

# THE GOLDEN CIRCLE OF BEARS AND BEERS

Story and photos by Willie Weir



*You know what it's like in the Yukon wild when it's 69 below;  
When the ice-worms wriggle their purple heads through the  
crust of the pale blue snow ...*

I first heard those lines of a Robert Service poem when I was in sixth grade. They were recited by a National Park Service Ranger while we stood in the snow surrounded by giant sequoias in Yosemite National Park.

I was transfixed. Within a week, I'd learned the entire poem by heart, "The Ballad of Blaspheamous Bill." I wanted to visit that wild place, but, at 11 years old, the Yukon was worlds away.

So why did it take me 40 years to get there? I'm not quite sure. But Alaska and the Yukon Territory seemed like such a vast area that I assumed I needed three months minimum to make it worthwhile. My wife Kat encouraged me to look into a shorter trip, and I found one.

The trip begins with a flight to Juneau, followed by one of the most beautiful ferry rides in the world to Haines, Alaska. You then hop on your bike and

pedal north into British Columbia, cross over the mountains to the Yukon, and then loop back over White Pass and descend to Skagway, Alaska, where you are forced to endure another magical ferry ride back to Juneau. The well-paved, 360-mile loop is called the Golden Circle because it follows the historic Dalton Trail and White Pass routes that led to the Klondike Gold Fields.

Rather than give a day-by-day account of our journey, I'm going to address the two topics everyone has asked about our trip: bears and food. Or put another way, bears you'll meet and food you'll eat.

#### **Bears**

This part of the world is insanely beau-



tiful — mountain ranges that appear to go on forever, air so pure that breathing is akin to a fine dining experience, glacial rivers as clear as glass. But you know what heightens the beauty, the vastness, and the epic nature of this landscape? Bears. Not the little black bears you are more likely to encounter in the lower 48. Whether you call them grizzly bears or brown bears or Alaska bears, they are big. And fed on an all-you-can-eat diet of salmon, they get huge.

What do these creatures add to your bicycle-travel experience? Adrenaline. And that chemical coursing through your veins heightens your awareness and thus makes this place on earth 38 percent more beautiful than it already is.

You don't even need to see one of these creatures to have it intensify your travels. Just the knowledge that they are out there enhances your experience.

Now understand that this is coming from a city slicker. Unlike the staff at Adventure Cycling, who live in Missoula and have the opportunity to pedal up into the mountains on their lunch break and share a power bar with a grizzly, I'm from Seattle. The only creatures tossing salmon in my city are the employees at Pike Place Market.

The route out of Haines is a flat stretch along the Chilkat Inlet and then a gradual climb upriver. Cottonwoods abound but slowly give way to spruce



M.L.BOSTWICK - CUSTOM MAP DESIGN

as you climb. The mountains of Alaska's Coast Range loom to the west.

Our first camp was at Mosquito Lake. Untrue to its name, there were no mosquitoes. There were also no other humans. We had the entire campground to ourselves. However, the amount of bear scat was impressive. There was no bear box to secure our food, so we had to hang it. The spruce trees that surround the lake have short stubby branches. I'm told that experienced outdoorsmen will climb up two trees and attach a rope up high

between the two, then use another rope and a carabiner to dangle their food bag at a distance high enough to discourage even the largest bear on tiptoe.

We only had one rope, and it was more like a chord. I attached a rock to it and threw it up dozens of times before finally arching it over a stubby spruce branch. Success! We then discovered that our food bag was too heavy to pull up. We lugged a picnic table underneath, and I lifted the bag while Kat pulled on the chord. After dragging the picnic table away, we glanced up at our food supply and wondered what we'd have for dinner. Timing is everything.

Nary a bear visited our campsite. But I lay awake half the night and thus had more conscious hours to enjoy our semi-wilderness experience. Thank you, bears.

The next day we got to see more than scat.

The pass that you pedal from Haines, Alaska, on your way to Haines Junction, Yukon, is a beautifully paved, lightly trafficked highway. We often felt as if we were on the world's widest bicycle path. Once most of the climbing is over, you hit a bit of a rolling plateau. There are few trees at this elevation, mostly scrubby bushes growing along the riverlets. I stopped to turn and take a photo of Kat pedaling toward me, and across the road a grizzly raised its head up above the shrub line. I said (in a voice more



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alarmed than I'd like to admit), "Oh my God, it's a grizzly." It might have helped poor Kat if I had added, "It's a hundred yards away," but I didn't.

After Kat got over the scare of her life, we watched in timid fascination as this magnificent creature stood on her hind legs and checked us out. She then lowered herself and walked slowly away.

A lone pickup truck stopped, and a gentleman asked us what we were looking at. We pointed out the bear. He said he was a photographer and had been taking photos of her throughout the week. She had two cubs.

Then we watched as the bear stood again, gave two sharp, loud huffs, and charged in our direction. The ground that bear covered in three seconds was horrifyingly impressive. The bear stopped in her tracks and stood up again.

"That was a bluff," the man said. "But if she does it again, we are in the back of this truck." Both Kat and I thought but didn't speak the words, "Next time? How about now?"

Mercifully for us, the bear slowly strolled away and headed downstream.

We said goodbye to the photographer and pedaled on as the sun sank lower in the sky. It was an amazing wildlife encounter, one I'll never forget. But at that moment, we both knew there was no way in hell we were going to sleep in our tent.

Fortunately, we had talked with a cyclist in Juneau named Bill who told us of a cabin whose owners left it open for travelers in a bind. It was in this area. But could we reach it before sunset? The cycling gods were with us. We found it two miles later.

We leaned our bikes against the porch of the little log cabin with single-pane windows. The inside was charming — candles in wine bottles, a tiny book shelf, a small wood stove, little troll dolls lining the windowsills. There was a loft that had housed both mice and men, and this was confirmed by a sign to keep the wood door closed to keep out the critters. It was a humble abode. But there is nothing like having an encounter with a grizzly bear to make a tiny cabin feel like a castle

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fortress. We slept like logs. You see, bears just make travel better.

#### Food

The Golden Circle is either feast or famine. The ferry lands outside the little town of Haines. We ate salmon and halibut fish and chips at Crazy Al's, a food truck on the side of the road. Crazy Al has a striking resemblance to Yosemite Sam. There are a few restaurants and a store in town. Stock up here if you haven't already in Juneau. There isn't much in the way of food for the next 150 miles but there are a couple of diners. We had a standard two-egg plate with reindeer sausage and finished up with a piece of blueberry-rhubarb pie at the 33 Mile Roadhouse — a classic diner where hunters and fishermen come to eat, drink coffee, and swap stories. Approximately 100 miles later, we shared a trucker's breakfast at the Kathleen Lake Lodge (three eggs, three strips of bacon, three slices of ham, three sausage links, toast, hash browns, and coffee).

When we arrived in Haines Junction, we discovered the only grocery store in town had gone out of business. The liquor store was closed, but the bakery was open. We imagined eating stale Danish washed down with bad coffee. Oh, we were wrong. The Village Bakery in Haines Junction looks as if it were designed by a touring cyclist. One huge glass case contains piles of muffins, scones, and cookies. The other has savory items — pizza, bread, lasagna, etc.). And the coffee was fabulous. For a brief moment, I considered asking the proprietor if we could discreetly set our tent up and stay a few days. A sign posted by the cash register read, "Our accountant is Helen Waite. If you want credit, go to Helen Waite."



*It's becoming more common to see touring bikes parked outside the quirky coffee shop in Carcross.*

A long stretch of rolling Alaska highway connects Haines Junction to Whitehorse, the capital of the Yukon Territory. Before you roll into town, you'll want to take a side tour to the hot Takhini Hot Springs. Camping is cheap and gets you a discount to the hot-water pools. The construction is old-style concrete, but the hot sulfur water will soothe your sore muscles. Nearby is the Bean North Coffee Roasting Company, a coffee stop with art on the walls and both inside and outside tables with views to an amazing perennial garden.

The capital city of Whitehorse itself sports many restaurants and bars. I was hoping to stay at the Robert Service Campground, where I could recite a poem or two. But it was tacky and overrun with tourists, so we pressed on to a quieter campground where we were invited to

share a bottle of wine with our camp neighbors, Bernie and Else, from York, Pennsylvania. How can you complain about any day that includes biking, bur-gundy, burgers, a bakery, and beer?

There is only one place to stop between Whitehorse and Skagway. Carcross (formerly Caribou Crossing) is a funky little town of 400 souls. Not much to eat, but there is a coffee shop. Many of the buildings date back to the 1890s. The most striking object in town is a boat, or at least what is left of it. The *SS Tutshi* was a paddlewheeler back in the days of the Gold Rush. The town went to amazing lengths to restore her to her glory, bringing in craftsmen to do it right. In 1990, before the sprinkler system had been installed, she burned. Only the bow remained. They ended up building a framework of

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beams to represent the rest of the ship as a memorial. It has two levels. You climb the stairs to see historic panels above.

We chatted with the ladies at the town's visitor center. They had lived in Carcross all their lives and wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world. The Yukon is in their blood. Before we left, one said, "Camp on the boat. It's not illegal! And put your tent on the second level because we have a problem bear in town, and bears don't like to climb stairs. I have stairs going up to my yard and the bear climbs the house instead."

So that's what we did. I lay awake looking at the stars through the mesh of our tent, wondering to what degree this problem bear didn't like to climb stairs.

There is a reason to ride the Golden Circle clockwise. It means you blast down the steep grade of White Pass into Skagway instead of climbing up it. The cruise ship stops in Skagway, which means plenty of lodging, restaurants, and pubs.

For those with a taste for barley sandwiches (that's code for beer), you can have a pint or three of spruce tip ale in Skagway (they brew it in Haines and Whitehorse too). The shiny, light green, new growth of the spruce is high



At Mosquito Lake, there's more bear scat than bugs (Bear Scat Lake wouldn't draw many tourists).

in vitamin C. We talked to the folks at Haines Brewing Company and they told us the locals gather the spruce tips and exchange them for some of the beer at a later date. The beer has a nice bright flavor, and if I had to pick a favorite, I'd say the folks in Haines brew the best.

Our Golden Circle tour began and ended with a pint of spruce tip ale. We pedaled some of the most scenic roads

our tires have ever rolled over. We saw eagles soar, a bear charge, and even heard a raven sing (yes, they do sing).

I didn't get to see an ice worm wriggle its purple head through the crust of the pale blue snow though. That will have to wait for another trip, in another season. **AC**

*Willie Weir has been a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist since 1995. If you buy him a pint, he'll gladly recite "The Ballad of Blasphemous Bill."*



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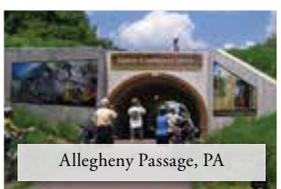


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