

# LAEL WILCOX

STORY BY **KAREN BROOKS**  
PHOTOS BY NICHOLAS CARMAN

→ WITHIN THE FIRST MINUTE of our interview, Lael Wilcox blew my mind. This perennial bike traveler had set a new women's record for completing the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route (GDMBR) in June 2015 during the Tour Divide race. I asked her if she'd been relaxing since then, but Lael gleefully informed me that

Nicholas Carman, were planning to head out on bikes directly from the show, escaping the bright lights of the Strip for the clear desert air, touring to Arizona. This is Lael's and Nicholas's way of life: they travel by bike for months at a time, working between tours to save up for the next adventure. In the year leading up to the 2015 Tour Divide, they had toured off road in Europe, explored South Africa, and ridden through the Sinai into Israel.

riders in a blur. She was armed with a new carbon racing mountain bike and a bare minimum of equipment. At first, all seemed to be going well, but within a few days, she began having respiratory problems of a sort that would have halted more experienced racers. "I was having a really hard time breathing," she said. "I went to the emergency room mid-route, and they gave me an inhaler and some antibiotics. It was terrifying — I've never

## eat, sleep, ride, great divide

she had turned around and ridden the route again, blazing a new fastest time for women. "Holy crap!" was all I could say before we both erupted in giddy laughter.

Those of us who follow the Tour Divide — watching the Spot Leaderboard with its little balloons tracking racers as they trickle south on the 2,745-mile route — were amazed at the speed of Lael's pink balloon. She was a first-timer, yet her finish in 17 days, 1 hour, and 51 minutes knocked a whole two days off the previous women's record, set by accomplished long-distance bikepacker and racer Eszter Horanyi. Lael's second attempt, just weeks later, took another two days off her time, within a day of the men's record. Where did this girl come from?

I met Lael amid the glitz and glamour of the 2015 Interbike trade show in Las Vegas. Lael stood out for her refreshing lack of glamour: simple shorts and T-shirt, dusty sneakers. She looked fresh from a ride. In fact she and her partner,

While in Israel, they enjoyed riding the route of the Holy Land Challenge, a self-supported mountain bike race across the country akin to the Tour Divide. On the spur of the moment, Lael decided to try her hand at the Challenge. "Oh wow, let's do it!" she recalled saying with her typical lightning-quick enthusiasm. Despite the fact that Lael rode an old 8-speed touring bike on singletrack trails — in a cotton T-shirt, sneakers, and running shorts, no less — she finished third overall.

This impromptu performance set her to thinking. "I decided, if this goes well, I'm going to go back to Anchorage, put a bike together, and then leave in a week, ride down to the start, and then race in the [Tour] Divide." This formidable "shakedown cruise" took Lael from her hometown of Anchorage, Alaska, 2,100 miles to the starting point of the race in Banff, Alberta, Canada, in just 19 days.

Photos from the Tour Divide start show a laughing Lael passing other

had a problem breathing in my life. But after the hospital visit, I got a lot better."

The rest was a relative breeze. The 2015 Tour Divide had been graced with good weather, which helped both men's and women's records to fall. But Lael knew she hadn't been able to give it her best shot. "I still had missed so much time in the beginning from being sick that after the race I was like, 'I know I can go faster.' The thought was there. I got back to Alaska, and I decided to go ride it again."

For this next attempt, a solo time trial, she cut down the pre-race warm-up to a mere 850 miles by taking a ferry from Whittier, Alaska, to Bellingham, Washington, and then riding east to Banff. After a few days of rest, she set out with perfect health at a blistering pace, doing 220 miles the first day. In the back of her mind was this juicy carrot: "I think I can beat the men's record." And Lael was on pace to do it until wheel-sucking mud in





Lael Wilcox at the U.S.-Mexico border during one of her two record-setting trips along the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route in the summer of 2015.

Montana slowed her down. The shorter late-summer days also made it tougher to stay warm and motivated in the dark. Still, her newly minted women's record of 15 days, 10 hours, and 59 minutes — within a day of the current men's record and faster than the previous one by five hours — is an amazing feat. The T-shirt she wore during the ride, a gift from her grandmother, said "Alaska Grown."

Lael's racing formula is simple and effective — time equals miles or sleep. "Everything I did was like: what will make me go faster? I would eat only on the bike — while pedaling." As far as gear, she carried little more than her sleep shelter and food. In fact, she said, laughing, "I lose stuff all the time. So my setup ends up being lighter and lighter as I lose everything." She slept about four hours per night, wrapped in just a sleeping bag and vapor barrier on the side of the trail, setting an alarm on her GPS and placing it near her

Lael Wilcox and Nicholas Carman document their adventures in aptly named blogs: Lael's Globe of Adventure ([laelwilcox.com](http://laelwilcox.com)), and Gypsy by Trade ([gypsybytrade.wordpress.com](http://gypsybytrade.wordpress.com))

head so she'd be sure to hear it. Was she bothered by a lack of amenities or harsh conditions? "I was so tired, I didn't care at all," she said. "If you're not that tired, you should be riding."

Lael and Nick had ridden parts of the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route on previous tours, so she got a boost of motivation crossing into familiar territory in New Mexico. "My favorite section is from Abiquiu to Cuba," she said. "I love the landscape. It's gorgeous Georgia O'Keefe country: chunky trails, a little bit rougher riding. I felt so good being there. Plus I like the heat."

You'd guess that the pair are used to doing monster days on their long tours, but in fact they enjoy a rather leisurely

pace, stopping often to check things out and taking lots of photos. And Lael is the slow one. "The funny thing is," she said, "when we're touring, I have no motivation to ride fast — like at all! So Nick's always hollering at me to pick it up because I'm just dawdling."

So where does this racing drive come from? "I don't know. It's a *race*," Lael said simply. She did have experience doing ultra-marathons and other long running events before getting into biking, and she still goes for runs while on tour. But ultimately her ability comes from living on the move. "I don't have a lot of racing, mostly just doing stuff. But then I realized that translates really well to racing." We agreed that as distances get longer, women get closer to equal footing with men. "Women can compete, I just think there haven't been that many participating yet," she said. "A race like this — you don't know what's going to happen until you try."

What's next for Lael — another attempt at a GDMBR record? "Yeah, I don't know. It's like, what I can do is take a day off [my record], or I can just go do something else," she explained. "Maybe I'll come back and do the Divide again. It's a great route, and the riding is awesome." But she mentioned another goal: "I think I'm going to race the TransAm." Whatever she decides, you can bet that we'll be hearing her name more often. **AC**

*Karen Brooks got sucked into the vortex of the bike industry after college graduation, and has not been able (or willing) to escape since. She was the founding editor of Bicycle Times and is currently enjoying a career as a freewheeling freelancer.*

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