

BC Ballast

Riding the Kettle Valley Railway

Story and photos by Chuck Haney

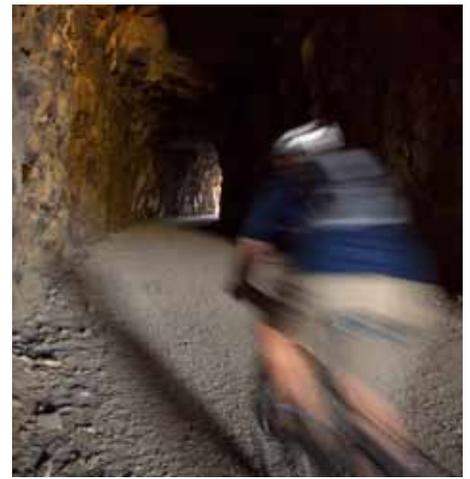




With chains lubed, tires topped off with air, and water in the packs, another two-wheeled adventure was set in motion as the morning sunlight began to filter through thick stands of coniferous forest. The cool of the morning air slowly dissipated to the warmth of a lengthy June summer day. Ravens called out to each other from opposing sides of the trail, their squawking banter and the gravel ballast crunched constantly below our tires. This was the soundtrack of our first day of riding. In south central British Columbia, mighty locomotives were once the undeniable kings of the Kettle Valley. I'm once again paired up with *Adventure Cyclist* editor, Mike Deme, for a cycling excursion in a far-flung location. We are in British Columbia to sample the famed Kettle Valley Railway, or as it's referred to locally, the KVR. Our preferred section of the route is called the Carmi subdivision. It stretches for 215 kilometers between the towns of Midway and Penticton and is just part of the overall rail-trail mileage of the KVR and other connecting spurs that cover nearly 600 kilometers of abandoned railway lines.

In past cycling trips to the backroads and trails of Colorado, Utah, and Oregon, Mike and I seemed destined to follow a dubious pattern of unpredictable weather leading to various misadventures from incessant rain, wind, or even snow mucking up our planned itinerary. Throw in car troubles, tow trucks, raccoons setting off car alarms in the middle of the night in a full campground, and getting lost, and it seemed we had been through it all. But for this particular trip, the skies remained clear, the winds were calm, and even annoying things like mosquitoes stayed mostly at bay.

Our British Columbia adventure on the KVR began near the remote town of Westbridge, which is small enough to be almost engulfed among the heavily forested Beaverdell Range of the Columbia Mountains. The region is known locally as Boundary Country due to its close proximity to the American border. We pedaled north from the Little Dipper Hideaway Resort toward the small outpost of Beaverdell along the West Kettle River where we were soon greeted by the sound of water speeding through a narrow gorge and a scenic



view of the rapids below. For the first few miles, the emptiness along the route was broken only by a couple of motorized trail bikes heading south. (Motorized vehicles are allowed on most sections of the route.) We passed by a bearded drifter who appeared to be squatting on the land adjacent to the route in a somewhat derelict-looking trailer complete with satellite dish. The place seemed to house more dogs than a Westminster Kennel show.



Myra Canyon trestles. Mike rides along one of the many trestles that help make this part of the Carmi subdivision of the KVR unique.

Nuts & Bolts: Kettle Valley Railway

Best time to go:

May through October. Myra Canyon is busy with cyclists and hikers on weekends, and campgrounds tend to fill up quickly. Make reservations or plan on arriv-

horseback riders, and motorized traffic, which is light. Don't be tempted to ride a touring bike on this trail. Trust me, ride a mountain bike. You'll thank me later.



ing at campsites earlier in the day. The Okanagan Valley is high desert and can get quite hot so plan accordingly. The trail never exceeds a 2.2 percent grade. Surfaces range from smooth to fairly washboarded with large ballast gravel. The multiple-use trail is open to hikers,

• *Cycling the Kettle Valley Railway* (www.kettlevalleyrailway.ca) by Dan and Sandra Langford. This must-have companion to the route will point out interesting tidbits and history and will guide you past all the detours and keep you heading in the right direction.

Accommodations:

• Little Dipper Hideaway; www.littledipperhideaway.com, (250) 446-2213. Located near the scenic West Kettle River. Showers can be purchased, a real plus after a day riding in the dust.

Resources:

• Paul Lautard's Cyclist Rest Stop is less than two miles down the road from the Little Dipper.
• Myra Canyon Trestle Restoration Society; www.myra-trestles.com.



One of a dozen trestles that succumbed to the wildfires of 2003.

- Chute Lake Resort: www.chutelakeresort.com, (250) 493-3535.
- British Columbia Parks: www.bcparks.com.
- Kelowna Tourism: www.tourismkelowna.com, (800) 663-4345.
- Pentiction Tourism: www.penticton.ca/main.asp, (800) 663-5052.

Precautions:

British Columbia is still wild at its heart. Grizzly bears, black bears, mountain lions, wolves, and rattlesnakes call the area home. Make sure to have plenty of food and water because places to stock up can be miles away.

The crushed gravel ballast beneath our two-inch mountain-bike tires was compressed from decades of thundering steam locomotive trains. They had once hauled many tons of silver, copper, lead, coal, and lumber out of the Kootenays heading toward markets and shipping docks in Vancouver during the KVR's heyday from 1915 to the 1970s. Mountain bikes have replaced lumbering locomotives on this line; the last train to rumble through this secluded valley was in 1973.

As we rode toward Beaverdell, Mike spotted a large wolf straddling the trail ahead of us. He seemed as surprised by our presence as we were by his. There are just enough wolves, mountain lions, bears, and rattlesnakes here to remind us that this is

still wild country. Even though our route paralleled Highway 33 and civilization was hardly ever more than a few pedal strokes away, we kept alert for dangers lurking ahead of us. We reached Beaverdell, which would have been the last opportunity along the KVR to stock up on provisions had we been touring the trail as a point to point. Because we were riding out and back each day, we settled for a quick bite at a general store that featured such exotic fare as breakfast pizza heaped with eggs, cheese, and Canadian bacon. We had intended to visit the historic Beaverdell Hotel, the oldest hotel in British Columbia, for a cold beverage but, alas, it was closed due to the bad economy.

Day two led us to Myra Canyon and

its 18 trestles and two tunnels situated on Okanagan Mountain high above Kelowna, the largest city in the region. That we were even able to ride this section of the KVR was amazing because the canyon had suffered an immense wildfire in 2003 from a lightning strike that completely burned or disabled about a dozen of the trestles. At the kiosk near our starting point at the old Ruth Station, we had astonished looks on our faces as we gazed at pictures of the trestles completely engulfed by flames. The quick rebuild is a testament to the non-profit Myra Canyon Trestle Restoration Society, which boasts approximately 150 volunteer members. Beginning in 1993, their hard work had resulted in the trestles and tunnels being safe to travel upon. Then,



Cyclist's Rest Stop. In Rhone, KVR riders can visit Paul Lautard's replica cabooses.

after the fire of 2003, everything had to be rebuilt. To the organization's credit, they completed the restoration by the summer of 2008, and the trail is now better than ever. This is by far the most popular sec-

tion of the trail; evidenced by us having to weave in and out of groups of other cyclists and people out for a walk enjoying a sunny Sunday afternoon with the family. The trail in Myra Canyon is level and has a much

smoother surface than other sections of the trail, and we even spotted several riders on road bikes here. We stopped several times and savored the outstanding views of other trestles and the vista all the way down to Kelowna and Okanagan Lake, which shimmered in the distance as we made our way back from the turnaround at the old Myra Station. Mike and I agreed that riding here in Myra Canyon should be near the top of any cyclist's wish list.

The third and final day of our short excursion into British Columbia came much too quickly as we drove south along Okanagan Lake toward the town of Penticton. Along the east side of the lake above Naramata Road we found the trailhead among numerous vineyards and fruit orchards. The Okanagan Valley has outstanding growing conditions for grape vineyards and fruit trees, which were laden with apples, peaches, apricots, and cherries. Its semi-arid climate and a large temperate lake produces bountiful crops and fine wines. From the trailhead, the railway climbs a steady and pleasant two-percent climb as the old rail bed snakes its way up the Monashee Mountains.

We paused right before entering the 48-foot-long "Little Tunnel" and took in

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Leading light of the KVR

86-year-old Paul Lautard has become a legend and an icon of KVR lore through his generosity toward cyclists who come by his remote British Columbia home. Just down the hill from his house overlooking the Blythe-Rhone Road, Paul built a memorial in 1991 honoring those who served in World War II. Cyclists would often stop to observe the stone memorial that is also the site of the old Rhone train station, and Paul would bring down a jug of cold water. As more riders showed up, Paul erected shelters to accommodate these weary and thirsty two-wheeled travelers. By 2001, Paul had built a shed and a replica caboose, which makes a unique shelter for escaping the elements. At the height of its popularity in 2003, a record 1,750 riders stopped by (Paul keeps track), but that same year wildfires ravaged Myra Canyon and the number of riders briskly declined. Because the trestles have been rebuilt, riders are on the increase again.

Although Paul looks for riders coming down the roadway ahead of time with his

binoculars, his eyesight and hearing are both in decline due to age. The key to getting his attention is to ring the large triangular bell at the shelter, which signals his faithful dog Stubby, who in turn alerts Paul by barking and letting him know that he has



company. Not only will you get a cold drink of water, you will get a fascinating history lesson of the area and the railroad that once ruled the valley. Paul has led an interesting life, and Mike and I were privileged to take

in a few of his stories. For example, Paul told us the struggles of growing up with 10 siblings in the house and how the railroad workers would sometimes throw out a gunnysack filled with shoes for him and his family. Paul's father and one of his brothers worked on the railroad, and although Paul worked as a carpenter, his knowledge of the railroad is second to none.

This pit stop for KVR riders is much like stopping at a railroad museum. Where else will someone explain how to use a spike puller or stoke a coal fire with a long-handled poker? When asked why he does it, Paul explained, "I get to meet people from all over the world and have made many friends over the years." He also added that riders help keep him company – most summer days 20 to 30 riders will stop by. The popularity of his stop is evidenced by the many signatures in the logbook and the graffiti along every nook and cranny of the shed that also contains a hammock for those really tough days of riding.

the spectacular views of the sparkling blue water of the lake below us contrasted by green hillsides bursting with fruit trees. Soon we encountered more trail users as small parties of ATV users purred past us, and we met several groups of mountain bikers descending from Chute Lake. We stopped by rock ovens that were built in the forest by Scandinavian and Italian masons while they were constructing the original railroad nearly 100 years ago. The smell of fresh bread coming from these earthy contraptions must have been extremely appealing to hungry rail workers laying down ties and

driving spikes. Imagining the aroma must have worked on our stomachs as well as our minds because Mike and I decided to head back for the car and lunch. But first we had a pleasant surprise as we read the trail map along the kiosk that explained the history of the rock ovens. We discovered that there was a singletrack trail that steeply descended and would take us back to a lower section of the KVR near the Little Tunnel. As much as I enjoyed pedaling the railway that morning, I really love singletrack trails so it was a no brainer that we would buzz down the narrow trail back to the tunnel. We even met

a pannier-toting teenager traveling with his mother who was eager to join and descend with us. The adrenaline rush was a great way to end our time on the KVR. We passed on stopping at one the numerous wineries along the highway leading back into Penticton because there was still one mission left on our trip, and that was to meet the local legend we had been hearing so much about over the last several days (see above). **AC**

Chuck Haney is a photographer and writer who lives in Whitefish, Montana. More about him can be found at chuckhaney.com.

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