

A photograph of a family of four sleeping in a large, olive-green tent. They are lying on a yellow sleeping pad. From left to right, there is a child in a green sleeping bag, a woman in a blue sleeping bag, a man in a teal sleeping bag, and a child in a black sleeping bag. A red and white water bottle is visible between the man and the woman. The tent's interior is visible, showing the fabric and some gear.

# ONE FAMILY GOES BIG

**Part Two**  
**Story and photos by Aaron Teasdale**

**CONTINUED FROM JULY ISSUE:**

It took two and a half excruciating hours to get back to the site of my father's accident, and only after rallying his Prius like an all-terrain Formula One car up a ragged, rock-strewn dirt road. Approaching the scene, I didn't know what to expect. Grandpa sprawled and my family weeping? A squad of search and rescue trucks? But it was the same as when I'd left — the boys, Jacqueline, and Carol shading Grandpa on the roadside. Maybe the SPOT unit didn't work. Maybe search and rescue weren't coming. Maybe I was going to have to figure this out myself.

I jumped out of the car and began calculating who could fit inside for the ride back to civilization. While Grandpa sat in the background repeatedly asking where we were and what had happened, I realized Jacqueline and the boys were going to have to spend the night in the mountains by themselves. Then I saw the Prius had a flat tire. Things were looking grim.

At that moment came the sound of helicopter blades cutting the air.

"Wow!" I called out to the others. "They actually sent a helicopter."

Two days later, we were sitting in Fernie and Grandpa was trying to convince me he was fine and wanted to continue the trip. He'd spent a total of one hour in the hospital after his search and rescue helicopter ride before declaring himself fine and walking out, lucid if battered. He'd always been a mind-over-matter ironman, but in truth, I was nervous about him rejoining us. British Columbia's Flathead Valley was as remote as it got, with the highest density of grizzly bears in non-coastal North



**To the rescue.** Harold Teasdale is helped to the helicopter by a Fernie division professional.

America. People already thought I was crazy for trying to ride it with kids. The last thing we needed was Grandpa, who was clearly hobbled, getting hurt again. But how do you tell your father "no" when he so desperately wants to come? He knows this time with his son and grandchildren is precious. That's why I realized that if he thought he could go, I wanted him to.

A hired van drove us back to the accident site, where the bikes were stowed on the mountainside. As we prepared to start riding, my stepmother Carol pulled us all together for a blessing circle. Grandpa

popped some Advil and smiled. Everyone vowed to ride conservatively. Well, almost everyone.

I turned to the kids and said three words, "20 — Kilometer — Downhill."

Much to their mother's alarm, the boys and I were by far the fastest descending bike in the group. This was partly due to my years as a mountain biker and partly because once our enormous bicycle got rolling, well, it was a bit like a runaway train in a Hollywood movie. Best just to hang on and let the momentum carry you.

Within moments, we pulled ahead of the group and started plunging down from the high peaks toward the distant valley bottom.

"Still going down!" I called out every five minutes or so.

Any concerns I had about surprising bears were rendered moot as the mountains rang with the boys favorite made-up song and its repeated chorus of "Bears, please don't eat us."

I stopped partway to ask Grandpa how he felt. Since he was a 24-year-old trapped in a 67-year-old body, I was relieved to see him actually riding conservatively.

"I feel pretty good!" he said enthusiastically.

As we ate dinner that evening in a wildflower-carpeted meadow along Howell Creek, it was hard to believe that only two days before we'd been watching Grandpa

get flown away in a rescue helicopter.

After a mellow ride the next day, we camped alongside the Flathead River, where Silas, with a smile as wide as the valley itself, pulled fish after fish from its crystal flow. When he pulled another one out the next morning, the adults quietly groaned — that was *four* fish to eat for breakfast. While we packed up camp, our pint-sized hunter-gatherers ambled just far enough down the river to make us nervous. When I walked down and found fresh bear tracks in the sand next to them I said, "This is one of the wildest places left in the world. People don't rule here, wild-life does." (This point was made even more forcibly that night when we saw a grizzly crossing an avalanche path not far above our campsite. It was the second one we'd seen in the valley.)

As our family cavalcade made its way up the valley, denuding the roadsides of strawberries and covering our usual 10 miles or so a day, the handful of people we encountered were stupefied at the sight of us. A man on a four-wheeler said, "You almost make me feel guilty for being on one of these."

When he asked how we could possibly ride through the Flathead with kids, I just smiled and said, "A little at a time."

Our last morning in the valley I sat on the shore of the river drinking tea and studying the map. It was a rare leisurely moment and for the first time on the trip I reflected back on the miles of wild country we'd crossed on this enormous bicycle. We were dirty, scabby, and smelled like an industrial experiment gone horribly wrong, but I knew I was doing right by my boys. They'd be better off after this trip —

tougher, more worldly. Maybe this whole thing *was* crazy, but I was no fool.

Then Silas, who'd also been looking at the map said, "Looks like we've got about a 1,000-foot climb today."

My boy was learning to read maps. This was good.

Then Grandpa offered to carry some of our gear to help ease the climb over Flathead Pass — the ironman was back.

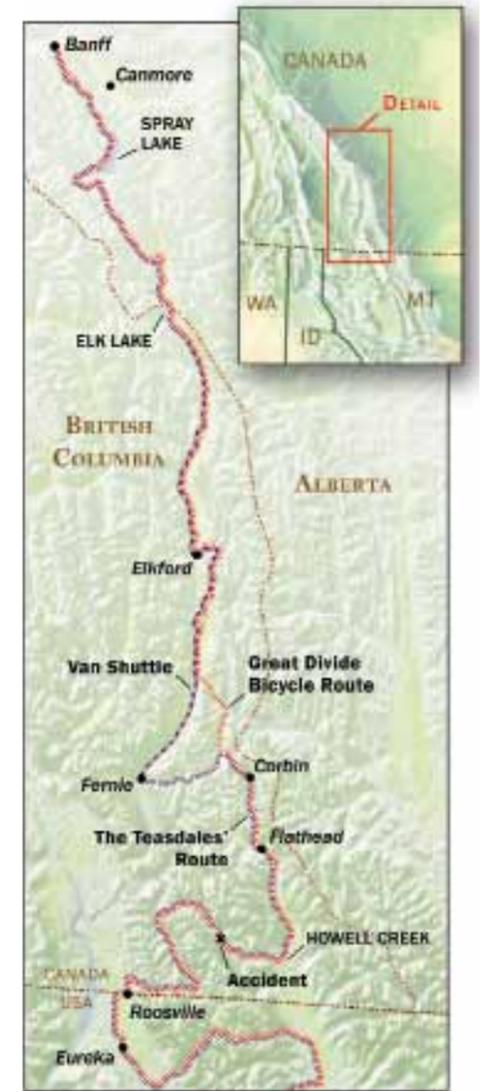
The next morning, after a spectacular thunderstorm bulleted and strobed our tent throughout the night, I gave the kids a pep talk for our ride to the mountain town of Fernie and our temporary return to civilization. This was also where Grandpa and Carol would leave us.

"We don't look pretty right now boys," I said. "We're covered in insect bites, we stink, and we look like we live in a cave, but that doesn't matter — we've just biked through the Flathead. Hold your head high."

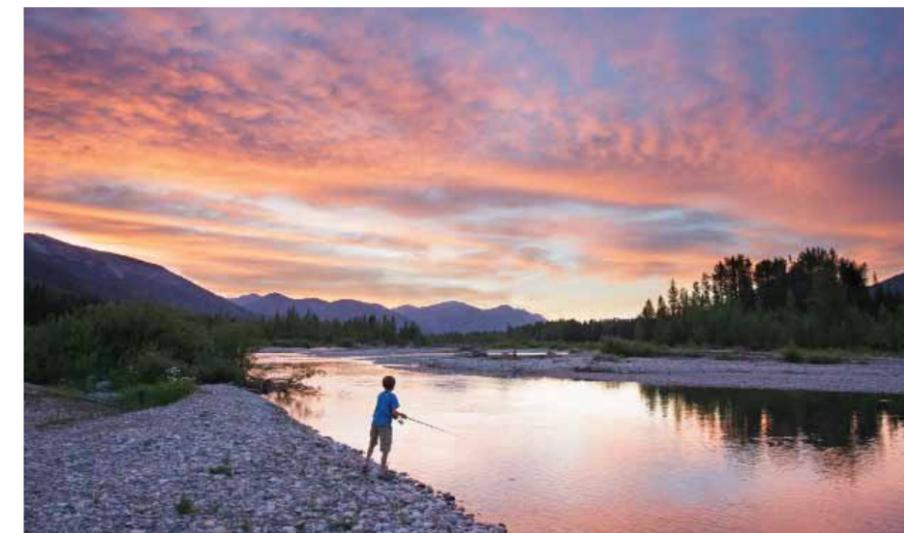
It was in this condition that we brought a bit of dirtbag to the world of luxury eco-lodges, rewarding ourselves with a few nights at Island Lake Lodge outside of Fernie. Unsurprisingly, we were the only guests whose deck railing served as an airing-out rack for chamois and sleeping bags.

After saying goodbye to Grandpa and Carol a couple days later, we set off for the upper Elk Valley, which led due north like an arrow in the direction of Banff. I'd thought from the beginning that we might skip its first half — a long, straight, washboarded road clogged with logging and mining trucks. My goal on this trip was fun, not pedal-purity. I called Kootenai Taxi in Fernie and arranged a ride partway up the Elk.

I was already notorious at Kootenai for



**Mountain majesties.** Jacqueline Teasdale rides among the stunning scenery of the GDMBR.



**Cycling and gathering.** Silas Teasdale fishes the Flathead River to supplement camp meals.

the ride they'd given us back up to our bikes after my father's accident. After dropping us off, their van had gotten stuck high on a mountain road with two flat tires. "No more backroads," they'd told me.

Our driver this time was Evelyn, a 60-something Canadian mountain woman with long silver hair and keen eyes. As we turned off the highway, she said she remembered when this road to the little coal-mining town of Elkford was a one-lane dirt track. Once past Elkford, it deteriorated into the road of her memory — rough, narrow, and riddled with craters. The van rattled, Evelyn swore, and we drove for what seemed like forever.

When we reached our drop-off point, Evelyn practically threw our gear out of the trailer and said a quick goodbye before pounding back down the road, trailer bouncing behind.

I looked at the dirt track leading to high mountains ahead and smiled. It was good to be in the wilderness again. But as I started

putting the bike together I saw something that made the world crash around me.

“No, no, no, NO!” I cried.

The metal pin that held the trailer-bike hitch to the tandem was gone. It must have fallen out in the bouncing trailer. I could think of no way to safely MacGuyver it. We were now in the middle of nowhere British Columbia with a pile of bikes we couldn't use.

The only thing to do was panic. In a rare show of anger, I hurled my helmet 50 feet into the bush.

“Don't say anything to Dad right now,” I heard Jacqueline say quietly to the kids.

On a whim, I turned on my phone, which hadn't had reception in hours. I tried a call, waited a minute, and actually heard a ring. A ring!

“We've got cell service!” I cried with joy,

before connecting with Kootenai Taxi, who were now certain to ban me for life.

An hour later the van came clattering back. Evelyn leaned out the window with the pin in her hand, and bellowed, “You've got to start carrying another one of these!”

With that, we were back on the road.

At the head of the valley, we made camp at Elk Lake, a silty blue mountain pool ringed by mountains about a mile off the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route. Sporadic rainstorms pinned us there for two days, but fortunately, I'd dropped a food cache at a nearby Alpine Club of Canada cabin, as I had at several key points along our route. One morning, while Jacqueline and I ate oatmeal by the campfire, the boys came marching up with huge grins and two toads in their hands. According to them, the toads were best

friends named Jonathan and Marv. They also, apparently, loved to race each other, so the boys created a race course between two logs with a finish line drawn in the pine needles.

Their cries of “Go Jonathan! Go Marv!” echoed across the lake.

A few days later, after muscling over the Continental Divide into Alberta, we reached the Mount Shark trailhead and entered the final stretch of our trip. I'd planned plenty of time for the last 40-mile, off-road section around Spray Lake — rugged, wild, and mind-meltingly beautiful, it's one of my favorite places on Earth for bike touring. But first we had to make it through the Nordic trails just past the trailhead that carved through a virtual buffet of wild strawberries.

“How can we be expected to ride this route?!” I called out as we stopped, yet again, to gorge.

People often asked me during our trip how many miles we'd ridden, to which I answered truthfully, “I have no idea.” Our trip wasn't about miles, I liked to say, it was about strawberries.

Like sirens to a sailor, on descent or climb, the very site of them caused brakes to squeal and bikes to be abandoned. Which, besides the adventure of it all, is why we were doing this trip — to slow down, be together, and appreciate whatever cool, interesting, beautiful, tasty things we found along the way. Wild strawberries in Montana are ripe a few weeks before the ones in Banff, so we followed their ripening arc as we rode north. I like to think we were carried along by a wave of strawberry ripening as it surged up the northern Rockies, powering us through the wilderness.

Which was good, because we needed all the help we could get as the route soon turned into a real mountain bike trail — rooty, rocky, and crossing narrow bridges over tumbling whitewater. “Give er!” I'd yell and both kids, now riding like polished professionals after more than a month on the Teasdale Train, would jump into motion, crank the pedals, and power us over obstacles.

Jacqueline had also been transformed. When I warned her about a long, steep descent, she said, “I'm not worried about a big descent.” She'd come a long way from nervously riding down steep pitches at walking speed or leaping off her bike when things got too rough.

As we rode through old-growth forest along the skirts of the mountains, we met



**Great Divide grandeur.** A moose cow and calf graze beneath the towering granite peaks of British Columbia's Rocky Mountains.

a young woman riding the GDMBR alone. We were united in spirit: she was probably the only solo woman on the route and we were probably the only family. Everyone was telling here she was crazy to ride the route alone, that there were grizzlies here. I encouraged her and said, “There's no reason to be ‘bearanoid.’”

Soon, however, we faced a situation that would test our own bear tolerance. When we reached the place I'd planned to camp, a point of land where Spray and Bow creeks merged and flowed into Spray Lake, there

stakes were missing. I must have left them back at the trailhead when I'd done some repacking. This meant I'd have to tie the tent off but I didn't want to use our food-hanging line to do it. It was a happy moment when I found a length of parachute cord I'd stowed in our emergency supplies.

We saw no bears the next day but plenty of their tracks as we made our way along the western shore of Spray Lake, mountains rising like spears in all directions. At our camp along shore the next

hour all I could do was sit there and soak in the beauty of the wilderness and my family — four little humans amid a wild expanse of rivers, lakes, bears, and mountains. Often big trips have one moment, one memory that forever defines them in our mind's eye. That quiet hour by the campfire at Spray Lake was mine.

Then the storms came. We were on our bikes when they hit. First rain, temporarily sending us under a spruce tree to put on all of our clothes, and then hail. The kids were cold. At a hill I cried, “Crank up this hill guys. It'll warm you up!”

Then the top halves of the mountains went white with snow. My hands started losing function. Things were getting dangerous. This worst-case weather scenario was a test of my gear strategy — the tent and sleeping bags were our ultimate safety net. There was no stopping now until we found a place to camp.

When we finally came to a flat, sheltered spot, I had the kids huddle together while I directed every iota of my energy into my numb fingers to tie off the tent. Soon we were all huddled together in our sleeping bags — warm, yes, but my vision of four little humans in the wilderness was

### *On our ride, we'd overcome uncountable physical challenges, concussed grandparents, and the coldest, stormiest summer in decades.*

were signs of fresh bear activity — a log as big as a man ripped out of the ground and hurled 20 feet; an overturned rock of unsettling size; a mountain of fresh scat filled with blood red berries. Jacqueline was visibly nervous.

With black clouds moving in fast, we quickly unpacked and I realized the tent

morning, I lay on my sleeping pad amid the Alaska-like landscape and let the cool breeze wash over my skin. The kids fed the fire, my tea mug warmed on the embers, and Jonah rounded up pet grasshoppers. The sun even hinted through the clouds and brightened the morning for a spell.

We needed to get moving, but for an



**No licking!** The Teasdale boys found the local fauna on the GDMBR fascinating.

quickly losing its romantic appeal.

It didn't help that our provisions were failing us. The zipper had just broken on Jonah's zip-off pants, sending him into tears. Silas's glasses were being held together with bailing wire and hope. My sleeping bag was hemorrhaging down. Jacqueline's inflatable sleeping pad was slowly deforming into a shape more akin to an exercise ball, and that night she stared at her dreaded freeze-dried lentils and rice muttering, "Two more bites ... you can do this."

I was seriously considering riding ahead solo to Banff to get our car and pick everyone up.

The next night, after 24 rain-soaked hours in the tent, I said, "I wish I wasn't hungry enough to eat another dinner right now."

"Me too! Me too!" the kids blurted in unison.

"I think I'd pay \$10 right now for one hot piece of good pizza," I added innocently.

At this, everyone in the tent launched into hysterics. Silas started babbling about French fries, Jonah was borderline hyperventilating, and Jacqueline yelled, "Why did you bring us into this God-forsaken rain-hole with crappy food!" before we all broke down in laughter.



**Well-deserved soak.** A hot tub at the Banff Hot Springs Hotel provided a post-trek treat.

The absurdity of not riding as a family to Banff hit me as I fell asleep that night. What were we going to say, "we rode bicycles from Glacier to Banff except for the last 10 miles because it was raining?" No, we would not. I didn't care if a grizzly bear ate all of our gear and we had to ride naked, we were riding to Banff no matter what.

The next morning I prepped the kids

for a big ride. It was our second to last day and after our rain delays we had around 17 miles of rugged terrain to cover. I told the kids we needed singular focus. We set off with high hopes for the first kilometer until someone cried, "Strawberries!" and the bike was instantly abandoned. So, yeah, our singular focus needed work.

But then an amazing series of things

happened. For the first time in days, the sun came out and warmed our skin, boosted our spirits, and sent diamonds shimmering across the surface of Spray Lake. The boys pedaled with conviction, Jacqueline rode like someone who knew they only had one more freeze-dried meal to eat, and our whole team moved merrily through the berry-lined back routes toward Banff.

Around the campfire that night, about 10 miles from Banff, I asked the kids what their favorite parts of our big adventure were.

"There's so many, I can't remember," Jonah said, and then listed things from the last few days — loons, sunsets, berries. Silas said his was seeing mountain goats at Cabin Pass in the Flathead. Then, in words that warmed my heart, he said, "I kind of wish the trip could just keep going forever, you know? Maybe we could ride to Alaska."

After reading our bedtime book aloud, the boys and I stepped out of the tent to answer nature's call, as we had nearly every night for the past six weeks. I looked over at them as they stood barefoot, watering the wildflowers, starlight glinting off their backs, and thought, this is the last time I'll see them at this age under the stars like this. Our adventure was ending. Soon it would only be a sweet memory.

The next morning I found myself sitting alone for a minute by the campfire. Soon we would follow a trail along Goat Creek in glorious mountain sunshine to a reserved room at the castle-like Banff Springs Hotel in the shadow of the GDMBR northern terminus, where we would likely be the first guests to ever brush our teeth with handle-less toothbrushes. Looking into the flames, my mind wandered back over the months of preparation, route planning, and food caches. On our ride, we'd overcome uncountable physical challenges, concussed grandparents, and the coldest, stormiest summer in decades. Silas could read maps, clean fish, and start fires. Jonah could communicate with toads and eat 10 times his weight in wild strawberries. We'd actually pulled this crazy family bike adventure off. My smile outshone the fire.

As we started pedaling, I called out, "Guys, I have a feeling this isn't our last family bike adventure."

The boys simply cried, "Woohoo!" behind me and we rode into the sun. **AC**

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