

Biking to the Midnight Sun

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Between June 7-18, 2009, we rode bicycles from Fairbanks, Alaska, to beyond the Arctic Circle, then visited Denali National Park.

The Idea: My friend, Ward Budweg, is the former owner of Decorah Bicycles. I have ridden with him on RAGBRAI for many years. In June 2007, he left the USA with his wife Jacky, and together they have traveled the world on their bicycles (Europe, N. Africa, S. America, New Zealand, Australia, SE Asia, China, Mongolia, Korea). Their website details their adventures - www.fromthebenchesoftheworld.com. Last December, Ward sent an Email from Australia inviting me and a few others to join him on a bicycle trip to the Arctic Circle. I accepted the invitation, along with my daughter, Kelsey.

I planned to participate in the 2009 Heroes Campaign to benefit the Southeast Minnesota Chapter of the American Red Cross. In each of the four preceding years, I did a personal challenge, either kayaking or cycling, to raise money for the Red Cross. I had raised nearly \$30,000 in four years. It was not a big leap to consider this my challenge for the year.

Planning: We were pretty nervous about the potential hazards of the trip, including bears and moose, insects, hazardous road conditions, bad weather, big trucks. So planning included buying airline tickets to Fairbanks, planning for camping out, deciding whether to bring our own bikes or rent, and preparing for these hazards and others challenges. Ward kept in touch from across the Pacific and we agreed to rent a motor home for safer sleeping quarters and upgraded support. Jacky took to opportunity to get off her bike for a week and provide support, including meal planning and preparation.

The Group: There were 8 people in the group, with 7 riders plus Jacky. The others included Mark Pernitz, Jeff Freidhoff, Joanne Snow and Frank Pollari. Mark (aka "Joey") is an attorney from Madison, who has ridden GRABAAWR with Ward and Jacky. Jeff is a math teacher/wrestling & football coach from Decorah who worked for Ward during high school and college. Joanne Snow is a former Mayo Physical Medicine resident, now doing a Pediatrics fellowship in



Milwaukee. She is a RAGBRAI-er. Frank is a computer technician from Thunder Bay, ONT, who is also a GRABAAWR and RAGBRAI regular.

Arriving: We arrived in Fairbanks on Sunday, June 7 at 3 pm. Joanne and Joey were on the same flight. Despite the fact that we had a direct flight from Minneapolis, Northwest managed to misplace both Kelsey and my checked bags. They do not have a desk at Fairbanks, so we placed a claim with the Alaska Airlines agent and hoped for the best, knowing that it could take days to locate our bags. We took a shuttle to our hotel, the Springhill Suites.

We took the shuttle back to the airport for the 8pm flight to meet Frank and Jeff. We were delighted to find that our bags were on the later flight. We headed back to the hotel and went for a walk to enjoy the amazingly warm (80 degrees) weather and to have our first taste of the midnight sun. We missed closing time at the nearby restaurants, so we ordered pizza and walked along the riverfront for an hour, seeing our first wildlife in downtown Fairbanks, a beaver on the river.

After a good night's sleep and Continental breakfast, we picked up our bikes from Larry, the outfitter – two road bikes and two cyclo-cross bikes. Ward and Jacky arrived with a 30-foot motor home at about 6:00. We had dinner and returned to the hotel for final organization. We needed to do the shopping, but didn't need the whole crew for that, so 4 of us (Joanne, Jeff, Frank and I) started riding while the others shopped. We headed out at 9:30pm in broad daylight and rode past midnight until the shoppers caught up with us in the motor home.

The Midnight Sun: The summer sun sets in Fairbanks between 1-3 a.m., but the darkest it gets is twilight; it is never dark. 24 hours of light per day has a strong biological effect. You don't feel sleepy until very late. It is easy to become shifted to a much later schedule, and you also tend to sleep less. As we traveled further North, this tendency became more marked.

The Route, the Riding and the Roads: We started in downtown Fairbanks. It's 11 miles on the Steese Highway to Fox, then 73 miles on the Elliott Highway past Livengood to the start of the Dalton Highway. The Elliott Highway is paved but includes many large steep hills, including the maximal elevation of the southern half of the route at 2175' at milepost 15. That hill is followed by a 5 mile descent. We had been told that the route was hilly, but I don't think any of us realized quite how hilly. Many of the climbs and descents are miles long with steep pitches up to 10-11% grade. There is almost no flat ground between Fairbanks and the Arctic Circle, so we often spent up to 75% of the time climbing. This resulted in very slow progress. We averaged just over 50 miles per day, but each day was harder than most 100-milers in my previous experience.



The 84 miles from Fairbanks to the start of the Dalton Highway is paved and mostly in pretty good condition. The Dalton Highway is mostly gravel, loose and coarse in many places, including some very steep hills. It is maintained by periodically wetting, then grading and rolling it. If you ride it just after it has been watered, it can be like riding in wet concrete. That happened to us for two lengthy stretches on the second and third days of riding. The paved portions of the Dalton Highway (40 miles out of 115 south of the Arctic Circle) have a lot of rough pavement, big cracks and potholes in places and lots of transitions to gravel. These hazards often occur in the middle of long steep descents.



Weather: We expected cold, rain and possibly even snow, but the weather was a very pleasant surprise. It was 80 degrees and sunny when we arrived in Fairbanks. Most days during the ride the temp was in the 60's or even the 70's, and sunny most of the time. We had rain for short intervals on just two days.

The Pipeline and The Road: The road, originally called "The Haul Road", was built in just 5 months in 1974. It exists to support oil exploration on Alaska's North Slope near Prudhoe Bay. It runs 414 miles from near Livengood to Deadhorse. The last 7 miles to Prudhoe Bay are not open to the public. The pipeline took 3 years to build from 1974-77. The road was named in honor of arctic engineer James B. Dalton in 1981. It was only opened to the public in 1994. There are no homes or power lines, and support services are very few. For nearly its entire length, there is nothing but the road and the pipeline in the middle of the vast Alaskan wilderness.

Truckers: We were warned that the truckers rule the road and travel very fast. We were concerned about being engulfed in clouds of dust and blasted with rocks shot from under their tires. We were surprised by the reality: They are extremely professional and courteous. They always gave us wide berth as they passed. When they passed on gravel, they typically slowed down to avoid pelting us with gravel or raising clouds of dust. It became clear to us that they must be communicating by CB to be nice to those poor crazy bikers.



Wildlife: We were all nervous about the unknown risk of bad encounters with bear and moose. We made all possible preparations, including studying advice on how to deal with animals, arming with pepper spray and even guns. Fortunately, we did not have any untoward encounters on the trip to the Arctic. Also, fortunately, we DID see lots of wildlife in safer environs. When we returned from the Arctic, we saw lots of moose on the road to Chena Hot Springs, and many more animals in Denali Park (see below).

Insects: We were also warned about bugs, and they were fierce, particularly the mosquitoes. Mosquitoes are slow enough that one can avoid them by maintaining a modest speed on the bike. They become a problem when you stop or slow way down on a steep hill. Flies are faster, and as we went further north, we had more issues with them. Black flies came out on the day between the Arctic Circle and Coldfoot. Horseflies are fast enough to stay with you on flat ground and were a challenge for 2 days before reaching Coldfoot. We used so much DEET that the food often tasted peppery.

Arctic Circle: The Arctic Circle sign is 115 miles along the Dalton Highway, 199 miles from Fairbanks. Typical of the trip, the 115 milepost is at the bottom of a monstrously steep and long hill, with the wayside and sign at the top of the hill.



Mosquitoes are particularly fierce by the sign. Despite the skeeters, it was a great feeling to reach the Arctic Circle and the photos by the sign are a great reminder of the sense of accomplishment. We were the only cyclists there, and when motorists stopped off for a photo, we enjoyed watching them do the “mosquito dance”.



Coldfoot: We had not made any firm plans for after we reached the Arctic Circle, so once we made it that far, we decided to ride on to something new, rather than retrace our steps. We rode another day north to Coldfoot. The ride from Arctic Circle to Coldfoot was the first time all week that we had rolling valley roads rather than mountainous roads. There were several monster hills, though. Grayling Lake is a particularly beautiful spot along the highway on the way to Coldfoot. We reached Coldfoot in the late afternoon in time for a few beers at the northern-most bar in the USA. Ward had stopped for some fishing and caught 5 Grayling, an arctic fish, which he grilled for a tasty evening meal at Coldfoot.



Chena Hot Springs: We returned to Fairbanks in the RV to take a 2-day ride to Chena Hot Springs, 60 miles NE of Fairbanks. We saw lots of moose along the Chena Hot Springs Road. Rick Swenson, the only 5 time winner of the Iditarod, has his dog kennel at the hot springs. We got to see his dogs and a bunch of puppies. We had a nice time at the hot springs, then rode back a third of the way to Fairbanks to spend the night at a riverside campground. The following day we rode into Fairbanks to return the bikes. That completed 353 miles of riding in 7 days.



Denali: That evening we headed out at about 6 for Denali National Park, 150 miles SW of Fairbanks. We got to the Riley Creek Mercantile just before closing at 11 pm, in time to confirm our campground reservations at Savage River and to make reservations for the Denali tour bus for early the following morning. We parked the RV and got to bed about 1 am, still daylight. The following morning we caught the tour bus at 5:45. Wonder Lake is 90 miles from the park entrance, about a 5 hour trip, with many wildlife sightings and gorgeous scenery. We saw Dahl sheep, moose cows, a wolf pack, a mother grizzly and cub, caribou, beaver, loons, willow ptarmigan, rabbits, ground squirrels and others. On the way back we had a very close encounter with a mother grizzly and twin cubs, plus two bull moose, a lot more caribou and other bears.



Because of cloud cover, Mt. McKinley is only visible about one day in 3-5. We were fortunate to get a great view of it. Its summit is 20,320' elevation. The valley is only 700'. It is more than twice the height of most of the other mountains in the Alaska Range. It is much larger than Mt. Everest, which rises 12,000 feet above the 17,000' Tibetan Plateau.



Ending: We returned to Fairbanks on the morning of June 17 and dropped off Frank and Jeff at the airport. Frank was headed back to Thunder Bay. Jeff flew to Spokane to enter the Coeur d' Alene Ironman. He got a PR of 12 hours 12 minutes. We spent our last day in Fairbanks shopping for souvenirs and visiting the Yukon Quest headquarters (the other 1000+ mile Alaskan dogsled race). We met one of the mushers, Brent Sass, who is originally from MN, along with two of his lead dogs and a bunch of pups.

Ward and Jacky dropped off Kelsey and me at the airport at 4 pm. They headed off to Anchorage to meet up with Ward's son John and his wife. They were planning a fishing trip near Valdez. Our flight got going an hour late at 10 pm, but got us back to Minneapolis nearly on time just after 6am on the 18th.

Red Cross Heroes Campaign: So far, I have received over \$8,000 in contributions and pledges for the Red Cross. For that I am most appreciative!

Media Coverage:

We attracted some media attention, partly because of the craziness of the idea, partly because of support for the Red Cross Heroes campaign.

Rochester Post Bulletin article from 6/9/09:

http://www.postbulletin.com/newsmanager/templates/localnews_story.asp?z=2&a=403204

KAAL News 6/19/09:

<http://kaaltv.com/article/stories/S987893.shtml?cat=10226>

Photos posted at SLIDE.com:

<http://www.slide.com/r/WMV5QeLKsD9LkpyibZXqy5rckzQCRNjN>

What's Next? I plan to participate in the Heroes Campaign again next year, but have not decided what to do yet. I expect it will be challenging again. I hope it will be as memorable.

