

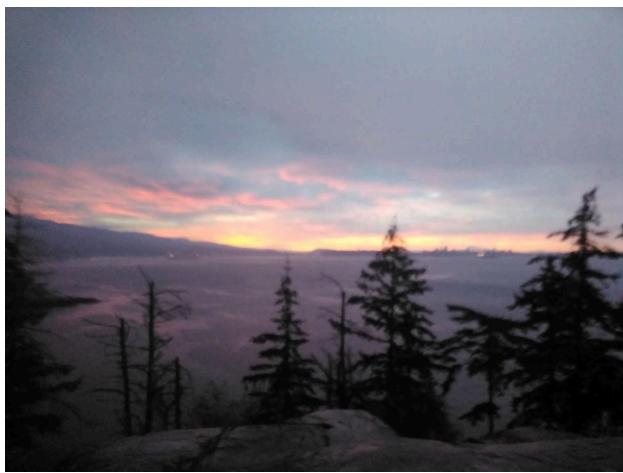
## Canmore to Penticton: A Bikepacking Odyssey

It was a familiar sight, the beat up grey chevy engulfed itself in Greenhill Road's clouds of dust as my family headed on their way back across the world to 'home'. I didn't feel quite as lonely as last year, right here in Lost House felt like home, I had a whole province to explore, and more tangibly a bus from Vancouver's Pacific Bus Station in 3 days time, so I retreated home to pack.

Saturday I headed for town, being the third cyclist across the ferry to the bus stop, leaving no more space on the rack, I had to opt for slogging up the narrow coastal highway to Courtenay. I never did enjoy going into town, returning to all the hustle and bustle that I was happily avoiding on the island, but I had some spare parts, books and other essentials to grab.



On the way home it was time to address the bike's clicking, so I ventured up, up, and up again to Megan-Rose's hideout on Triple Rock Road where she was already tending to a bike. She regaled me with the story of her mammoth ride across Canada while bringing the battered Dawes Super Galaxy back to health. The vast lakes and busy highways that stretched across Ontario, followed by months in the prairies where a day's most eventful sight would be a tree or a cow, I was only covering a minute section of the TCT but she assured me there was a hell of a journey ahead. Back home, I received wise advice from Natalie, she had many tales from her years spent hiking through the backcountry of the Rockies and had fond memories of the treacherous Spray Lakes Road (much more pleasant in a car as I would come to learn!), snow in any month of the year and great long stretches of wilderness without support or shops. I baked a lime drizzle loaf that could've been mistaken for bird feed to thank Megan-Rose and slept like a baby, my kit laid out for the big day tomorrow; from the humble, quiet solace of Denman Island to a night on the rough out in Vancouver, exactly where, I wasn't too sure.



Vancouver Island's Highway wasn't new, but it was no less unpleasant a ride. After a short stint on the coastal road, Denman disappeared behind me, opening new horizons ahead as I merged into 4 lanes of gas-guzzling chaos. 100km down, I caught the ferry to Horseshoe Bay leaving a few hours to scour for camp before dark. A memory washed over me from earlier in the summer. I had met a lovely woman, Patricia, walking her 200lb, 6'6" behemoth of an Irish Hound, who had suggested I visit Lighthouse Park when I get the chance. I (partially) followed her advice and stealthed my way in just as the sun dipped behind the gulf islands, drenching Vancouver in a heavenly pink glow.

I was blessed to wake up to a light pitter-patter accompanying the hypnotic washing of waves against the rocks beneath me at the crack of dawn, getting me up and out of the tent before any rangers came knocking. A short and sweet ride along Marine Drive with Metro Van shining in the morning light to my

right led me through the woods of Stanley Park and out to my bus station. My only job for the next 4 hours was to acquire a bike box and pack my bike up into it. I came to find this was easier said than done. As I trundled along, pushing my bike with my right arm and a man-sized box from MEC in the other, creeping patiently along the busy crossing on Main and Terminal, the box came loose and slipped out my armpit onto the road! An ensemble of beeps ensued as I tried picking the box back up, eventually giving up hope and running with the bike across the road to dump it before I could race to retrieve the box. The crowd all around took me back to being 13 in the hall of Taipei International Airport, my Dad working hard to unpack and put together 3 bikes as scornful onlookers passed in every direction. Truth was, it didn't matter then nor did it matter now what anyone thought about my journey - my scruffy beard and rag-tag bike panniers, with all manner of loose ends attached by bungee certainly had gotten me used to the stares and scrutiny or, at times, complete ignoring from passersby. I reminded myself how lucky I am to face such treatment only by choice, and on a holiday.

Onwards, I packed up my bike and took a much needed rest in the square opposite the station. A grand fountain was at its heart, with pristine walkways extending in all directions, intertwining fresh green lawns blooming with dandelions and daisies. Perhaps in times long ago the square held such charm, it had since been relegated to an encampment. Seizing a bench just by the dilapidated fountain, left of two men with curious glass pipes, I got started on some of the homegrown Natalie had wished me off with - I had a 16 hour bus ride ahead after all and I wasn't planning to stay awake for it all. I chatted with a hasty fellow in torn-up attire about my journey ahead, as he reminisced over his past travels, hitching around the USA in search of work, with the cost of freedom eventually coming down with a medical bill that left him stagnant. I never got his name, but the last I saw of him he was trying to convince my bus driver he had a ticket with the name John Smith.

The first few hours passed in a flash and I was woken up by the bus driver in some middle of nowhere town for the 11pm loo break. My dead right hand struggled with this next doobie, so much so that I employed the help of a fellow passenger, Trent. He was a fair worker, doing the rounds, setting up games and stands all over the country. I admired his passion for his job and he didn't match the loser-cruiser stereotypes of the North American bus rider, though the couple fornicating under the blanket in row G and a senile, serial sleepwalker sat behind me sure did.

After no time at all, 5:30am struck and we had arrived in Canmore. The bus driver gave me a stern look and asked if I was sure I wanted to get out here, into the cold, dark isolation of the rockies. I smiled. I had rarely been less sure of anything in my life. Silhouettes of giant peaks engulfed me in the Canmore Valley basin. After a few mishaps putting the bike back together, I was left to wait outside the bike shop for a spare spoke. A few tourists stopped to ask about my journey and one older guy, telling me all about his cycle across the United States when he was younger, offered the wise though little-too-late advice to take the air out my tires before removing the wheels.





Natalie had warned me of the road out of Canmore, she had seen few cyclists take it on and spared her sympathy when she did, by way of a good chuckle. I rose up a slow tarmacked incline directed straight towards Ha Ling peak above the picturesque Grassi lakes reflecting the valley's opposing peaks. Not an hour into my grand journey, I got my first taste of grit and gravel from the old forest road. After a good pummeling from the incline and still a ways to go, I stashed my bike in the woods, packing just enough in my daypack for a few days hiking and sticking out my thumb.

After about half an hour, I caught a ride from a young guy from Ontario who was working in oil. He was living out his Tacoma for the month before dropping a down payment in Edmonton with his first paycheck. As is the custom when riding as a hitchhiker, I didn't probe much about the oil industry at the risk of an argument and my plausible ejection from the truck, a short ride later we reached Spray Lakes where he was camping, not quite where I wanted to end up but I had faith in a second ride.



Unfortunately cars passed very infrequently and those that did seemed too fancy to be picking me up! Anyway, hitchhiking isn't so bad with a view like that, soaking in the fervent summer heat. That said, after an hour waiting I opened up and took inspiration from the hobos, sticking out my thumb for cars going in either direction. If I wasn't gonna reach the trailhead by car, I might as well get there on my bike! Soon later, a van with two scrambler dudes headed home to Calgary picked me up. They warned me of a rough weather warning for the night which I shrugged off and dropped me a few miles back in the middle of the road where the bike was stashed. The rest of the ride up the hill was slow yet scenic, a common occurrence in this landscape which I came to get used to. Pedalling means progress!

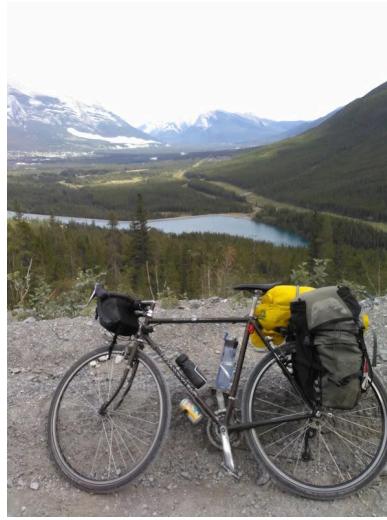
A fact I came to learn the year before is that when bikepacking, you don't tend to see many others, until you need them. After enduring 120km of tired, screeching, wheels down along the beautiful rocky coast of Oregon, I was overtaken by a couple, Herve and Lucie who stopped to diagnose and fix up a loose screw joining my fork to the front wheel, hailing down an RV which would have a spanner large enough for the job in its toolbox. Similarly, at the precipice of Spray Lakes Rd, I was overtaken by two mountain bikers who pointed out that my back wheel was low on air, just as I was turning off on a 200km stretch of empty, open road. They pumped my tire (I had brought the wrong kind of pump) and wished me luck on my hairbrained journey, just as it began to rain. I got back to where I had initially been dropped off earlier and pushed on, across the north shore to Spray Lakes Campground, seeking a shortcut through the woods to the Mount Shark Trailhead. Soon, the pitter-patter turned into an onslaught of hail and I was forced to duck under tree cover and set up camp before the hail turned to snow. Luckily I wouldn't have to pay for the campsite as I was in the old campground, which had been closed for several years after frequent cougar sightings.



The next 22 hours was a bit of a blur, snow piled on as my gear got soaked. I couldn't move my bum in fear of losing my only dry oasis in the sopping orange shelter. This was a time for learning, both existential lessons and others more survivalistic, for example, to open my tent zip occasionally, once I had inhaled all the oxygen and felt the onset of a migraine - or maybe to check the weather next time!

Having set up at 6pm the night before, I first got out of the tent at noon to grab food, the snow had reduced, but only to rain and so I felt more comfortable spending a few more hours in the tent. There was no use trying to continue on with my gear in this state so I gave up and headed back for Canmore. The ride down to town was much more pleasant, though each metre down came with the inevitable uphill on my return tomorrow. I settled into a Canmore hostel for the night and tried to dry my things.





*Before and After The Snow*

*Grassi Lakes with Canmore in the background, facing East from Spray Lakes Rd.*

*Peaks Grotto and McGillivray in the distance*

*Shoutout Tai and Ekou*

I woke up and colonised the empty space beside the hostel with my sleeping bag, tent and roll mat soaking in the sun. No need to check the weather, I had faith in the calm after the storm and set off!

There were positives to take from the mishaps of the day before, enduring the first snow of the season (in August, mind you!) meant seeing the dry, jagged peaks contrasted with their wintery, white-capped, alpine form. Most of the ride was spent on a narrow dirt trail along the banks of the lake, though I lost it at some point and ended up high above the lake on an old gravel path, safe to say my bike was no great match for the fallen trees or river crossings and progress was slow.



The views were incredible, and aside from the trail mishap, navigation was easy too as I stuck to the wide ex-forestry tourist road escorting urbanites over to lakes and lodges. 40 miles in, I took the first right up the road to the trailhead, just as the whirr of a helicopter blared across the valley. The next three days it was constant, shuttling visitors to and from the lodge over my head. One special thing about some Rockies trails is bike inclusivity, I managed 10km beyond the trailhead past knackered, sweaty thru-hikers, before a bear warning stopped me in my tracks. The rattle of a Dawes Super Galaxy is enough to disgruntle most humans, let alone any wild creatures, so I locked it to a tree and packed my rucksack. There was limited space in the red 18L rucksack, not enough for a med kit or battery pack, not even enough for my bagels which dangled underneath, swinging left and right, no doubt hypnotising any cougar eyeing me up from afar. I found a creekside campground not far along which provided a bear cache and cozy tent pads. There was even company, a pair of fishermen who told me they had weathered the storm two nights before - I could already tell from the state of them!



credit: Altus Mountain Guides

Onwards and upwards the next day, following hoofprints over a mountain pass across the Alberta-BC border led me to Lake Magog, a crystal clear alpine lake at Mt. Assiniboine's (3618m) base. The campground was packed and I even spotted a ranger asking for permits, so I headed up into the woods to stash my things and got on with an afternoon day hike, a well-marked trail took me along the lake to a decent cliff jumping spot and I returned to camp refreshed and ready for bed.

The next morning, I set directly up towards Sunburst peak, looming 600m above the Campground. It began with boulder-hopping and developed into slippery switch-back scree then extensive scrambling sections past tat (old rope for belaying) and bolts. Luckily, nothing was too sketchy and the weather remained favourable. Filling out the logbook I realised I couldn't safely return the way I had come up and opted to follow the ridge up to the next peak. Traipsing along the peak of the ridge was incredible, the view to the north was an endless collection of jutting brown peaks, some sprinkled in snow and to the south a similar expanse, intertwined with alpine meadows and lakes extending past the horizon.

At one point I was forced to stop and consider paths, with the choice of a small vertical crack-climb or an exposed steep scrambly traverse up and round. I leaned over and hopped a small gap over 800m of abyss to an extruding rock and tried the scramble, soon having to turn back as my rucksack was brushing the wall beside me, pushing me away. The climb certainly wasn't a walk in the park, and it took 2 attempts to hold on through a crumbly, cracky, crux but I made it up and over.

There was company waiting on the other side, a bright white mountain goat 50 yards ahead lost its camouflage as it turned and ran away from me, disappearing down a steep rocky face. Now I really put my plimsoll trainers to the test on the 40 degree snowpatch crowning Wedgewood Peak (3024m). After a brief celebration involving a spliff and my rationed lunch of a handful of trailmix, I headed down towards Hind Hut.



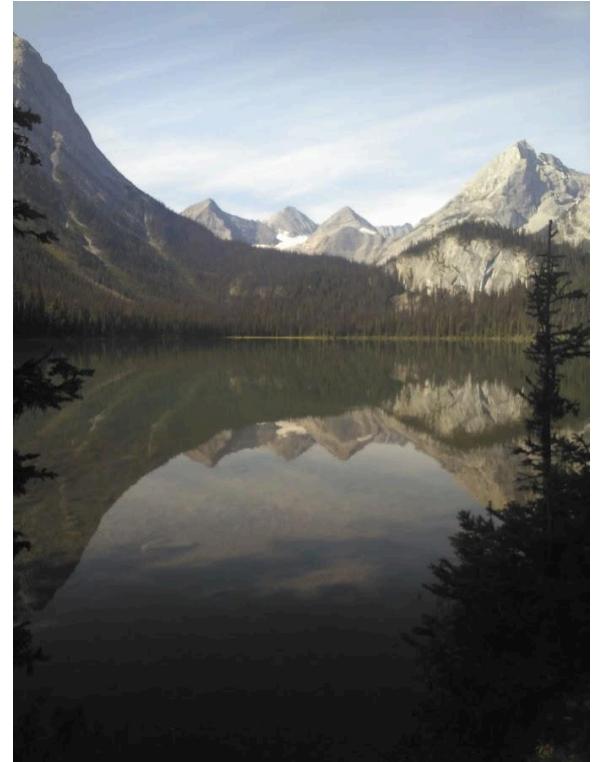
credit: UPI

It was all empty, save for some emergency supplies and Jim Murray's 2006 Whiskey Bible. I was able to verify its credibility, having seen the smoky 12-year Jura as his top pick. Without much else to do, I continued on down back to camp, and with some time left on this fine long summer's day, I packed up and set off for the trailhead. I passed by a group of around 50 hikers all hanging outside the lodge snacking. Having averaged a meal a day so far, I could've ravaged the lodge's whole supply of tea and cake, that is if I had any money to pay. Rummaging through my sack, I realised the wallet had been stashed back with the bike and stumbled on short-changed and empty-handed.

Over the aptly named Wonder Pass and following the bank of the equally aptly named Marvel Lake, I reached the abandoned Bryant Creek Shelter. A card sign on the door alerted me of the hut's fate "October 7th 2002: Bryant Hut Permanently Closed", but the boarded windows had been unboarded and the locked door unlocked, so I made my way in, set up and ended the day with a campfire under the stars. The next morning I was shaken awake early by strange grunting outside the door. I never found out what the source was, I just counted my lucky stars that the door still locked properly. After a classic breakfast of Oatmeal, finishing off Megan-Rose's indulgent chocolate spread, it was time to get back to the bike and finally make some progress, it was a long way yet to Vancouver after all!

60km back on the busy gravel road led me to my first shop in 4 days, though my relief was shortlasted as the only dinner option left was tinned potatoes and beans in maple syrup. I grabbed some snacks and a beer for the road and kept moving. My final bagel, tinned potatoes and maple beans (yes I got them, I had to) would have to last me until Elkford, 90km south so constant progress was vital. Soon I was approaching Elk Lakes Pass, a steep, rock-strewn trail brought me up and a steep, rockstrewn road took me down to the lower lake, which had a campground waiting for me.

The campground was bustling! I even saw another bike and got chatting to its owner, Phillip. He was a German PhD student who had two research meetings a few weeks apart, one in Vancouver and the next in Calgary and he's decided to cycle the distance! As I was doing the exact inverse trip that he was, we exchanged details about the trail we had



encountered so far, I was apparently due quite a few closures as a result of collapsed bridges - but that wouldn't be for a week or so. The next character I met was Zoran, a Yugoslavian man who adored his ultralight camping gear. I must say I was impressed by the 500g tent consisting of just one pole (which doubled as his walking pole!) and by his chopping abilities as he prepared firewood for the night. I took a short swim and much-needed clean in the cool tranquility of Lower Elk Lake before cooking dinner and spending the evening by the campfire with Zoran, Phillip and a couple from Calgary.

The next morning I set off bright and early, hoping to reach Elkford for the afternoon and top up on food (and booze!). Just past camp I bumped into a middle-aged Kiwi, Stewart, tinkering with something on his mammoth mountain bike set up. Unlike me, he had all the gear; much like me, he had no idea. He was riding the whole length of the Rockies, down through America to Colorado and had started a few days back like me. After reminding him to pick up the gloves he'd left on the floor we set off for Elkford. It was only 60km away and downhill most of the way but had such poor road quality that we were forced to hold the brakes and go slow to maintain control. We took frequent breaks, and he frequently left his gloves on the floor, meanwhile I would've lost my water bottle and snack bag if it wasn't for him. It was refreshing to ride alongside someone equally clueless but accepting of what would come ahead. After an hour or so together, I sped away up a hill and agreed to catch him the next morning for breakfast in Elkford.

Not long after leaving Stewie in the dust, my tire began to deflate, to the point where I'd put in double the effort for half as much speed, I sat by the road in the valley base, surrounded by clear-cuts and evidence of recent wildfires, languishing in the heat as I anticipated Stewie's arrival. He caught up and left me to it. I'd hand back the pump when we met again, which would only be a couple hours, as long as there were no hiccups. Tires pumped, I pushed on and on, though the constant bumping on the dry, dirt path eventually wore away my tires so badly that the valve loosened and all air was lost. Another attempt at pumping my messed up wheel made the valve shoot out into the surrounding grass and with 20km still to Elkford, I lost all hope of having a comfy night in a campground.

Stood by the road, in the middle of nowhere, with a bike that wouldn't go, was certainly one of the lowlights of the journey. I could either walk the bike into town or leave it and try to hitchhike and return tomorrow with repair gear. I had passed a few cars throughout the day, likely on day trips from Elkford, this was a dead-end road with no turn-offs after all, and I had faith in them returning soon. I stuck my thumb out for a ride to town and the 5th truck pulled over. A large man, Dave, hopped out and, after hearing my situation, offered to chuck my bike on his rack and take me into town. He was a local, had grown up in Elkford and had been camped out in the wilderness enjoying the hunting season. We had a great chat about our own journeys and exploring, he mentioned that he doesn't travel so much anymore with all his kids, just then I heard a chuckle and turned around to see 5 kids and their Mum crowded in the back of the truck earwigging. I hadn't even realised they were there nor that I'd nicked Mum's passenger seat! We reached Elkford and he dropped me at the Campground, just across the road from the Grocery Store, Liquor Store and Dispensary. I raided all three and returned to camp to find Dave waiting with his son Hunter and a spare valve which he kindly fitted for me, rejecting any offer of payment. Moments of generosity like these gave me great hope along the journey.

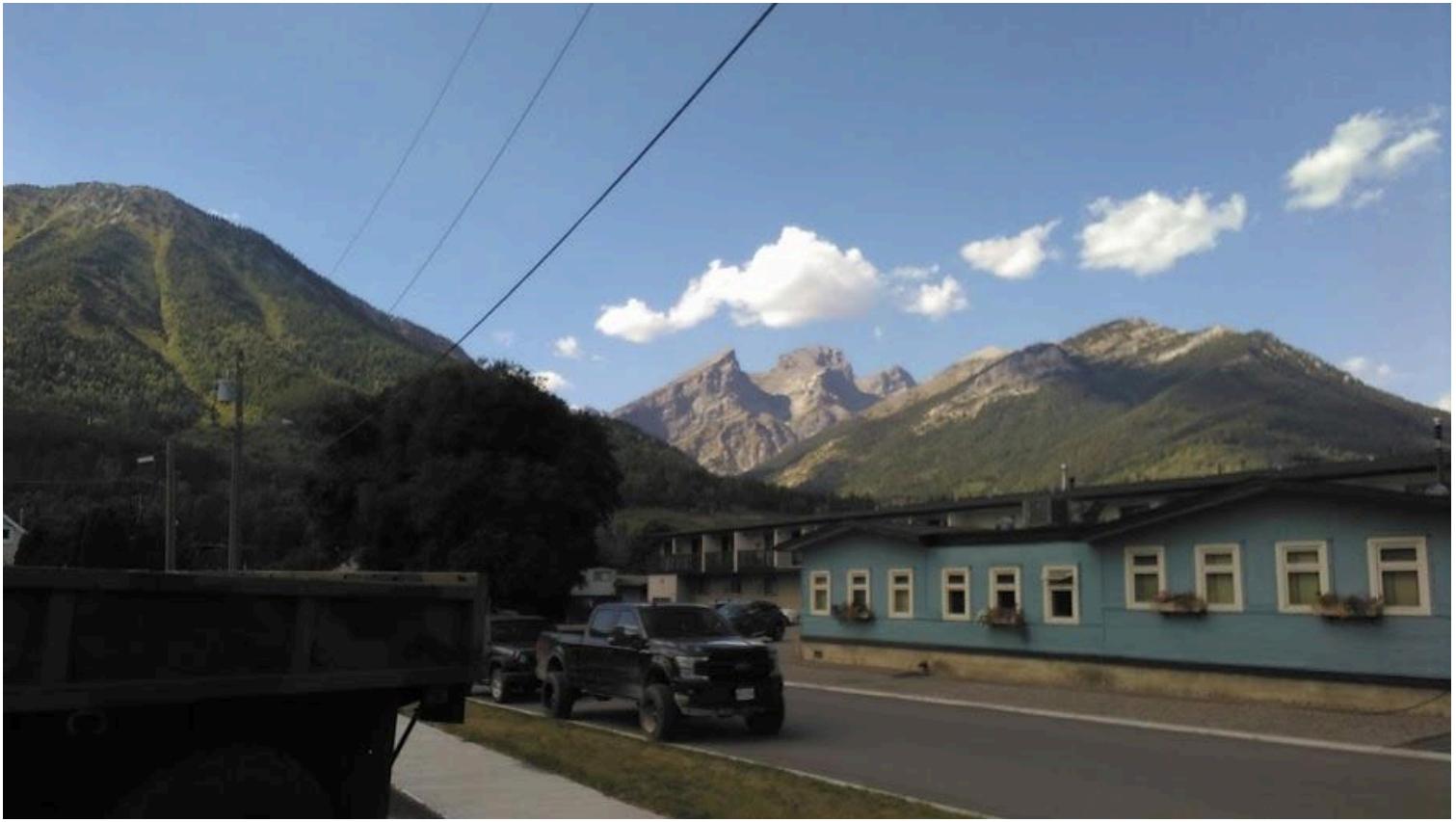
Since I'd first arrived, a trio of mid-40s bikepackers had pulled up, brothers Eric and Olaf and their friend Tim. I joined them on their bench for dinner and shared my celebratory red wine round. They had nearly completed their ride, the Crowsnest loop with rough, rugged bushwhacking round the Rockies on proper mountain bikes with chunky frames and heavy suspension. They headed for an early bed as I popped down to the river for a quick bedtime spliff. The next morning, I had to hunt Stewie down, I came to find hunting down a visitor was not a tough task in Elkford. The town's only motel was across the road from the campground and I mentioned a New Zealander to the owner who pointed me to room 11. We had agreed on breakfast at 7, but Stewie clearly wasn't in a great way, opening the door in just his pants and taking the pump back. He'd come down with something and was taking a rest today, I hoped it wasn't the dodgy water we had pumped from the stream yesterday!

The only café in town was closed, so I figured I'd just duck into the gas station for something quick and cheap. Turns out the gas station was the café, tucked into one corner was a little table for four. Grabbing a coffee and a wrap and sitting with two Elkford old-timers, I asked what was up with all the trailers around. One of them helpfully answered, "Hunting," before quickly launching into a rant about the government "stripping our freedom" by banning bear hunting. To make his point about these urbanite politicians and "liberals" he welcomed them to visit Elkford and raised his hand, shaped like a gun, aiming somewhere off in the distance. While I am generally impartial to a skeptic, this geezer lost me when he mocked the government blaming climate change for Elkford's first ever cancelled ski season. Thankfully, by this point another cyclist, Chris had sat down so I at least had someone to divert attention to, we finished off our breakfasts and started off riding together. He wasn't the speediest and I raced off on an uphill through Elkford's mountain bike trail network. Narrow dirt paths carved through the lush pine forest silently, after the forest, an expanse opened up, I wasn't in the mountains anymore, now it was the land of ranches. Tall yellow grass covered the hills in every direction, distant cows dotted around.

I got sick of the rocky old forest road quite quickly and opted for the parallel highway. Constant overtakes were jarring but progress was fast and I reached the comfy solace of Sparwood McDonald's in no time. It was early afternoon now and other than this massive fuck off truck there wasn't much to see or do in Sparwood, so I figured I'd firm the 30 kilometres on to Fernie.



Once more, the highway was unpleasant but it was overcast and cool, so I put a podcast on and stuck my head down till Fernie, a town I'd heard lots about from Max, who had grown up nearby. Fernie was an old coal mining town, and it was the first of a couple of Kootenay towns I'd see that had been lost to history. Nowadays, it's active for its alpine resort and it has got some great beer which I spent the rest of the afternoon testing. Clearly the town was too popular for its own good, because I couldn't even sneak a free campsite. A park ranger pulled up in a golf buggy and made me pay 30 bucks by card for a spot to pitch. Lesson learnt, stick to the woods next time. I got to have a quick call sharing stories and views with Jacob, who was cycling across Europe down the Rhine at this point. For the evening, I put my normal people's clothes on and treated myself to Funky Goat's Pizza and beer in a cemetery.



Exiting Fernie, it was 30km to the next stop, Elko. I twisted and turned along a picturesque, windy section of highway towering above the banks of the Elk River, before stopping at the first gas station for some snacks. At some point after I must've taken a wrong turn because I ended up on a gravel road marked 'private' with bullet holes splintering the road signs. Surrounding me was a wasteland of massacred forest, it was mostly quiet but once in a while a 12-wheeler hauling a whole forest would pass me. On one such occasion, I decided to be nice and pull right to the edge of the road as it passed, unbeknownst to me this gravel bank was a foot thick, clutching my tire, stopping me in my tracks and toppling me off to the side. The truck driver slowed down for a longer look, as he chuckled and continued on back to the mill.

It was just me on the road down past Baynes Lake and I caught my first sight of some CP Rail. A bright red freight train chugged past on the adjacent tracks, what must've been 2 miles of car after car full of coal headed towards the coast. Once I'd crossed Kootenay River, the Trans-Canada Trail returned along the Chief Isadore Trail, and I was swept up a forested hillside along 40km of narrow, meandering paths. It was smooth sailing to Cranbrook, and a lot of fun too, picking up pace free-wheeling down windy trails, until a stubborn bull halted me from right on the trail. After a minute's waiting and calling I caught its attention, he puckered up from munching the grass and, much to my relief, turned away, only to continue directly down the trail. I was limited to a cow's leisurely pace for the next 5 minutes, which was a helpful time for reflection though I did take my chance eventually taking a shortcut around and returning to normality. Two hours onwards down trail, I descended into the largest city yet, Cranbrook. After my extensive wilderness journeying this urban dystopia came as quite a shock, but at least the Walmart parking lot was doused in an angelic peachy light as they tend to be. I headed up to the suburbs and snuck onto a hiking trail late at night for a quiet camp.

There is truly no comfier feeling than a few hours in a Denny's after a rough night's sleep. I listened in to early morning business chats and altercations as I struggled through my kid's meal and rinsed the unlimited coffee. By 8am, I got started on the trail. I was in more populated areas now, and the forests were sparsely dotted with homesteads and farms.



20km of empty road through lush forest led me to Kimberley, and after the slow morning and decent ride, the clock was past 12 which made it time for a pub visit. Max's local when he lived in Kimberley was the Sully, a quiet pub paired with an ingenious idea, the drive-thru liquor store which I couldn't take advantage of on my two-wheeled steed. The next section of trail involved Gray Creek Pass, a road only open between July and October ascended some 1500m to connect Kimberley more directly to Kootenay Lake, as such I took my time in Kimberley, lacking any urgency to start on the mountain ahead. Half an hour outside Kimberley I passed a campground, I hadn't washed nor swum in a while so I snuck in for a hot shower before pushing on to St Mary's Lake, a bench made a perfect camp spot and I found a flat patch of grass by the lake, facing the towering mountains west, agonising over what tomorrow would bring.



Preparation isn't always my strong suit; I often used downloaded maps to help track distances, and had done so before my phone had died this morning, for whatever reason the numbers 51 and 27 faintly stuck in my head so I was certain I had either 51 or 27 kilometres of uphill ahead of me. I also had just two trail bars to fend off the great hunger that would await me at the top. Regardless, I crawled along this forest road, with markers every 100 metres separated by gruelling minutes of arse-rocking bumpy gravel. I saw very few people this morning, there certainly weren't any cyclists en route but a couple of motorbikes revving past and even they struggled with pace. For the sake of the reader I won't go into great detail about the uneventful 6 hour, 27km (thank god!) uphill struggle, just know I did it and had a much needed celebratory spliff atop, next to a smashed up corolla.

I was thoroughly excited for the 1500m downhill awaiting me, though this joy dwindled as I begun and found that without holding the brakes fully down, I would struggle to remain in control of my great green Dawes and as such I was reduced to a crawl for it, my legs were no longer sore but my forearms certainly felt pumped. Regardless, I thanked my lucky stars that the snow hadn't reached this far west yet and the road was still open as I creped along towards Gray Creek. I reached the town's general store early in the afternoon and it was yet another gorgeous sunny day. The cashier described my dinner of tinned chilli, beer and sweets as a "Dinner of Champions", I did feel quite the champion glugging down my Red Truck right outside. An Argentine motorcyclist offered me some chain lube after the pass but I kindly refused, knowing my Dawes could take care of itself, this was a big section of a cross-province motorbike loop that was apparently a pilgrimage of sorts for those types. Not my style.

I was in quite rough shape after the long haul and opted for a slow afternoon, approaching Pilot Bay campground, just south of Kootenay Bay, where I was to catch the world's longest free ferry the next morning. A pleasant and welcome oddity of this area was the presence of an inland lighthouse. At the end of the 19th century this area was in an industrial boom, and ships going along the grand Kootenay lake needed visibility and navigability which the lighthouse provided on foggy days. As I reached the trailhead for Pilot Bay, stashing my unneeded gear in a nearby tree I noticed a sign from 2 days prior warning of cougar sightings, cougars move pretty quick so it was probably long gone by now...? A kilometre or so of overgrown forest trail led me to a picturesque headland set up comfortably with benches and bear caches, my site faced east towards Pilot Bay, it was a clean, golden bay of sand with no sign or remains of the smelter which had employed over 200 people back in 1895. Following a short swim, I was soaking up the westerly sunset, onlooking the decommissioned lighthouse to my north and preparing for an early bed following the gruelling ride.

Waking up bright and early, I set off for the Crawford Bay ferry, 35 minutes, about 5 miles across and all for free. A gumpy character greeted and directed me towards the wrong entrance of the ferry but I figured it out and helped myself to a coffee onboard. The lake was incredibly vast, and with the mountains surrounding in all directions it felt like being at the base of a huge crater. It was helpful to reconnect slightly with the real world, seeing a few more people than I'd been exposed to in the past couple days before raiding all three shops in Balfour in quick succession. First a wrap at the restaurant, then some pastries at the bakery and topped off with another treat at the gas station.

Max had recommended Ainsworth Hot Springs, a resort town 10 miles north of where I was now, for a relaxing day cooling off in the springs. I had seen road signs about a week ago directing me to this little town so my expectations were high and I was excited for a chance to unwind. A short, but surprisingly hilly lakeside ride led me to this town and when I turned the last corner into town it seemed I had shown up about 100 years late.

The only shop left was a vintage gift shop with a crumbling gold rush era storefront. Admittedly, there was a spa but it was more of a resort than the Jimjilbang I had been expecting. One of the greatest rest stops I've ever had while cycling was a hot spring in Taiwan. Shortly after a tense encounter with a savage macaque, Reubs and my Dad led the way through tunnels of thick, overhanging Taiwanese red pines to a perfect respite. It was a group of outdoor pools, some cool and some hot. The cold soothed my sore, worn muscles and helped me forget about my macaquey brush up. While I could really have done with a spa day, my bank balance wasn't looking promising and I stashed my bike in a bush just next to this boat, heading up to the hotel just for a late lunch. Eating alone was great with a view over the lake, I got a taste of home both from the fish, chips, and pint and also chatting to my waiter. He was around my age, originally from Surrey, whose parents had moved just north to Kaslo when he was 13. It was lonely and he still felt a slight outsider but upon sharing tales of our explorations around BC we agreed it was pretty great.



After a pleasant and slow meal I returned to my stash and lit up while thinking of where to sleep tonight. There was a 3x3m patch just left of the dock in the photo above, a great view of the lake for me, but also a great view of me for the street of residents living just up on the bank. I figured if I left it late enough and got going early nobody would mind anyway. Just as I had settled into my spot for tonight, two cars of teenagers pulled up to the dock making all sorts of noise with their exhausts and blasting some soundcloud era classics.

I retrieved my bike from the stash and began hauling it up the ramp towards the dudes. "Hey man want a rip from this bong?" one yelled over, "I was just gonna offer you a hit of my zoot!" I replied. After deciphering my slang for them, they became hesitant after I informed them it was from a dispensary. "Man, we don't smoke that shit out here in Nelson." I recalled when I had met the three bikepackers in Elkford, trailing through my future destination, they highlighted Nelson as the home of BC cannabis, an old hippy haven. He pulled out about a 3.5 of his homegrown and dropped it in my pleading palms. "So, what are you even doing here, man - you're British right?". "Yeah, I'm trying to get to Vancouver, you lot don't know where I could find a spot to sleep tonight do ya?" They did. 5 miles back south of Ainsworth, just before the campground, was a parking spot with a tight patch of grass, presumably for those fishing in Coffee Creek. Ainsworth was a bit of a dud and it was good to make some progress in the right direction for the evening, so I set off.



When I woke up with the sun, there were three cars surrounding my bike and tent. I got out and saw what all the fuss was about, it turned out a couple of other campers had the same idea after I had crashed in the layover. I got moving towards Nelson and was there in time for a late A&W breakfast. As I scarfed down my bacon and egger, a mysterious man in all-black leather, chains and all, sat down at the table next to me. In his hands was a cubic harmonica, with a different mouthpiece on each face. He mumbled to himself and took sweet sweet time with his sole bag of small fries. He demonstrated each face of the harmonica to me, each playing different octaves - the last and highest graciously drowning out the kids' squeals behind me. Upon noticing my helmet and cycling gear, the man moved over and told me about his own bike journeys, also on pedal bikes despite his motorbiker do-up. He had been hit by a speeding semi-truck and lost his arm, without healthcare he was left homeless, one of a homeless population of nearly 100 in Nelson.

Next I went for my first proper food shop in a week, stocking up on some classics to save spending on meals out all the time. Sat outside with a sandwich in the tranquil Lakeside Rotary Park, I found it tough to want to keep going, it was a truly serene spot and Nelson had its charm. Scooting out to the edge of town and onto Castlegar, I first stopped by the visitor centre. It was clear this town had a history by the Western style facades all up the high street, unfortunately with it being a Sunday the centre was closed. Just as I finished having a wee in the public loos, a worker was locking the door from the outside. I banged on the door and was courteously released. "Sorry dude didn't mean to lock you in there". Brad worked at the visitor centre and told me all about Nelson's history. Canada's first red light district was in Nelson, just past where the train would drop off copper, silver or gold miners, beep the horn and flash the red lights to alert the brothels. It was a town of abundance, and one of the few in the area large enough to survive the mining industry going bust. Just north for example, was Sandon, the first fully electrified town in BC is now not home to much more than a general store and a herd of Vancouver's rusty, abandoned buses.

I blew past Taghum, Blewett and Beasley to reach Castlegar for the afternoon. It was a picturesque road with a grand bridge soaring above none other than the Columbia River! The time was around 6 and it was beginning to get darker, so I pushed on towards the 1000m of elevation up to Bonanza Pass. Just as I got in my stride an older man rolled down the windows of his classic VW Beetle and yelled "Hey man do you want a ride!? I got some spare chinese food in the back!". An offer I simply couldn't refuse; I didn't know it yet, but my second ever hitchhike would be quite something.

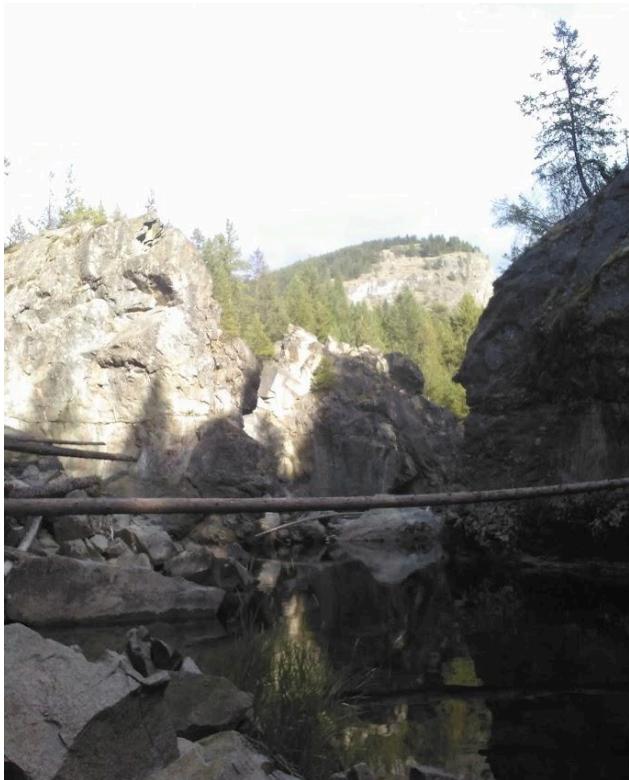
In the driver's seat was David, a retired guy who had plenty of stories to tell and advice to provide, the first piece of wisdom imparted on me was to pack deodorant next time - noted. David was driving back home from a day out with a good old friend over in Trail, and he'd lived in the Kootenays since his Mum passed and left him the house. Before that, David was a party animal, living la vida loca on Vancouver's very own Wreck Beach all day every day. He couldn't recommend it enough, but said the old vibes of campfires long into the night, music and shamanic rituals had long since disappeared. He partially blamed the rise of phones on this, increasing the feelings of constant judgment and criticism in public spaces. While living in Vancouver, David was a recording artist, and had been part of a band "Idle Eyes" who I'd recommend for some 80s new wave pop rock, they even won best breakout band in the Canadian Grammys back in 1985. He regaled in tales of doing lines with Jay Ramone in the back of seedy clubs, parisian love affairs and somehow led onto his local friend, an internationally known bear feeder. He couldn't show me the house because heading up his driveway without the friend was asking to have his beetle mauled by black bears and grizzlies. Apparently, if you were calm enough (and crazy enough!) you could feed them apples straight from your hand! The uphill flew by in this sturdy whip and after a small detour to show off his dream future home, all secluded on the west bank of Nancy Green Lake we began to head south to Christina Lake where he lived.

We made it back to his humble bungalow in Christina Lake and I got my stuff out of the car as he set up a sofa bed for me on the porch, just above the raccoon family he was keeping fed. The neighbours weren't too chuffed but he would remind them to have gratitude, for he wasn't feeding cougars or bears. Without wasting a minute, we cycled a couple of minutes to the beach of BC warmest lake for a quick dip, graciously, David didn't conform to his wreck beach rituals and decided to keep his skimpy

speedo on. It was a great refreshing swim in clear, fresh mountain meltwater that glistened purple and pink as the sun ducked behind the westerly hills. Back at Chris', I scarfed down most of the leftover chinese as he showed off some Canadian cultural classics like Austin Powers. We spread out some rice and veg by the front stairs before I crashed on the sofa bed, my first bed in two weeks, it was a comfort like no other. The next morning, we headed to Dave's favourite restaurant, a cute little diner tucked in the corner of the visitor centre and split eggs benedict. He offered to drive me a bit of a way, skipping the next 600m hill and dropping me off with a pleasant downhill to look forward to, along this drive we were hugging the 49th parallel, and came as close as 200m to the US border and we even passed an oxbow lake, how's that for ya gcse geoggers!?



After cruising downhill for what felt like a lifetime, I made it to Greenwood and followed the bike path parallel to the highway down to Midway. At this point I caught the Kettle River and I was truly back in ranch land, all the signs (literal + bullet-splintered as well as metaphorical) I'd seen in a week back were returning. Red barns, brown cows, yellow grass and a spotless blue sky made for a scenic ride to the ice cream shop at Rocky Creek.



The scene changed instantly as I joined the Kettle Valley Rail Trail north towards Beaverdell. Journeying alongside a steady, meandering river on a trail that kept disappearing or literally turning to dust was somewhat jarring, but after a turn-off at the Coddiewomplers campsite, I entered a smooth trail on a rail-grade incline (always < 5 degrees!) which I followed for 30km to the small town of Beaverdell. Thankfully, there was a general store and even a campground, though that might be giving the three adjacent tent-sized patches of grass a bit too much credit. Warm, roadside chilli and a cold beer on an empty stomach brought me back up after a tiring slog of a day and I snuck into a quiet corner of the campground. The old railway had hugged the rugged rock creek and there were ample scenic swim spots including this beauty with a balancing beam diving board.

I made it to the 1200m summit at Summit Lake for the early afternoon and had some time to appreciate its beauty, and anticipate the glorious downhill to come, a constant 2-3% decline for 40km, along old wooden trestles, through crumbly tunnels and past more charming lakeside spliff spots.



As an avid railway - and especially trestle enthusiast, this next section was something I'd been looking forward to since I'd first had the idea for this journey. 20 or so historic railway bridges had had their tracks removed and opened up as a multi-use hiking and biking trail.



The scale of myra canyon was truly incomprehensible, between the large crossings were sections of flat gravel, hugging the contour lines on the northern ridge of the mountain range, overlooking Kelowna before reaching Chute Lake and looking down on Okanagan Lake to the west.

There were comfy looking lodges sat on the bank by Chute Lake, and with it being the off-season they looked quiet too. I made use of the grass and benches for cooking before it was dark enough to stealth it into a lodge. It was a dream room, a large double bed at the heart, candles to keep the yurt-style structure lit and an old classic fireplace in the corner, the only thing missing were rose petals scattered around - 9/10. Rather than mess up the bed with the grit and grime I'd spent two weeks collecting on my only shirt, I opted for the floor and got to bed instantly.

So quickly, in fact that I'd forgotten to bring my things inside, and had left my worldly possessions strapped to my bike, laying on the grass outside the cabin. At 2 in the morning I was awoken by a rustling outside, my mind went straight to the worst possible scenario and I froze still. It was an instinctive fear I hadn't felt since about a year prior, to the day. When sleeping in a makeshift log structure in California's Desolation Wilderness, one had come loose and landed on my foot with the weight of a black bear's paw - thankfully this time as well it was no bear nor cougar rustling through my things but rather a raccoon. I lifted up the door flap just enough to see two narrow, iridescent eyes centred on me and I could just about see my breakfast bag in between a set of small, cheeky teeth before they darted off into the bushes and I was left without oatmeal and nutless. Struggling to get back to sleep after the encounter, I got out and shifted the 300m to Chute Lake recreation site, setting the tent up not long before dawn would strike.

Regardless, getting up the next morning was easy as I had motivation on my side. Ever since I'd heard from Phillip at Lower Elk Lake about the bridge washout on what would've been my next section of trail, I had decided to call it at Penticton and look at what bus options I had. Currently, a long chain of Penticton -> Keremeos -> Princeton -> Merritt -> Hope -> Abbotsford would get me to Vancouver in 2 days and for only 30 bucks, this was perfect because my flight was in a week's time and there was someone I desperately wanted to see.

It was a soggy overcast morning, and didn'tucker up all day - I was completely drenched rolling down the KVR's switch backs to BC's own home of great wine, Naramata. I felt like I was in Southern Italy as the sun peeked out and I navigated along windy backroads intersecting vineyards of all varieties. A short ride on and I reached Penticton's town centre, not the prettiest place but it meant a lot to me as it indicated the end of a grand grand journey of ups and downs, twists and turns, rain and shine and everything else I could've asked for.



My long-haul bus plan was scuppered when the biweekly bus showed up with a broken bike rack and the driver asked me to wait till Sunday (it was Wednesday!) so I caught a quick one to Kelowna where I could catch a coach the next morning. I spent the evening meeting and talking with a psychomaniac and even worse, a gaggle of brits at the hostel, readying up for a return to Vancouver Pacific Bus Station, where it all began just two weeks prior.



G. salt