

an Arctic Adventure on 3 wheels

# Triking Alaska's Dalton Highway



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**Triking the Dalton Highway**  
**By Andrew and Joanne Hooker**

Published by:  
Andrew and Joanne Hooker  
<http://www.where2pedalto.com>

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ISBN 978-0-646-50523-7

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...years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore, Dream, Discover.

Mark Twain

To good friends and fellow adventurers

Murray and Joyce Castle.

without whom, our dream would not have come true.



## Preface

Every now and then, something comes into the mind of a man, that when fuelled by courage and the willingness to attempt it, regardless of success or failure, changes a man's life forever.

Somewhere back in my life the idea of doing one's own thing, separate to the so-called "normal" life, came into being. I am not sure where the idea came from, but I am glad that it did. I am also glad that I have been blessed with a partner that is as adventurous as me.

Since returning from our cycling around Australia trip in September 2003, both Joanne and I experienced many interesting emotions, not the least that of wondering why we stopped riding and living the lifestyle that we had come to love, and even grieving for it in some weird way. We both took on jobs, and our family life resumed its special place in our lives.

Almost 12 months after we had stopped riding and both of us were yearning for the open road and our carefree nomadic lifestyle, and as time went on the yearning had been getting more intense. Many things we thought we'd do when we got back didn't materialise and we found ourselves easily being swallowed up in the ways of the world a little bit more each day, all the time wishing we were strong enough to resist and to get back on the road where we felt we belonged. The coolness of winter of course conspired with life and exacerbated the problem. The warmth and comfort of the house we were renting, aided and abetted by the enjoyment of friends and family being close by and willing to have us involved in their lives again saw us surrender - almost.

As winter slowly began to fade our thoughts were again turned toward doing more of what we said we would do while saving up for the next ride – riding and camping more, and living simpler. But did we actually do it – No. Both of us wanted to but found that we needed to organise ourselves much more, not just physically, but mentally. We returned to old habits and became like the people we used to comment about when we were riding, all rushing about trying to cram as much as they can into twenty-four hours with life blissfully slipping by before arriving at the end of their life wondering what had happened and with a long list of unachieved goals under their arms.

All was not lost though; amidst our yearning, jobs and a busy life we embarked on a project that would get us back on the road again. Project "Where-2-pedal-to..." commenced. Where will the two of us pedal to next, or is it where should the two of us pedal? We had figured out that to work a little, play a little was a good balance and one that we could continue for as long as our bodies would let us. The principle was relatively simple, work long enough to fund a trip and then enjoy the fruits of our labours, all possible without being on the road all the time and looking for work at the same time.

So amid living what we considered a very busy, complicated and fast lifestyle, we started work on our next adventure – trying to figure out where exactly it was going to be, and when? Sound confusing? Well it was because we realised that we couldn't plan, finance or do anything else about an adventure unless we knew when and where we were going to go, and we couldn't figure out when and where we were going to go until we knew what resources we had or could get, and when we could get it – it was sort of a complicated chicken and the egg routine.

During our round Australia trip many people asked us what we would do next? and of course the subject of going overseas invariably came up. I mean, once you have conquered Australia the world is your oyster or so they (them again) say.

The idea of going overseas to tour had been fuelled through a number of people we had met and interacted with before and during our previous trip. Mike Vermuelen on his way around the USA, Australia, NZ and India, and whose one overnight stop with us before our trip, spurred us on; Murray and Joyce, two like-minded Canadians and adventurers we met at Edith falls when they were touring Australia on their motorbikes; and Frank and Heike, two Germans whom we met on the road during their world tour, and who we have had the pleasure of riding and camping with, and their staying with us when we were settled. Add to all of that the desire to see "if" we can do it, fuelled by the fact that if we don't give it a go we would always be tormented by "why didn't we at least try?"

So with the idea of going overseas burning in our minds I started ploughing through the websites of others who have done the very same thing. The world became a smaller place with the Wright brother's discovery of powered flight, but reading how many people are cycling around the planet it began to appear even smaller. The world is literally covered in bicycle tracks.

Fantasy started to play a part in the project and I started to envision us riding around the world, footloose and fancy-free. Starting with Canada, the USA, England and Europe, then because we didn't want it to end, taking the long-way home via Russia, Mongolia, China and SE Asia, or maybe even Europe, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India and SE Asia. The danger in all of this however, is the cost of regret after not realising anything.

I remembered back to 2001 when my Dad asked me if I had lost my marbles the last time I told him I was going to go cycling, so I could only imagine what he would say if we embarked on something like this. I suspected though, despite the fact that he would be certain that we had gone mad, he and others would also be quietly excited about following us on the web again.

Of course, the world is a very different and sometimes dangerous place these days, and maybe rather naively, I was reading about others doing it and wondering why the heck couldn't Joanne and I? What have they who are doing it got that we haven't? Is it truly a matter of the six inches between your ears, or is it something else? How would we handle being asked for a monetary bribe at a border in a non-English speaking country? Or maybe even being arrested in China because we were riding through a "closed" area that is not only not signposted, but also not publicised, or Joanne having to ride covered from head to foot in a Muslim country? We didn't know, but would find out if we went. The idea sounded great, but the reality might be a fair bit different.

Some months on, and in the midst of fantasy, plans, uncertainty, what if's and a very busy life, we received a most unexpected email. Murray and Joyce, a Canadian couple we met at Edith falls invited Joanne and I to go over to Canada and to use their home as a base to tour from. They invited us to stay with them for a while so as to get a feel for the place, to see some of the sights around where they live and do some cycle touring. With a room, facilities and a car available, how could we refuse an offer like that? So, after one short, chance meeting and an incredible offer from two amazing people, our next trip well and truly came up on the radar.

Unbeknown to us at the time, our next trip had been conceived at Edith Falls when we had first met Murray and Joyce, and the email just confirmed it. The email sent my mind into frenzy and my initial thoughts were for us to cycle across Canada and around the USA, and then somehow and for some unknown reason, Alaska came into my mind. Suddenly the general idea of the trip changed from Canada and the US to from the top of Alaska back to Calgary and then around the USA and back across Canada, or something similar.

The theme for the trip also came into being and considering that we would ride our three wheeled trikes from the Arctic to the Pacific to the Atlantic, the theme therefore became 3 Oceans on 3 Wheels. This, our story of riding the Dalton Highway is but one of the legs that made up that journey.

## OUR ROUTE



Prudhoe Bay to Fairbanks



There lives and there leaps in me  
A love of the lowly things of earth,  
And a passion to be free.  
To pitch my tent with no prosy plan,  
To range and to change at will,  
To mock at the mastership of man,  
To seek Adventures thrill,  
Carefree to be, as a bird that sings,  
To go my own sweet way.  
– Robert Service.

## DEADHORSE

"what the hell have I gotten us into?" were my thoughts as the clash of reality and the romantic thoughts of the journey collided as I looked through the small window of the plane high above a frozen Arctic landscape.

Even from 30,000ft I could see the barren, featureless, frozen wilderness that is the arctic plain, its high points giving it a skeletal like look and where any water was a just a frozen pocket in the landscape, and it was here that we would very soon be cycling, camping and living.



After circling the airport a number of times almost as if the pilot was lost, we finally slipped below the arctic fog and touched down on the permafrost supported runway,



immediately coming face to face with The Great North Land, in all its stark, beautiful reality.

Our day had started in the early hours of the morning. Standing on the verge outside of Murray and Joyce's very comfortable and warm Calgary home as we waited for our taxi to the airport the cool brisk air jolted us awake and made our senses stand on end. We had absolutely no idea of what we were about to experience nor how it would change our lives forever.

Our 3-flight hop to the start line began with a flight from Calgary to Seattle to officially enter the USA. But before we could even get on the plane we were required to jump through the various hoops of the Department of Homeland Security. Being inklessly fingerprinted, having our photo's taken and being quizzed as to why we thought we should be allowed into the United States, it was one of those events that makes you glad of the rigours of safety and vigilance, but annoyed at the way the process makes you feel guilty - even though your not, and the almost clinical actions of those making the decision requires absolute obedience to them to achieve your own, simple objective. So with so much on the line it was with a large "Phew!" that we eventually boarded the plane and enjoyed a simple eventless flight up to Anchorage and one final hop onto Deadhorse - where the real adventure started.

Our final plane trip for the day was full of oil workers returning to their frigid workplace where it sits on the edge of the Arctic Ocean and on top of the world. Joanne and I were the only non-workers onboard and while we were busily and excitedly looking out the window to absorb it all, the others, no doubt having done this commute many times, just slept or read the newspaper, breaking their routine only to consume the in flight food and drinks service provided by a lone female flight attendant who seemed to be just going through the motions. The further we flew North, the more barren the landscape below become and it was hard to take our eyes off if its mesmerising features. The tops of tall, snow covered mountains that seemed close enough to touch peeking out from under the cloud eventually giving way to the foothills, and then the flat barren landscape that is the Arctic plain. Passing over Atigan Canyon and a frozen Galbraith Lake, we got our first look at where we would soon be riding and living.

Touching down and taxiing towards the terminal we could feel the arctic blast as it invaded the warmth of the plane as soon as the door was opened. With no air bridges to take us from the warmth of the plane to the warmth of the terminal, we walked out of the plane's door and as we descended the stairs onto the tarmac our senses confirmed to us that we had front row seats to a totally foreign experience. By the time Joanne and I had climbed down the stairs onto the tarmac our exposed skin was freezing - and this was summer! A quick look around showed plenty of dirt-covered snow and melting ice around the industrial type buildings of the oil town, and not much else.

Walking across the tarmac and into the terminal building, we were met by Murray and Joyce who had been on their own adventure as they drove our trikes, equipment and food up from Calgary. My fear of what I had seen as we flew North dissolving slightly now that we were back in friendly company again. After all, if we needed to bail out now, we could have driven back to civilisation with them. Casting a thought to what it would be like to have flown in without them there, and to how interesting it would have been to unpack the trikes in the terminal and to then ride out of town with no idea of what lay before us, I was grateful beyond words for Murray and Joyce's willingness to drive our gear North and to meet us there, and I hoped that neither we or our adventure would disappoint them.

Deadhorse is an oil town sitting on the largest oil field in the US and the 18<sup>th</sup> in the world and it exists for one reason and one reason only – extracting oil from the earth and pumping it South, South to where it can be transported and used by the unrelenting, ravenous consumerism of the American population.



Tourists are tolerated here and afforded just a few places to go on their Arctic visit. The only accommodation being the three hotels that are made up of insulated modular type buildings that are also part of workers accommodation. With the meagre hotel accommodation costing \$235US per night it was so prohibitively expensive that we drove out of town to an overnight camp Murray and Joyce had picked previously, passing on the way some of the area we would be riding tomorrow after we had made our obligatory trip to the Arctic Ocean. The oil companies feverently guard the final 8 mile trip to the ocean from Deadhorse, and as such the only way out there is on the bus driven by a Security Guard, all for the small price of USD\$35 each, but that was tomorrow.

Our first night in the Arctic was an overnight camp on a gravel access road near the Sagavanirktok (Sag) River in full view of the Franklin Bluffs - long snow covered hills alongside the river that stretch off to the horizon, and which make up the East bank of the river as it flows to the frozen sea that is the Arctic Ocean. With the river on one side and the flat featureless tundra (derived from the Finnish word for "tree less plain") on the other, the wind was blowing hard as it came off of the frozen ocean to the North, reducing the 2 deg C temperature even more. The cold permeating our layers of clothing and giving us a first hand experience of what it is like to live with the Arctic Blast.

Using Murray's truck as a windbreak we set up our tents behind it and spent our first night on the arctic plain. But with 24 hours of daylight, night was only denoted by the time on a clock. Grateful for the relative stillness and shelter inside the tent's thin fabric, we tried to sleep, anxious and yet excited about our adventure that would really start tomorrow. Touching the ground through the tent floor resulted in a very cold reminder that we were in fact sleeping on frozen ground and ice!

Despite the cold and 24-hour daylight, our first night on the tundra was a pleasant and peaceful one as we slept cocooned in our sleeping bag. Waking to a clear blue sky with another cool wind blowing, our first day was to be a busy one and one which would see us pack up our camp, drive back into Deadhorse and take the tour out to the ocean. Then after a wonderful meal in the workers canteen, we unpacked the trikes and prepared to depart.

Driving out to the ocean in the bus along the gravel road we passed through the sprawling buildings, fenced vehicle storage areas, oil wells, security checkpoints and miles and miles and miles of seemingly never ending pipeline as it transported the oil from the wellheads or Christmas Trees as they are referred to. Our Security Guard chauffeur was providing us with a commentary on what we were looking at mixed in with interesting and scary stories of polar bears chasing the bus at 35 miles per hour!

Not being sure about what we could expect, on arriving at the Arctic Ocean we were briefed on the procedure we should follow should a polar bear be spotted in the area. Considering the photos of them around town and their known willingness to stalk their prey it was a very serious subject, and something else to consider later on when camping. Pulling up to a non-descript spot on a gravel road, we left relative safety and warmth of the bus and walked along the course gravel causeway towards the white expanse that is the frozen ocean. The horizon barely discernable between the frozen surface of the Arctic Ocean and the sky. Stopping on the edge of the gravel amidst an eerie silence and with the freezing cold air against our skin, the lack of features and the elements really made an impact on our senses, and us – we were at the top of the world and there were no words to adequately describe where we were experiencing. It was true, it was silent, it was beautiful and it was enormous.





Since planning this trip I had wanted to take a dip in the ocean to become a member of the Polar Bear Club and to keep a promise that I had made to my best mate Bob, but with the ocean frozen solid, there was no way I was going to get my membership or keep that promise on this visit, so I opted instead to make a silly movie of me jumping off the gravel causeway and landing on the hard, icy surface of the frozen ocean.

As time wore on we gradually became more accepting of our surroundings and as the realisation of our location sunk in. Walking out onto the frozen ocean we began taking photos and videos to mark and record the occasion before the cold and our desire to get going had us heading back to the warmth and security of the bus. It had seemed longer but we had spent a total of 20 minutes at the ocean's edge, and the warmth of the bus made our frozen, exposed skin feel like it was burning as we got back in. Back in the bus we began to reflect on where we had just been standing, our silence evidence of the exhilaration we were feeling as the realisation at having been there sank in, and of the more serious stuff about to commence.

Back in Deadhorse we were able to get a nice cooked meal in the workers canteen, so we tucked into a \$15USD, all you can eat buffet of meat and vegetables topped off with desert, a meal that was to be our last proper meal for a few weeks. Sitting there in the canteen it seemed almost surreal and like we were there for another purpose but eventually the time came for us to get on with the adventure and we walked back out into the frigid cold of the North.

Finding a good spot in the car park near the Post Office and opposite Lake Colleen - Deadhorse's frozen fresh water supply, we donned overalls and began to unload our gear from Murray's truck. Murray had bought his new truck only a short time before leaving Calgary to head North, so it was on its maiden voyage and sitting in the Arctic. Unpacking our gear took some time because of the excellent job Murray and I had done in packing it all in, ensuring that the load was secure so that it would not cause any problems or be damaged on the long trip up from Calgary.

And so around 3 pm, having unpacked the truck and checking and double-checking our gear, we got the trikes loaded and took a small trip around the car park to test the moving parts. A quick photo shoot in front of the "Welcome to Deadhorse" sign and we were off, no big fanfare or speeches, we just rode out of the car park under a brilliant blue arctic sky, birds chirping and many miles of adventure before us.





Testing the assembled rigs outside the Deadhorse Post Office  
(Photos courtesy of Murray and Joyce Castle)



## THE ROAD

The James W. Dalton Highway, named after James Dalton an Alaskan engineer, is a 414-mile (666 km) road that runs from the top of Alaska to just North of Fairbanks. Once called the North Slope Haul Road (the name Haul Road is still used by many even to this day), it was built in 1974 as a means to supply road support to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and is the highest, and most northernmost road kept open all year round in Alaska.

Leaving the sprawling oil town of Deadhorse behind we were riding in the wheel marks of the huge semi-trailer trucks that haul everything up to Deadhorse, and the further we rode out of town the better the indication of how hard this ride was going to be. As the buildings of Deadhorse in our mirrors gradually disappeared behind us in the arctic fog the large gravel rocks were conspiring with the washboard to slow our progress and to make us work hard as we grappled with our load and riding again after over a month's layoff. Somehow our equipment and two weeks worth of food seemed just that much heavier. The width of the trikes wheelbase being slightly more than the wheel ruts of the trucks meant that we often had both front wheels in the deep and often large gravel rocks as we gave preference to the rear wheel, placing it on the smoothest part of the road that we could find. Breaking spokes, the rim or the hub of the drive wheel with all that weight on it would have been disastrous and would most certainly have stopped our adventure before it had even begun, so it was a little like riding on eggshells.



Riding the Dalton we were passing through a frozen, barren land where nothing grows higher than 6 inches tall because of the cold wind that blows, the ice that sits under the shallow layer of top soil and where underground streams freeze and then rise up out of the ground, sometimes hundreds of feet high to be called Pingo's. Bouncing along the rough, large gravel rocked road it was disappearing ahead of us through a tunnel of metal poles evenly spaced and designed to mark the edge of the road when it is covered in snow. Adding to the problem of riding in the gravel was the fact that the wind had sprung up, in our face and despite our layers of clothing and physical exertion it was just plain cold. Leaving the outskirts of town we passed a sign that once again brought the reality of it all home "Fairbanks – 494 miles Next Services 240 miles". While planning the trip the distance figures didn't seem that big but when it was right there in front of us it came crashing home especially when I realised it was miles and not kilometres that we were talking about here. It is one thing to read, plan and scheme a trip from the comfort of your lounge or office chair, it is totally another to actually be there, face to face with it.

Some 30 kilometres and one heck of a lot of effort later we eventually arrived at the new campsite that Murray and Joyce had selected, the snow melting at the last night's spot where we had intended to return to revealing a carcass, which was most certainly a neon sign to a bear that food was available. We were spent! The load and the road had certainly taken its toll on us, and being unfit wasn't helping. But how the hell do you train for something like this? Like our round Australia trip we would get fit as we went.

Setting up camp on a gravel spit near the Sag River and under the beautiful, clear blue sky we spent a very pleasant evening with Murray and Joyce, reflecting on the days ride, our feelings, and on what lay ahead, and it wasn't long before we were heading for bed, tired enough to sleep despite the 24 hour daylight.

Waking somewhat refreshed after a good night's sleep our slow, careful stretching of the legs while still in the sleeping bag revealed that our legs were sore, but not too bad – all things considered, and based on past experience, today's riding would loosen them up in no time. Breakfast and packing up over and it was time to get back on the road, Joanne and I riding out of the camp leaving Murray and Joyce to pack up and leave at their leisure – after all, no matter how long they took, they would catch us up in their truck in a matter of minutes.

Back on the road we were again battling the corrugated gravel road with its deep truck wheel ruts, large rocks and of course the cold wind. As we rode through the barren, featureless and frozen terrain at 6-8 kilometres per hour with our bodies slowly getting over yesterday's ride and working on today's, our minds tried to absorb our surroundings and record the experience for recanting in our journals later in the day. The hard packed gravel and large rocks on top was bouncing us from pillar to post as we rode, making it hard to find and maintain a good riding rhythm and all the while we were dodging the larger rocks and protecting the back wheel.

Flat terrain as far as the eye could see, white frozen lakes except for a few colourful feet around the edges, the pipeline in the distance, birds and the occasional Caribou were taking the monotony out of the ride and providing some relief from the pounding that we were taking. I remember thinking that if these conditions continue for the whole way that this trip was going to be a very hard ride. I also remember that I was thankful that we were on recumbent trikes where the trike took most of what would have been absorbed by our arms and shoulders had we been upright on two wheels.

Stopping for lunch at the gateway to a large valve complex we were able to get the stove going for a coffee and a bite to eat and as we sat in the cold silent north admiring the view across the tundra to the river we could feel the cold, desolate wilderness slowly freezing its magic into our hearts and leaving an incredible impression on us as it did so. Looking back North as we sat and ate, we could see the fog and cold that covered Deadhorse, and we were thankful for the sun's warmth, albeit slight.

Back into the fray after our break, we were being passed by large semi-trailer trucks as they hauled their huge loads up to Deadhorse, the drivers slowing down to a crawl as they approached us, waving to us in return as we waved to thank them for their thoughtfulness on the narrow, rocky, dusty road. Our relationship with the truckers in Alaska was beginning and flourishing in the same manner as it did across the Nullarbor in Australia. The drivers were all slowing down to ensure that no rocks were thrown from their many large wheels and to reduce the dust, and we were staying over to one side to give them as much room as possible to do our bit to share the road. These guys drive one of the harshest roads in the world, all year round; they are totally professional and have our utmost admiration.

The magnificent flat, featureless terrain continued as we rode through it, the road at one stage turning from energy sapping gravel to smooth, fast flowing sealed road, which was heaven to ride on and allowed us to double our speed and give our aching bodies some relief from the constant pounding, a loud woo hoo escaping my lips as we went.

The further we rode the more hills and ranges we started to come across, their barren, and often snow covered tops stretching out into the distance, and all the while the greener the ground around us became. We were riding past low growing grassy tundra with nothing taller than ankle height as far as the eye could see, small white and purple wild flowers visible signs that spring was on its way as the Arctic began to shed winter's frigid coat. Visible off in the distance and in the middle of all of this beautiful scenery we could see a building complex of some type. The road and pipeline ran parallel to each other as they passed frozen lakes and over small rivers as they headed towards the large sprawling complex of industry, offices, accommodation and workshops that make up Pump Station Number 2.

Approaching the huge complex with its large green walled buildings as they sat behind the six foot high chain mesh fence we were surprised that the only sound was that of our tyres as we rode along on the sealed road, the pump station obviously well muffled to ensure a minimum amount of noise pollution in such a pristine environment. Approaching and then passing the main gate we eagerly looked for signs of human activity and someone to wave to, another human in this vast Arctic wilderness but there was no one to be seen. We rode past and turned the corner as the road began to climb and leaving us to wonder what it would be like to work in a place like that in the middle of nowhere, and in such a beautiful, yet harsh environment. It also allowed us to take our minds off of the task at hand – the largest hill we had climbed in a long time.

Our climb up the Sagwon Bluffs was taking us up off of the Arctic Plain as it stretched up towards the cloud filled sky, the sun sneaking out under the clouds to catch us unaware, and all of a sudden sunburn became a consideration. Both of us were struggling with our loads on this large hill and the fact that we had at that stage covered around 60 kilometres. Up and up the hill we went, picking out rest stops by

road marker poles, stopping next to the relevant spot just long enough to rest the legs and allow our breathing and heart rate to settle down some. The total silence of our surroundings allowing us to hear the “quince, quince, quince” in our ears while we watched our torso's move rhythmically to the beat of our hardworking hearts, a sure sign that we were physically doing it tough.

Snow covered streams rushing down the hill next to the road provided us with cool drinking water and allowed us to rest some more when we stopped to fill up, or to use it for a bird bath to cool us down, the freezing water chilling us as it touched our bodies, but despite the chill from the water and the beauty of our surroundings our eyes were peeled for bears in the now, low growing vegetation.

Eventually, and after 5 kilometres of climbing, we found the top of the hill and began to follow the ridge of the range on a roller coaster ride, each downhill faster than the previous, and each uphill slower and tougher as our energy levels fell quicker than a rock thrown into a lake. Rocky outcrops and barren terrain all around us, rays of sun beaming out from behind the clouds resembling bicycle spokes in the sky, and the road visible as it stretched across the tundra to where we had started.

Our day had been a long one, and some 8 hours and 72 kilometres later, we arrived at the gravel pit campsite Murray and Joyce had found and picked out for tonight's accommodation. The day had been full of surprises and interesting things and there were still a couple more surprises left. Murray and Joyce had stayed with us until we were off the Arctic Plain but were now leaving us to our own devices and the rest of our adventure. To be honest I really hadn't thought about when they might leave us, and although we had probably discussed it, it hadn't registered with me, so when they told us they were leaving reality began to sink in. I remember thinking - “you can't!”, but they did, and the door to our adventure and our test of our skills and resolve opened up a little bit more.

With our camp set up and ready for the sun filled night, we said our goodbyes and stood in the warmth of the evening sun watching as our good friends drove out of the gravel pit heading for home. We stayed there watching them and our security drive away until they crested the hill and disappeared out of sight and out of contact. All of a sudden that feeling of dread that I had experienced on the plane as we flew into Deadhorse returned leaving me to feel like a child that has just turned around in a large shopping complex unable to see their parents. We were in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of Alaska – and we were on our own. We just stood there together having a cuddle as the shock of reality hit home.

Shock and the realisation that we were in fact really on our own registered and after a quick chat we began to work on our chores for the day. Filtering some water from a nearby puddle to ensure we had enough water for breakfast and to get us going in the morning before enjoying a birdbath to remove the day's toil from our skin. Then, to ensure our safety from bears looking for a meal, we moved away from the camp to cook, eat, and clean up and to store our food. Finally after checking our equipment, observing the surroundings and sitting down to compile our respective journals our day was coming to an end.

With no concept of the time of day the land of the midnight sun was about to teach us a brand new lesson. Sitting in the sun after our big day we were beginning to relax and unwind when Joanne looked at her watch and asked “what do you think the time is?”, not wearing a watch I had nothing to gauge it on, so looking around me and seeing everything bathed in sunlight, I told her that I had not idea, but it couldn't have been

that late because of the sunlight. It was then that Joanne said to me" it's 11.30 pm!" The daylight had tricked us into thinking we still had plenty of time to do things; all the while robbing us of much needed time to sleep. Of course we could have just stayed up until we fell over in sleep, but our regimented, light and dark orientated body clocks would have been well and truly thrown out of whack, and who knows what effect that would have had upon our riding ability. So after a quick check of the area for wildlife, we packed up, and with the bear spray and axe within grasp we closed the tent door and our eyes and allowed sleep to consume us, the silence of the Arctic totally deafening as we slid away into a deep sleep.

Despite still being in the Arctic, being up off of the Arctic Plain meant that the weather was somewhat warmer, and despite being tired from yesterdays ride, we woke frequently during the night. Rousing from a deep sleep the brilliant daylight was too bright for our eyelids to keep it out and that caused our brains to register the fact that it was light and therefore time to wake and get up. A check of the time however reminded us that 2.30 was not exactly the right time to be doing that. We had talked about riding through the night one time and as we slipped back into a slumber I was trying to rationalise what it would be like to wake and get up at that time of the night and to just start our day, but today was not going to be the day to try it. Rolling over and trying to sleep we fought the light until rather wearily, we gave in and got up.

By 7 AM, the tent was getting really warm, the crisp, cold, foggy weather of the Arctic Plain was behind us and we were about to experience the effects of the Arctic Summer. Checking our campsite for signs of overnight bear activity, and retrieving our trailer full of food from its safe location some way off from the tent, we packed up our camp, ate breakfast and began the days ride with a nice downhill. The thrill of the downhill ended quite quickly as we slowly crested the very same hill that we had watched Murray and Joyce disappear over the day before.

The road continued to pass along the ridgeline before dropping back down onto another plain, a small observation deck and interpretive boards halfway down the provided the perfect place for us to stop for a food break where as we ate we were mesmerised by the bluffs that rose up from the incredible frozen river beneath them where the white of the ice was gradually being replaced with the blue grey water of the river as it came back to life.

We had covered just over 150 kilometres since Deadhorse, some of which had been sealed, but it was now time to get back on the dirt which thankfully, was smoother than before courtesy of the road crews and the trucks. We were looking for a place off the road to stop for lunch when we spied a spot on a gravel pad near the river. Carefully looking around we found a nice spot out of the wind behind some large rocks and with a clear view of our surroundings set up the stove. Sheets of ice on the river meant that there was plenty of cool water to enjoy but we had been told that because of the mining activity in Alaska that we should filter and boil the water before we consumed it. So with that in mind and the water level rather low, I spent some time balancing against the wind on some rocks where the filter input hose would not hit the bottom and suck up the sediment. Filtering water through a ceramic filter takes some effort, and despite the advertised 1 litre per minute it took quite some time and effort to get our 8 litres worth. The end result being that my arms were now sore from pumping the filter and that was good as they now matched my legs which were sore from riding – so between cycling and pumping water I was getting a total body workout.



Lunch break over we were riding through some very pretty scenery, the river on one side of the road gurgled and bounced along over the rocks like mini rapids, the water turning white as it curled back on itself, with a large, long range on the other side. The further we went the more I was dropping behind Joanne, struggling to keep up with her and wondering why my brain was saying push harder but the message seemingly not reaching my legs. It was then that I realised that I must have a puncture and stopping to check confirmed my thoughts. Now doing anything with the rear wheel on a loaded bike or trike means a major evolution at the best of times, and so after removing the rear rack bags, the 4 panniers on the rear rack and unhitching the trailer it was a case of putting the gears into high, removing the wheel and spending time looking and carefully feeling and inspecting both the in and outside of the tyre for the flat tyre culprit. About halfway through this we were joined by a man on a motorbike, loaded up just like us. Recently retired he had always wanted to do the trip to the Arctic Ocean and was getting it in before he and his wife did some, as he put it, "less adventuresome" trips. Parked in the middle of the road it was great to discuss our respective trips all the while surrounded by the magnificence of Alaska, and no traffic.

My flat tyre culprit had eluded me so we continued on our way eventually cresting a long hill and stopping to just absorb the magnificent view in anyway that we could. Off in the distance we could see the light brown roller coaster ribbon of road as it crested the hills that we would have to ride over as we made our way South. Once we had absorbed that part of the view we turned out attention to the river down in the valley as it snaked its way between the hills on its journey North. Off on the Southern horizon were snow covered ranges contrasting just right with the brilliant blue sky and of course amongst all of that was the ever present polished silver pipeline as it made its way across the tundra like a giant metal snake. A check of the map showed that the strikingly long range ahead and off to the left of us was the Kakuktukruich Bluff, the highest point being 1,909 feet. The view was breathtaking and almost enough to help us forget the cold wind that was blowing and doing its best to get through the layers of clothing that we had on.

We had decided on a shorter day today and were therefore on the lookout for a campsite, but before we could stop there was a nice long downhill to enjoy followed by an equally long uphill and a river to stop for water at in the middle.

Having decided to film some of the trip using the video mode of my camera I decided to get some footage of the descent to the river. With the camera strap around my neck just in case I had to let go of the camera to save myself from an embarrassing situation we commenced the descent. Joanne was off in front as I let the trike roll and quickly gain pace. Rapidly gathering speed on the gravel road I came shooting past Joanne as I hurtled down the long hill trying to get some good footage by watching the small screen at the rear of the camera and using my peripheral vision to watch the road, steering with one hand and dodging the potholes, corrugations and loose gravel as we went. It was a scary but magnificent ride where both of us reached more than 40 km/h and one that apart from scaring the crap out of me really woke me up and made me feel alive. Eventually arriving at the bottom of the hill and a much slower pace I remembered Joyce's fridge magnet that was a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt. It said, "Do something that scares you everyday", and so that downhill became today's scary act.

Slowing and then stopping for water at the bottom of the hill we could see from our vantage point on the narrow bridge that there was still a large thick bank of ice underneath the bridge and that the water in Dan Creek was flowing quite fast. Leaving Joanne on bear watch, I scrambled down the bank and while perched on some rocks

on the bank, managed to get two bags of fresh and very cold water from the river before scrambling back up the bank again. The creek was flowing quite rapidly and had I fallen in it would have easily carried me downstream and off into the tundra rather quickly.

Water collected and disaster averted, we ascended the hill to where we came across some earth moving machinery on an access track to the pipeline, and it was here that we decided to investigate the area for a campsite. So after our usual check around the area for bear activity, we set up camp using the machinery as a very effective windbreak. So there we were, perched up on a hill with a commanding view of the area, the river as it ran along below, the hills in the background, the ever-present pipeline just a short distance away and had it not been for the cold of the wind, we could have sat there and feasted our gaze on the view for hours.

It was interesting to camp in the open and we felt safer for doing so, the open area around us theoretically allowing us to spot trouble as it approached when we were around camp as opposed to getting a last minute surprise. In most other areas we have toured we always looked for a secluded spot where we couldn't be seen from the road, but out here we were very much aware that people being able to see us was a good thing. The regular passing by truck drivers, security guards and other workers meant that if something went wrong, there was a good chance of someone seeing the incident or at least the remnants of it and being able to investigate and or, raise the alarm. Virtually camping on the side of the road meant that people almost always saw us, and often smiled and waved as they drove past, probably questioning our motives and thankful and glad that it was not them.

High up on the top of the ridge and during yet another of night fighting for sleep against the ever present daylight Joanne got up around 2.30 am, and with the landscape bathed in the softened light with shadows forming at angles and reflecting off of the silver pipeline took a couple of photos of the sun as it sat at its lowest level for the day. Barely dipping from on high to just above the horizon, the daylight, equal to an hour or two before sunset on any normal day at home was golden.



The sun's position at 2.30 am

Breaking camp we continued up the hill, beginning our days ride with an uphill leg waker. The sun was out and strong enough to be adding to our tan lines as we rode along so we were glad to stop for a break opposite some buildings near the river. A check of the sign and map showed that we had found the Happy Valley camp, previously a pipeline construction camp and now a good spot for the road construction crews. We watched as a plane landed on the gravel strip near the camp and taxied up to the buildings before we rode off and up yet another hill. The Central Caribou herds pass through this area on their way to and from their calving grounds, and we had hoped to see some of these large herds, which apparently number in the hundreds, but we were too early, so we were left to imagine just how magnificent Mother Nature's spectacle might have been.

After climbing up the short, steep incline called Ice Cut we arrived at a road bridge over the pipeline, our closest view of it yet. Running under the road the huge metal pipeline sat suspended above the tundra on huge metal frames to keep it off of the ground, large frilly looking heat exchangers standing up vertically for over a meter above the pipeline at each set of supports ensuring that the heat generated by the oil passing through the pipe was dissipated into the air rather than through the frames of the cradles where it could melt the permafrost. Disappearing of into the distance, the large metal pipe could be seen snaking its way across the featureless, brown, frozen plains as they rolled on towards the mountains that make up the Brookes Range.



Kilometre after kilometre, the gravel road and pipeline snaked along and across the wilderness that is Alaska. As we came to the Southern end of Ice Cut we could see the road disappear down where the road had been cut through a large hill to come out near the river below. Joanne decided to go before me, shooting down the 10% grade



hill and out of sight at a great rate of knots, raising dust as she went and losing her helmet halfway down because being so warm, she had it undone. I was enjoying the downhill until then, the loose gravel grabbing at the front wheels to send them off in directions I didn't want to go and causing me to continually correct my path as I too shot down the hill, sitting six inches off of the ground, hair on fire and yelling Geronimo! Seeing Joanne's helmet come off I made a split second decision and decided to slow down and pick it up rather than risk an embarrassing moment in trying to do it at speed. Coming to a skidding stop halfway down, dust overtaking and covering me I came to rest where I could retrieve it and save her a long walk back up the hill. Joanne was waiting for me at the bottom of the hill so we used an old roadside maintenance camp area to stop and reflect on the downhill, to give Joanne her helmet back and to enjoy a short break, but after a thorough bear activity check first. Of course, with all that noise coming down the hill there was little chance of a bear remaining around to see what the noise was all about, but we checked anyway.

We were down in next to the river again as it ran along where over the years it had carved its path through the frozen landscape. The road ran along with the river on one side and the pipeline on the other, the short grassy tussocks of the tundra on the sides of the hills the only vegetation of note. Coming to another short hill we began climbing up out of the river basin at Oil Spill Hill, a short but rather steep 15% climb which saw us back on top of the landscape, able to view where we had come from and the undulating landscape ahead of us as we crept ever closer to the Brookes Range.

Stopping again to take in the view we stood there with no noise except that of the wind as it blew across the landscape, the barren, rolling hills stretching off into the distance for miles, a clear blue sky broken by just a few white puffs of cloud overhead. Such a magnificent place to be, and if the wind had not been blowing, the silence



would have been deafening, the sort of silence that allows you to hear your own heart beating.

Heading off along the ridges we were enjoying the view across the tundra when another large Pump Station complex came into view as we continued into Atigan Canyon. And then the road works began. The Sag River road crew were using very

large tankers to dump equally large quantities of water on the road, water, which when combined with Calcium Chloride crystals made for a sloppy muddy mess as it was graded and re-packed, the aim being to smooth out and strengthen the surface ready for the summer traffic.

The water tanker had passed us a number of times but this time as it approached, the driver stopped in the middle of the road so he could talk to us. Getting out of his truck and leaving it running we warned us of the wet and boggy conditions ahead, and that we should travel slowly through it all, as the Calcium Chloride crystals they had put on the road were very corrosive when wet. Terrific! Not only would we be riding through wet, sloshy mud, but it would also be eating our trikes away as we did so!

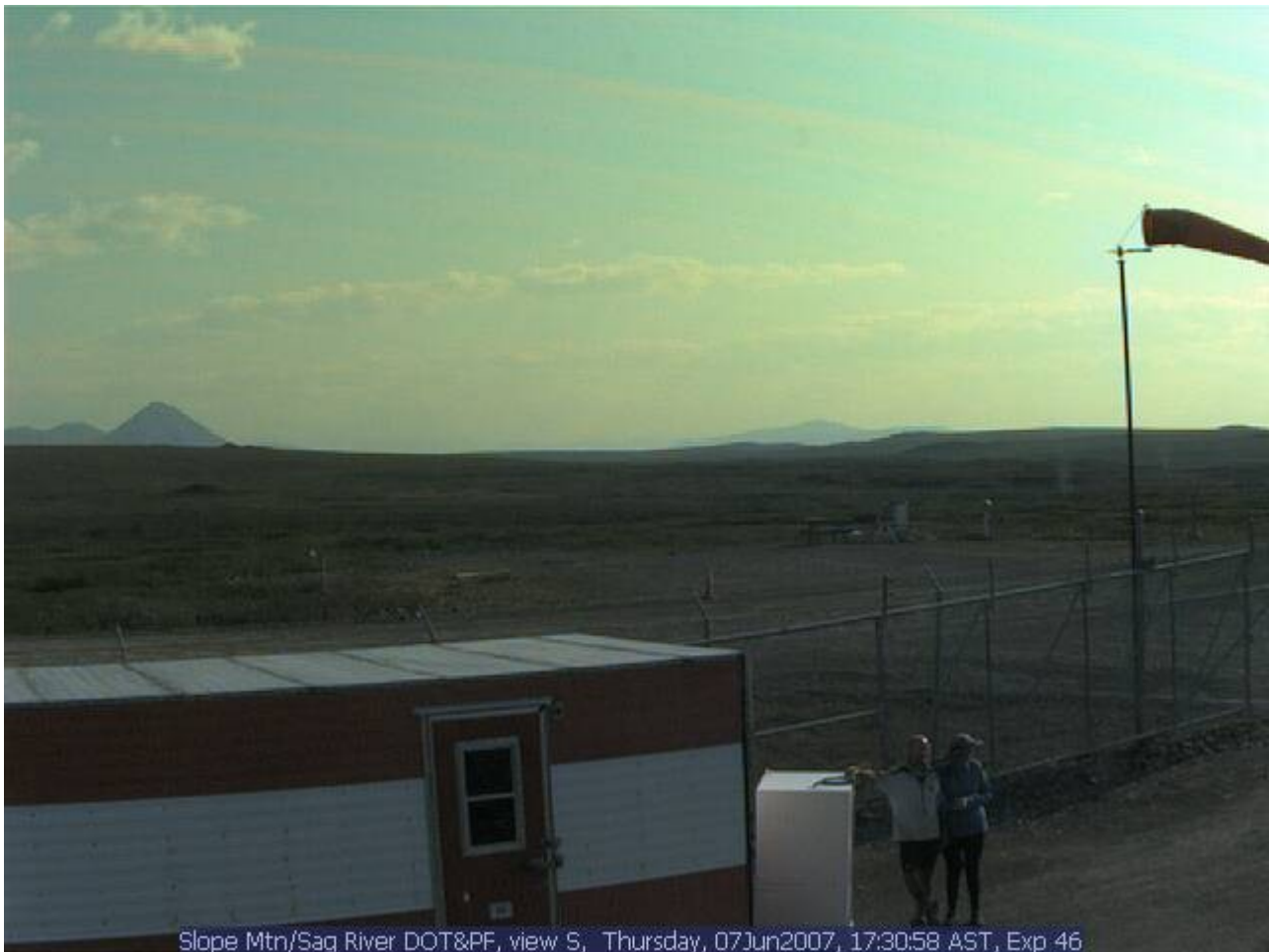
Thanking the trucker for his thoughtfulness and advice, we rode on trying to figure out a plan of action to deal with the corrosive mud as we went. Then, just as we were about to ride into the mud we spied a gravel access road opposite the pump station and a plan was hatched. We figured that we would sit and compile our journals and enjoy a coffee etc while the road crew messed up the road, and that we would move on when it had dried out a little. After all, what's the use of 24 hours of sunlight if you can't use it to your advantage?

Truckload of water after truckload of crystals went down on the road, our vantage point affording us a front row seat to the road making process. Our idea of the 24 hours of sunlight drying it out enough for us to ride on dissolving with every truckload of water that went down.

Journals and coffee over we figured that as the road was going to take some time to dry out and that we didn't want to camp opposite the pump station that we would ride on, albeit very slowly. Riding on the wrong side of the road so as to ride on the driest part we were crawling along at a snails pace, and despite our best efforts the further we went the more the trikes and us became covered in corrosive mud, the chemicals instantly stinging our skin as it hit it and began to dry. Our water tanker truck driver stopped again and told us that we were only a few miles from the Sag River camp and that we should go in there and hose the corrosive mud off of our trikes and ourselves, so after thanking him again we headed off in search of the Sag River Road Camp.

Eventually arriving at the turnoff to the camp and the end of the roadwork's, we rode the short distance off the road and arrived at the cyclone wire surrounded Department of Transport compound. Riding in the gate past the "No Unauthorized Vehicles" sign, we stopped outside the office but were unable to find anyone in attendance. A loud banging noise from inside the workshop told us that someone was indeed around and as I walked into the very large, cavernous and well equipped multi-vehicle workshop I found a man working on a damaged vehicle rim. Donny was the mechanic at the Sag River DOT and after explaining to him what the water truck driver had said to us, he set up the high pressure water cleaner and let us clean the trikes off, clean as a whistle, then, just as hospitable as most of the people we had met, Donny made coffee for us and let us use the Internet to check our emails. Contact with our family was important for us because although we knew we were alright, they didn't, so as well as checking our emails we managed get our picture taken by the University weather web cam that sits on the buildings edge facing the mountains before emailing it to Mum and Dad as proof of life – another great use of technology in the wilderness of the land of the midnight sun.





Having battled the road and mud all day we were happy to stop for the say and to find a campsite nearby, or even in the compound. Donny explained that we couldn't stay in the compound but suggested to us that we could use the gravel pit down the road next to the river, after all, there was nowhere else to camp and with the bears around, it was probably the safest place, other than the DOT compound. Riding the short distance down to the gravel pit we surveyed the area and picked a spot behind the largest pile of gravel and rocks that I have ever seen, the added bonus being that it blocked the wind which had sprung up and that was quite cool. With our camp set up we began to settle in for the evening before Donny came down in his truck armed with some Bratwurst sausages, rolls and drinks. We spent quite a while chatting about things in general and enjoying Donnie's company – and beer before Donny departed and we hit the sack around 10pm, with the sun as bright as it was at mid-day courtesy of the 24 hour daylight of an Alaskan summer.

Another light filled night and after the best nights sleep so far, we packed up and rode the short distance back to the road crew camp for coffee and breakfast with Donnie and the other workers. Donnie had arranged for us to enjoy a shower and even to do some laundry, so most of the morning was taken up with that and chatting with Donnie and the other workers. Donnie also suggested and then insisted that we should borrow one of his guns to give us some insurance as we rode through what he and the others considered a large bear population area. Despite having been in the Defence Force for 25 years and being quite at home handling a weapon, living in Australia which these days does not have a gun culture, we reluctantly and somewhat curiously agreed to take it with us, eventually riding out of the camp armed with a .357 Magnum revolver, 12 spare rounds and a letter of permission from Donnie to have the weapon

in our possession. It seemed funny to have the bang stick with us and despite everyone we met asking us if we had a gun, we kept our having one quiet. Right from the start, almost everyone we had met and talked with had wanted to know if we had a gun? Our answer of “no” always met with utter disbelief that we would undertake such a journey without protection from the bears – or man! As one man put it “I wouldn't go out my front door without my gun!” In the end the .357 was just extra weight and when I gave it back to Donnie in Fairbanks I was somewhat relieved not to have it in my possession – bears or not.

Leaving Donnie and the Sag River DOT, we were fighting the wind, hills and road surface, eventually arriving at the top of a hill overlooking the valley and where we had ridden and in view of the aptly named Slope Mountain. The wind was bitterly cold and very strong, but we were in need of some fuel for our bodies, so setting the trikes up as a wind break on the side of the road we boiled the Billy and enjoyed a cup of soup with rice in the bottom and croutons on the top, our bodies absorbing the nutrients as our eyes soaking in the panoramas of the magnificent hills and cathedral like granite mountains around us as they towered over the landscape and filled the horizon, a carpet of small white wildflowers covering the ground, and all under another brilliant blue Alaskan summer sky.





Continuing to follow the ridge, we were riding another roller coaster road, the long hills and gravel surface slowing our speed and sapping our energy, the pipeline also following the road as we both made our way South. Joanne's sore knee was still playing up and that meant that hills were no fun and full of frequent stops. Her sore knee later found to be from an incorrectly aligned and easily fixed cleat on her shoe. Arriving at a gravel road with a commanding view of the area, we stopped to investigate it as a possible campsite, but bear scat and a sign informing us that the Toolik Lake landfill was just down the road meant that we would not be camping there tonight, good view or not!

Stopping long enough to chat with a couple in a motor home who had arrived just after us, we descended a long fast hill, crossed the Kuparuk river before running smack bang into the other side of the very long, steep hill. Frequent stops on the uphill saw us tackling the steepest hill we had encountered in some time and where, two thirds of the way up the grade increased so much that Joanne was unable to continue. Leaving her there with instructions to hit her air horn to alert me if a bear came, I continued up the hill until I could safely leave my trike and return to help her up the hill. Rocks wedged under each wheel I gathered Donnie's gun and while catching my breath as I went, I walked back down to where Joanne was stopped. With Joanne riding and me pushing, we eventually made it to the top where I had left my trike, reflecting on the way up that had I needed to use the gun, I would have been too out of breath to use it with any type of accuracy.

Riding more of the rolling hills we arrived at the top of a hill where we decided to take a break while enjoying the 360-degree views overlooking Toolik Lake and the Institute of Arctic Biology of the University of Alaska and the magnificent dark grey Phillip Smith mountains. Having stopped at the lookout we decided that we would cook our main meal of the day and then leaving the smell of cooking behind, continue on a way before setting up camp somewhere.



We were cooking on the side of the road when two people in rather dirty vehicle joined us, the occupants being two Eskimos from Barrow who had gone to Fairbanks to buy a new car and who were now driving it back to Deadhorse. Looking at the man and woman it was easy to see the effects of the harshness of their home on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, their skin tanned like leather by the weather and the rotting and missing teeth very prominent features in their rounded faces and jet-black hair. It was great to have a chat and to interact with them and would have been very interesting to go home with them to see how they live.

Dinner and visitors over, we descended the hill towards Toolik Lake and ran smack bang into more roadworks, deep wet mud and slosh. Slow progress and riding to ensure that minimal mud got on the trikes, we passed the turnoff to the university camp and lake and then just as we thought the roadwork's would go forever we came to the end of them and where we found a gravel access road to the pipeline. Deciding that it would make a good campsite we made our obligatory inspection of the site for bear activity before we set up camp on the gravel a short tennis balls throw from the road and in view of some magnificent snow covered mountains and the Brookes Range.



Hiding the food trailer some distance from our camp and with the solar panel hanging off of the tent while charging batteries, we noticed for the first time that courtesy of the warmer weather, there were more bugs and mosquitoes around than before. Climbing into the tent for the night we laughed about being so close to the road and with 24 hours of daylight the fact that the lights from the trucks would not be keeping us awake as they drove past.

Awake early and on the road before enjoying breakfast, we were in a race with the road workers to get ahead of their days activity so that we could keep out of the mud they were definitely going to make on the road ahead of our camp. Riding like there was no tomorrow and with empty stomachs we eventually got a safe distance past where the roadwork's started and pulled over to enjoy a well earned breakfast. With our stomachs growling like a hungry bear we began to soothe the beast while for the first time for the morning, becoming totally immersed in the view of the snow covered mountains ahead.

Breakfast over we continued along the dusty dry gravel road as we made our way ever closer to the Brookes Range and where, after cresting another hill we were gob



smacked by one of the most beautiful vistas we had ever seen. There before us the rather long, steep dirt road made its way down and into the canyon proper, a thin line of gravel dwarfed by tall, rugged, dark grey mountains and the pipeline as it followed the road down towards the ice covered Galbraith Lake. From our vantage point at the top of the hill we could see what looked like a road work camp and runway a mile or two off the highway as they sat in front of more large mountains where small dribbles of snow, the last of the season for this year were running down from their peaks and where a glacier, its distinctive ice sticking out in its surrounds sitting in pride of place near the top.



With Galbraith Lake still covered white with winter ice and the mountains around adding to the magnificence of the view, I remembered Murray saying that when he visited the Rockies it was like being in the Church of the Rockies, so I figured this area must be the Church of Atigan Canyon, except for the frozen lakes the canyon floor was covered in green and under a brilliant blue sky dotted with white cumulous clouds was awe inspiring and totally breathtaking. The view, just so mesmerisingly beautiful and so full of wow factor made it actually hard to take it all in, our thoughts and discussion taking us back to when we had first seen the area from 35,000 feet as we flew North not that long ago, and quite different from the view from Google Earth.

Deciding to try and film the magnificence and the descent down to the lake, I slowed because of the roughness and corrugations of the road, one hand steering and the other filming, and where going so slow had the added benefit of being able to soak in more of the view. Joanne on the other hand had taken off down the hill, skipping all over the road looking for the smoothest part and raising dust as she did so and enjoying the thrill of the descent.

We were in the canyon proper now, so decided to stop and take in some more of our surroundings while we munched on a muesli bar we were close enough to the lake to see the cracks in the ice as the sun began to thaw winters handiwork. While we feasted our bodies our eyes feasted on the surrounding beauty. The large dark based, snow capped mountains of the Brookes range ahead, being dwarfed by more mountains to our immediate left and across the lake to the right of us. Looking back behind us we could see the hill we had just descended, where on the other side was and a flatter, colder, featureless landscape.



Muesli bar feast over we finally managed to tear ourselves away from the view and moved on further into the masterpiece canvas that was our domain, eventually arriving at Trevor Creek as it ran underneath the road. It was here that we decided in anticipation of a campsite later today, to filter some water to fill our 6 litre Sea to Summit water bags, canvas type bags on straps with a wine bladder type inner, fabulous water carriers because they could go almost anywhere on the trike and where as the water level dropped through use the containers became smaller, less bulky and easier to manage.

The frigid river water was running quite fast as it made its way down from the mountains and under the road so after clambering down the rocks to get to the water I began setting up the camera on the tripod so as to film the event. With the roar of the water as it bounced over the rocks and made its way downstream I was crouched on the bank pumping the water filter and emulating other, more famous TV and movie adventurers as I did so. Joanne remained up on the road near the trikes on bear watch, taking photos of my little escapade and soaking up more of the view. Water collection over I packed up the kit and just before clambering back up the rocks, decided to wash out my hat in the water, but then made the fatal mistake of putting it back on, the cold of the water instantly freezing my follically challenged head and the excess water sending freezing cold spears down running down my neck and causing my whole body to chill. It was certainly refreshing. I offered Joanne the same chance to freshen up, but having seen my reaction she wisely declined my offer while laughing at my reaction.

The road from Trevor Creek was relatively flat as it worked its way past the mountains and along the canyon floor. With not much except the view to speak of for the day we just concentrated on getting some distance in on the rough and rocky road, dodging rocks as they sat like slightly exposed icebergs in the relatively smooth dirt, their tops rounded and smoothed off by the pummelling they receive from the trucks. Another pump station came into view, sitting atop a large mound of dirt like a pimple in the middle of the valley and with the pipeline running underneath. The further we rode the more weather we could see coming in on our left and causing us to wonder if it would hit us. All afternoon the weather skipped along the tops of the mountains that surrounded us as we made our way into the canyon some more, gathering strength and even dumping in places, but not coming near us – yet.

Looking for a campsite before the clouds forming over head got to bursting point we found a nice clear spot next to the pipeline and just behind the since pole gate, but as we were investigating it and were about to set up, a security guard came along and



told us that we could camp anywhere but on the pipeline side of the gate. So figuring that he knew that area better than us we asked him if there was somewhere better. He suggested that we rode the short distance onto Atigan River 1 where there was turnout that was okay for camping. Riding on and with the weather still building and getting warmer and more humid as we went, we were met by the Sag River Camp Supervisor and then two road workers, the latter giving us bottles of fresh water which despite our having filled up earlier at Trevor Creek, we were grateful for and consumed on our way as the humidity continued to build.



Heading into Atigun Canyon



The Pipeline snakes its way though the canyon





The incredible Atigun Canyon Scenery





The undulating road eventually brought us to the Atigan River which was rather further than the guard had told us, but never the less, it was there. On the North side was what looked like a gravel pit used to make and store fill for the road and on the South side was a large pullout. We had considered the gravel pit as a campsite, but the gut feeling was saying otherwise, so as always when one of us had a gut feeling that said no, we abandoned the idea.

The water in the river was quite low and the riverbed, which was actually quite wide, had more rocks than water in it and as we surveyed the area we spied some fishermen down at the bottom of the bridge on the South side. This area would have made a good campsite but the fishermen there caused us to abandon that area as a campsite because of the possible smell of fresh fish or worst still some leftovers, both of which would be a sure sign that a bear might come looking for a feed and find us instead. With the weather to the North looking decidedly worst we moved a decent distance up and away from the river and the fishermen in the turnout and began to setting up camp, using rocks to hold the tent down because of the hard packed surface which was impossible to get a tent peg into and on an angle. Running down next to us was a large rock filled wash where the water from the road and the mountains ran down and into the river, the noise of the water nice to listen to but also a worry as it could drown out the sound of trouble, but with the wind that had started to whip up through the canyon ahead of the weather front that had been building and chasing us it would have to do and setting up camp was a quick, methodical affair.

With the weather the way it was we opted not to cook our evening meal, instead we enjoyed a cold can of baked beans, some cheese and beef jerky using the tent as a wind break and being very careful not to have dropped any food or liquid on the ground, or us. We were figuring that the strength of the wind would have well and truly dissipated any food smells so with our meal over and having set up our camp, battened down the hatches in anticipation, covered the trikes and get ourselves into the tent just as the storm arrived. Looking back up the canyon as we got in the tent there was nothing to be seen except a wall of rain as the mountains on each side funnelled it towards us. The wind came barrelling down the canyon arriving at our location like an express train, trying to rip the tent off of the ground while trying to drive the frozen rain through the tent fabric. The temperature dropped quite dramatically as we huddled from the storm in our small, thin fabric refuge, grateful that we were not still pedalling and exposed. The rain eventually passed leaving the wind to blow strongly all night as snuggled into the sleeping bag, warm, dry, comfortable and grateful for having such a good tent. We had wished we could have gotten the trikes inside with us as well, but our trusty steeds were also part of keeping the tent in place, so they had to sit silently outside in the weather.

Waking in the morning to good weather except for a very cool wind we packed up and moved off in search of the old fire station that the security guard had told us about yesterday, the idea being to find it and to use the location to enjoy a day off to carry out some maintenance, catch up on journals and the like. 5 kilometres up the road and just as we were getting warmed up we came to a large gravel area just off of the road and at the start of the road up to the summit of Atigan Pass. There in the middle of the gravel pad was an old green wooden building and some other more modern buildings nearby. Sometime later we would find out that our campsite was indeed an old pipeline camp where back in the 1970's over 300 people called it home and where they had an electric fence keep the bears out of the food trucks.

Dropping down the dirt track from the main road we arrived at the green building marked with the sign "Firehouse". A quick investigation of the building showed that the

vehicle and pedestrian doors were open allowing us access. Inside where the fire truck or ambulance used to park was a gravel floor and beyond that some other rooms with varying amounts of rubbish, small unseen rodents scurrying away to safety as we entered the rooms checking carefully as we opened the doors. Investigation of the nearby white buildings revealed kitchens and mess hall amenities complete with a BBQ, tables and chairs, but the doors were welded shut and we could only look through the window at what we could have been using.



Back at the old firehouse we moved our gear inside and began blocking up the openings with old cardboard boxes to keep the wind out, slowly enjoying the warmth of being inside solid walls and a roof. Our next adventure was a quick and noisy trip down to the nearby river where we managed to obtain some water. With water almost on tap it was a good excuse to heat some up and enjoy a shower courtesy of a 1-litre milk bottle with holes in the cap for the showerhead. Refreshed and out of the elements we settled in for the day carrying out some trike maintenance, catching up on some journals and generally lazing around. Not that much later we had a visit when two of the guys from the Sag River DOT came by. We enjoyed their company and the chat. They were worried about our climbing the pass and offered to take us up Atigan Pass or all the way to Fairbanks if we had wanted. But rather than defeat the purpose of the trip, we declined.



**THE PASS TO ANOTHER WORLD**

From the door to the firehouse we could see the road as it made its way towards the pass, seemingly heading directly towards the cauldron like depression full of snow as it sat on the top of one of the mountains. Figuring it was safe to do so, we set up our camp proper inside the old firehouse, cooking outside and using the wind to dissipate the cooking smells, and as our day came to an end and sleeping inside the building we hoped that any bears in the area would not come inside looking for something to eat and we bedded down with pepper spray and .357 magnum at the ready, just in case.



The road as it heads towards Atigun Pass

Waking after a peaceful night and our first under a roof since we had left Calgary, we began to pack up and to prepare for the big climb up and over Atigun Pass and the Brookes Range. The sun was out and a light wind blowing from behind us, and as we left our camp we could feel our legs were better courtesy of the days rest. Working our way up towards the cauldron we began a slow gradual climb up through the final part of the canyon, the gravel road and washboard conspiring with the gradient to keep our pace down to a crawl. The scenery through the canyon was a magnificent, tall dark grey mountains towered above us as we inched our way along and up the road. The pipeline still runs alongside the road through here but is buried to safeguard it from avalanches, the only visible sign of its presence being the flat packed gravel that sits over the top of it and the occasional orange sign with the mile number in large black numbers showing how far from the start it is. Dall sheep are reputed to live through here but scanning the mountainsides there were none to be found, the only white things on the mountains were snow flakes bonded together to form large patches of snow or ice.



After an hours ride from our overnight camp we eventually arrived at the bottom of the pass, stopping long enough to set the camera up and take a timed shot of us next to the "Atigan Pass" sign for posterity and dwarfed by the mountain behind. The road went ahead for a while and then, stopped by a huge mountain and with nowhere else to go it turned up to the right and I remember looking at it thinking "it doesn't look that steep". But then a vehicle passed us and began its ascent, and it was only then we watched it slowly ascend that we realised how much of a climb there really was. The vehicle was halfway up and was barely discernable against the mountainside.

Looking around us and enjoying the view we were climbing the pass at around 3-4 kilometres an hour and despite the weight of our gear the gradient was causing our rear wheels to occasionally slip and slide on the loose gravel as we inched our way up. Recumbents don't climb is something we often hear from cyclists who because of the fact that they can stand up on the pedals can almost always climb better and faster than us, so we continued to climb and climb stopping often near various points to rest, once again watching our torso move to the beat of our heart and hearing the "quince, quince, quince" in our ears as we did so.

The sun was out and we were working up quite a sweat, but thankfully for us the more we climbed the better the view was back down the canyon where we had ridden from and where the higher we got the more the road we had come along became a thin sliver of a thread between such imposingly large mountains, and of course the good view was also great excuse to stop for a rest – and a photo.



Looking North through Atigun Canyon

Halfway up the 4,739ft high pass we had stopped to admire the view on a gravel turnout, the road below just a small sliver of a thing as it wound its way through the

canyon towards the pass and where a large truck raising dust and passing along it looked like a toy in a child's fantasy land. Reaching what we thought might have been the top we stopped to ponder why we couldn't see the otherside but it very soon dawned on us that we were only halfway up! Standing there in the sun with a cool wind blowing as it was cooling our sweaty faces and causing us to give little shivers we were just gob smacked by the beauty of the area, drifting off into some sort of trance until eventually the cold jolted us back to reality and the desire to keep warm meant only one thing – turning pedals towards the top and away from the arctic blast.

Another hour after we started again, we finally reached the top of the pass, and without so much as a how do you do the road flattened out for a few metres as we crested the top. Then, with more of the mountain towering above us we rounded a bend and could see the descent ahead of us, steep and dangerous, yet so totally welcoming, but our eyes were for the moment focussed on the magnificent view of the way ahead. Off into the distance we could see more mountains stretched out as far as the eye could see, the green hills and valleys and the small light brown ribbon of road threaded its way South. Looking back now, we should have stopped and taken part in some sort of ritual to mark our arrival at the top, but the desire to descend and complete the climb seemed to take over and before we knew it the summit had passed.



The view South from the Summit

The descent down the South side of the pass was considerably steeper than the North, and although I wanted so much to film it, it was a case of film or descend, but not both at the same time, and it was times like this that I wished I had someone to film it all for us. The steepness of the road, the looseness of the gravel and the washboard were



making the 2-mile descent a difficult one, and one that was to be under brakes the whole way down.

Slowly but surely we inched our way down the tree and featureless South side of Atigan's 4,700ft pass, stopping often to let the disc brakes and our nerves to cool. Eventually arriving at the bottom we pulled over and stopped at the sign that told us that we were at the West fork of the North fork of the Chandalar River. Looking back up from where we had come we could see the faint dust cloud being raised by a vehicle that was also descending, and looking at the steepness of the South side of Atigan Pass, we were thankful we had come up from the North.

Still among some very tall, imposing surroundings we began to ride through another valley, the brownish tinge of the Arctic Plain had disappeared, replaced by a vivid green thanks mainly to the mountains of the Brookes Range as they blocked the Arctic Blast from the interior of Alaska. Passing the Chandalar DOT camp we could see someone on a large earthmoving machine hauling gravel into a pile, presumably to make it ready for the inevitable roadworks, which because of the harshness of the seasons occur mainly in summer. Gone was the large loose gravel, dust and washboard, we were riding along on a smooth dirt road at the best speed of the trip so far and it was nice to see the speedometer registering above 10 km/h. Stretching our legs and lungs as we sped along the smooth dirt road we came to a spot where we decided that we would just sit and enjoy the view back towards Atigan Pass - the mountains reaching up into the sky blocking the horizon all around us, a frozen lake and the green vegetation a feast for the eyes and the deafening silence only broken by the wind. Rested up and fed, just as we were about to leave a van turned up, the occupants, a Californian Biology class, spilling out from every door to stretch their legs on the long journey from Fairbanks, some looking for a bush to hide behind while others stood and took in the view or had a chat with us.



Almost immediately after leaving our little wayside stop we were descending again, this descent was another steep one of around 10%, the gravel, grade and washboard again making for a dangerous descent, and one which we again took under brakes.

Our descent of Chandalar Shelf was over a 3 kilometres in length as the road took us down the shelf on an angle, and the further down we went the more we noticed a change in the terrain and vegetation and the change from Arctic Tundra to Taiga Forest. The word Taiga being Russian for "little sticks" and referring to the spruce trees that cover most of Alaska's boreal and muskeg vegetation. Gone was the Arctic tundra and its grassy, windswept treeless plain, we were now surrounded by greenery, shrubs



and trees – spruce trees to be exact. Conical shaped fir trees that grow so slowly because of the coldness of their home, their roots reaching the ice below the thin layer of soil and with only a few months of summer warmth to help them, it takes many years for them to climb but a few inches.

Towards the bottom of the descent we came to a sign that denoted the Northern most spruce tree. The sign asked people not to cut it but unfortunately some idiot had decided to make a hero of themselves and had actually ring-barked it. Someone else had then tried to administer first aid by wrapping duct tape around the wound, but as good as it is the duct tape didn't help, and the tree is now dead, standing tall and grey, testament to someone's mindless act. It would have taken many years for that tree to fight the elements that surrounded and shaped it, and just a few minutes for some moron to destroy all those years of hard work. We stood there amazed at what an amazing feat that tree had gone through just to grow, and as we stood there looking at this grey coloured, dead tree we were saddened by the stupidity of its demise.



Leaving the tree we continued the last few metres of the descent and stopped at an outhouse as it stood in the middle of nowhere and on the opposite side of the road to the shallow, fast flowing and icy cold river. The Dalton is known as the Haul Road and approaching us while we were stopped was a good example of that. A large, long low loader truck was struggling with its very wide and very heavy load of earth moving equipment. The truck climbing the shelf almost as slow as we would have been had we been going North, the driver using all his skill to manoeuvre the large load slowly up the grade. Some time later we heard that the truck had actually broken down halfway



up the shelf and we could imagine the scene as it sat there perched precariously, brakes no doubt assisted by rocks under its many wheels, and we were so happy that we had passed it before it went up the hill.

Wandering across to the other side of the road to filter some water from the icy cold, fast flowing water that was a mass of small white crests as it bounced over the boulders I was able to refill our water supplies, an opportunity too good to miss and part of our water strategy of topping up at every opportunity. Gradually our senses grew accustomed to the fact that we were in a different world, one with trees and things, totally different to the open featureless tundra of the past few days. With mountains filling the horizon we rode along the ever-improving road as our average speed crept higher and higher. Large pink flowers began appearing - Fireweed, a foot high stalk with a head of pink leaf like flowers is the State flower of Alaska and was growing everywhere, contrasting against the green of the vegetation and the greys of the mountains, making for a wonderful show.



Fireweed making a great show

Despite being surrounded by mountains we were riding on flat terrain for the first time a number of days and it felt really good. Large granite mountains reaching up into the sky on our left and the river racing its way along a short way off on our right. With stomachs grumbling like thunder we found ourselves a small gravel road off to the river and pulled in for a lunch stop. Conducting a bear activity check first we noticed some tracks that we couldn't identify as the animal that left them had walked through the mud at the rivers edge, and then we noticed some signs of humans who had gone before us, garbage being left there a sign of their visit and an attractant to the bears.



So just in case, and in keeping with our bear avoidance strategy we moved a good distance away before setting up for lunch.



We could hear a vehicle coming along the road, its engine noise audible long before we saw the vehicle itself, and then it was there and past us. Braking heavily to a stop and coming back we were surprised to see the driver was in fact Donnie the mechanic from the Sag River Maintenance camp who was on his 8 hour drive home from his weeks stint at work. He had thought about us before he left and had prepared some goodies for us – iced tea for Joanne and a beer for me. How good did that taste!

We enjoyed a chat with Donnie for about an hour before he headed off and so did we. Riding along buoyed by our meeting and gifts, we continued on enjoying the smoother road and higher speed until it was close to time to find a campsite. Rather than taking our food smells with us we stopped and cooked our evening meal in the shadow of Mount Snowden, an very large, imposing, craggy mountain that fills the horizon, and some distance from our eventual campsite. Cooking and constantly looking around so as to ensure maximum notice of a bear approaching, the .357 magnum and pepper spray close at hand just in case, we enjoyed a meal of noodles, tuna and dried vegetables topped off with some beef jerky, then using the nearby creek to clean up we set off in search of a campsite.

Mount Snowden is a very large mountain and despite our travelling some distance it was still visible when we eventually found a gravel pipeline access road and a possible campsite. For the first time since starting we managed to hang our food up off the ground and potentially away from harms way. Most pipeline access roads have a large metal tubed frame across the track to denote where the fence or gate is, so using our



rope we managed to haul the Bob trailer bag full of food up to the top of the frame and to secure it in such a way that even if one rope was cut, the other would keep it in place. Food safely in place we moved a distance away from it and closer to the main road before setting up our camp. We had read that we should hang our food to get it out of reach of the bears and other hungry critters but the problem with hanging the food is that the smell of the bag itself or any smells that do manage to escape, are carried on the wind for a longer distance because of the height of the food off of the ground. So as we left our supplies swinging in the breeze we moved away wondering whether or not we had actually created a neon sign to attract the bears rather than the opposite. Figuring that we would find out the answer to our question during the night, or maybe in the morning we enjoyed the peace and security of our little material home once more. Its amazing how safe and secure you can feel in something no thicker than a sheet of paper.

We were less than 60 kilometres from Coldfoot, and after a peaceful night filled only with the sound of Mother Nature and snoring we awoke to another fine day. Retrieving our food bag as it swung in the morning breeze we were grateful not to have lost any of the small amount that we had left, and grateful that we had not had to defend it during the night, though the idea of night (dark) and the actual (light) up here were somewhat of an oxy-moron.

Leaving our camp with the bittersweet anticipation of arriving in civilisation, we were riding the undulating but relatively smooth road with a new purpose. Riding with ranges on both sides and parallel to the Koyukuk River as it made its way North, stopping at a creek where it ran under the road allowed not only allowed us to rest our legs, but it also allowed us to view the very large, thick glacial looking sheet of ice that was filling the creek as it fed into the river. The ice was at least a metre thick, imposingly large and with pristine blue ice visible in places as it gradually melted to once again become the river and to add to the wet feet the spruce trees already had.

We were making good time as we rode along enjoying the ragged peaked ranges as they towered above us and even stopping to view a lake as it sat reflecting the beauty of the large mountain nearby and the trees along its side in it's mirror like surface. Stopping for a short time we were enjoying the pleasant weather and hoping to get a view of some wildlife such as a moose or something similar, but it was not to be.

Approaching another yet bridge over a river this time an almost empty one, we noticed that this one had a large vehicle pullout near it and even an outhouse! So, as someone had taken the trouble to put it there, we decided to use it. But a quick look around the area ensured that we didn't stay very long. There in the grass on the start of a track off into the bush and not that far from the outhouse, was a very large, fresh clump of poo. Large enough to fill the average human dinner place, the object of our focus was made up of small lumps of black mass, containing berries and held together with a stringy type substance like chewed grass. We didn't know exactly what type of animal had left its calling card but we figured from the contents that it was actually bear poo, and a sign of a recent visit.

After a check that the owner of the large pile of bear poo was not still around we used the outhouse and with very watchful eyes moved on and well away from the area to have our mid morning break. Standing on the side of the road, each facing the opposite way and on bear watch, we were each enjoying our small bag of dried apricots, almonds and dates when we spied this funny little animal come out of the bush and begin to walk across the road about 100 metres ahead of us. Never having seen a bear cub we immediately thought that was what it was, and if it was, where

was momma bear? The combination of a mother bear with cubs is potentially a very dangerous one. The longer we looked at the animal the more we realised it was not a bear cub, but what was it? The animal, the size of a small dog, was covered in a light, coarse looking hair that was swept backwards, had a small snout and walked with the swagger of a sailor as it moved. Looking at photo's later with Donnie, we were informed it was an Alaskan Porcupine.

Break over, strange animal gone and no bears we continued down the road towards the pointy looking mountains that made up the mountain range that was reaching to hold the sky up as the road ran along in their shadow. The Alaskan summer sun warming us as we rode, despite the coolness of the wind as it chilled the sweat on our faces we were thankful for it. Passing Sukakpak Mountain, a very large, imposing grey block of rock, which is said to mark the boundary between the Eskimo and Athabaskan Indian communities, we were closing in on Coldfoot.

It was inevitable that spending enough time in the Alaskan wilderness and in the middle of grizzly bear country that we would eventually come face to face with one of these inhabitants, and that is exactly what happened as we crossed the Koyukuk River at Hammond Bridge.

Looking for a lunch stop we had come across two bridges, both with nice cleared, flat accessible areas near them and with a view over the river as it tumbled towards the Arctic Ocean – perfect for a lunch break. But as we approached Hammond Bridge a truck appeared some way ahead of us, Joanne was riding in front and as we began to prepare for the trucks approach, she spots something about 50 metres off to the left and heading for the road – a bear! Not wanting to spoil the moment by yelling out and possibly scaring the bear off, she just points toward the bear and I get my first look at a Grizzly. As my mind registers what it is I could feel the adrenaline rise and my heartbeat slightly quicker. This bear is huge, on all fours, standing 3-4 feet high and about the same in length and width. Blonde hair all over except for its underbelly and lower legs, which were dark brown from the dirt and mud, it had been travelling through. The grizzly hump and small round ears clearly visible as it came ever closer to the road, unaware of our presence.

Just as I began to think about our necessary bear avoidance actions the approaching truck slowed, the driver allowing the engine to slow the vehicle and causing the exhaust brake to kick in, the deep grumble of the exhaust causing the bear to look up and abruptly stop. Spotting us after hearing the noise the bear stopped for a second and with poor eyesight and no time to stop, stand and smell, it turned and bound straight back into the bush from where it came, no doubt forevermore associating recumbent trikes with a loud scary noise. With the truck past us we both looked back to see if we could see the bear, but it was nowhere to be seen, a golden photo opportunity missed. Our first bear encounter had happened so fast that it seemed almost surreal.

Still wanting some lunch, but now very much aware of bears and mindful of their fantastic ability to smell food, we rode on chatting excitedly about our encounter as our adrenaline levels returned to normal and until we were some distance away and where felt safe enough to bring our food out and eat. Turning a short distance off of the Dalton Highway up a small dirt road, we parked the trikes in opposite directions so as to sit on them to eat as we always did, and at the same time to allow us a view in either direction like sentries guarding something. We flashed up the stove and boiled water for our lunchtime mug of soup with rice in the bottom and croutons on the top, followed of course by our almost daily course of peanut butter on crackers. Sitting

there swatting mozzies and enjoying lunch we again excitedly relived our bear encounter, thankful and yet annoyed that the truck had come along when it did, thankful that its noise helped scare the animal away yet most annoyed that we hadn't managed to get a photo of the animal as proof of our encounter, or even able to spend some time observing it. If there was one there might be others and we welcomed the chance.

Lunch over and fuel tanks re-filled we rode on eventually passing the turnoff to Wiseman, a small community next to the Koyukuk River. Wiseman, established in 1908 has a population of around 21 these days, its hey day being back in 1910 when the gold miners had abandoned Coldfoot.

We should have taken the time to ride the 3 miles into Wiseman for a look, but we were more intent on getting to Coldfoot before the storm that was brewing behind us caught up to us in the middle of nowhere. The headwind, heat of the day and the moisture of the storm as it brewed were all making for a very warm and humid ride and a bit of a slog.



**COLDFOOT**

Turning a corner we could see the sealed road ahead and figured that we had arrived, the first building we saw being a small log cabin as it sat nestled among the trees. Turning off the highway we rode through a small wooded area that screened the highway from the location and into a muddy open area between some buildings and where a number of the large semi-trailer trucks that had been passing us were parked. Coldfoot, originally named Slate Creek as early as 1899 became home to many miners, boasting a Post Office, a gambling hole, 2 stores, roadhouses and 7 saloons, but its name changed after many of the stampeders heading North along the Koyukuk River got cold feet, turned around and returned South. Slate Creek became known for evermore as Coldfoot.

Nowadays, Coldfoot is a small, non descript place on the map in the middle of nowhere, but a vital one for travellers of the Dalton Highway. The truckers table in the truck stop is like a modern day information centre where information and news of the daily happenings on the Dalton are passed on and recorded, and no doubt the table had heard about two Aussies riding wide, lay down, three wheeled pedal powered contraptions from Prudhoe Bay well before it saw us.



Down town Coldfoot

Arriving in Coldfoot with barely one days food left, we found it to be home to around 15 people, some small buildings, a 24 hour truck stop, mechanical repair facility, cafe/ gift shop and general store, Post Office (open 3 days a week) and the 52 room Slate Creek Hotel made from old pipeline construction crew camp accommodation and charging \$180 per night! We did ask about a room but were told that it was all booked out because of the tourist busses that were coming up the Dalton that day. So unable

to get anywhere to stay inside for the night we set up the tent in the free campground a short muddy walk away from the truck stop, in plain view of the hotel and its dry, warm rooms as the weather closed in.

Thankfully part of our plan for the trip had been for Murray and Joyce to drop off one of our food parcels as they headed back to Calgary, without which it would have been roadhouse fare and nothing available for the rest of the trip. Murray had told us he would be leaving the food parcel at the Visitors Centre or the roadhouse, depending on which one would oblige. With no parcel at the roadhouse we eagerly rode out of town and over the highway to the Coldfoot Visitor Interpretive Centre to see if we could find it. We arrived at the centre, a very large new log cabin building where visitors can learn all about the Arctic, its flora, fauna and lifecycles, the building. Run by the rangers of the Bureau of Land Management and the US National Forest Service it is filled with excellent information and a warm place to sit and warm up while being educated about one's surroundings.

The manager of the centre found our food parcel and told us they were beginning to wonder where we had gotten to. The Satellite Internet in Coldfoot was not working so wanting to send a message to family; we managed to arrange for the friendly staff to send one for us when the net was working again, again providing proof of life to our family. The funny thing is that while we were okay and enjoying ourselves, we knew our families would be wondering about us, and even in this day of worldwide instant communication, there are still places where it is not available, and we were in the middle of one of those such places.

Back at camp we wandered over to the roadhouse and managed to buy a shower in the workers accommodation for the price of \$10 each! Ordinarily we might have ignored the need and saved the money but after this much time on the road we decided to treat ourselves, the steaming hot water flowing over our bodies, turning our skin pink as it mildly scolded us and washed away the toil of the Dalton, making us feel human again. Showers over packed the trailer with our food parcel and then went over to the roadhouse where we enjoyed the warmth of the building and being able to plug the laptop in to power to catch up on journals and website construction while downing countless cups of coffee from the staff, and watching the almost constant parade of interesting people coming in to buy food or pay for fuel.

Outside the weather had turned nasty and we sat there looking out the window watching the teaming rain and cold making the ground muddier and muddier as the trucks came and went. Two other cyclists, Ralph and his wife Pat also came in. They had left Deadhorse after us and were on their way down the Pan Americana, the highway that goes from Deadhorse Alaska to Tierra del Fuego at the bottom of Argentina. It had been Ralph's life long dream to do it and his wife Pat was helping him achieve it, like Joanne was helping me with mine.

The truckers table sat in pride of place in a nook of its own in the building, the cardboard sign on the top informing all that if you weren't a trucker then you had better find a seat somewhere else. Large tough men, hardened by their driving of the Dalton sat around the table, reaching for the table over equally large stomachs compliments of long hours behind the wheel, eating large platefuls of food between smokes, coffee and swearing, not to impress, but as just part of their normal vocabulary.

We decided that despite being topped up with our own food courtesy of Murray and Joyce's food drop, that we would enjoy a cooked meal from the truck stop, and so

along with a couple of bus loads of Americans, the ones in the dry, warm \$180 per night rooms, we tucked into a large buffet meal and sweets which stretched our bellies to the limit. Hanging on for as long as we could to enjoy the warmth of the building, we eventually braved the cold and rain to wander back to our tent, dodging the mud and puddles on the way and hoping that the sled dog camp over the back did indeed keep the bears away as the truck stop operators told us. Arriving back at our tent we found it in one piece, our trikes covered up and silently standing guard outside, waiting for us to load them up yet again so they could transport us safely and comfortably down the Dalton towards Fairbanks. It seems so silly, but after our trip around Australia, then across Australia and now through Alaska, both of us were becoming very fond of our respective trikes as they further became part of our being. We knew how much the trip was taking out of us, and were sure that the trikes had the harder part of the bargain. Drifting off to sleep, warm and cosy in our sleeping bag and tent, we remembered that it was our oldest daughters 30<sup>th</sup> birthday and her youngest 3<sup>rd</sup>. How time flies.

Leaving Coldfoot after enjoying an interesting day of arrival followed by a day off to complete some chores, we rode out of town under more threatening grey skies. Up hill and down dale we rode on a sealed road, the pipeline and road stretching ahead and showing us where we would be riding when we eventually got to and climbed that hill and with the spruce trees making up the boreal forest as far as the eye could see. Descending a fast long hill as it swept down across the landscape we crossed yet another fast flowing creek full of ice cold snow melt water and began to climb the opposite side. Reaching the top and looking back we marvelled at the long descent we had just enjoyed and at how small a large semi-trailer truck that we had just passed



seemed as it crawled up the massive hill.



Long and undulating was the order of the day through here as the road passed through a swampy area on one side and the open area at the bottom of the hills. Apart from keeping an eye out for bears we had not been that worried about our personal security, but then this vehicle appeared from behind us. Slowly passing us it disappeared over the crest of the hill it turned around and then stopped on the side of the road facing the way it had just come and our gut instinct was telling us to be careful. We rode up the hill and passed the vehicle, being careful not to gawk at the occupants, but at the same time casting a look out the corner of our eyes to gather information, after all, we were used to people watching and photographing us. We got passed the vehicle and continued on, checking the vehicle in our mirrors when we noticed that the vehicle had turned around and was following us again before it passed us slowly and then for a second time turned to head back past us in the opposite direction again. By now it really had our attention and I was really getting interested in its occupants. We continued riding as the vehicle passed us for the third time, disappearing ahead of us and leaving us bemused.

We crested a hill and eventually arrived at Greyling Lake, a large body of water surrounded by boreal forest where we had heard that Moose could be seen, and where we stopped to filter some water while undergoing a warning attack from the mozzies. Moving up the hill and away from the lake we stopped in the car park near an outhouse, and there as we approached was the vehicle again but no occupants to be seen. With nobody around I took the opportunity to take a photo of the vehicle and its number plate, just in case. After all, it might prove helpful to the authorities should problems arise and the camera be found later.

So there we were, with potential axe murderers around in the bush somewhere in the middle of nowhere in Alaska and with the sky threatening to rain on us yet again. We sat in our wet weather clothing and with our mozzie nets on to protect our faces as the squadrons of very hungry mosquitos the size of your small fingernail attacked us from every direction. Forced to stay safely protected from inside our nets, and eating by lifting them just enough to shove a hand bearing food underneath and inside we filled our hungry fuel tanks once more. One consolation of the area however, was our ability to go to the toilet in relative peace, as getting inside the outhouse meant that we only had a quarter of the hungry hoard to fight as we went about our business. Thoughts of getting inside the building to eat in relative peace also crossed our minds, but were instantly discarded as we realised that eating inside the toilet building was probably not that nice an idea, no matter how hungry we were or how bad the mozzies were.

The vehicles occupants returned from the small lookout, the two men and two women were Americans and stopped to talk to us and explaining that they were visiting the area on a bird watching trip. Our fears relieved and for once, our gut instincts proven wrong as we waved to them as they drove away.

Meal and fears alleayed we left the parking area and as slow as we were with our loaded down trikes we were thankfully able to ride fast enough to keep the mozzies at bay and so after literally throwing our food down our throats we headed off in search of refuge from the hungry hoard as it perused us.

Another Pump Station, Pump Station Number 5, came into view as it sat among the spruce trees and just off the road. As with the others it was mostly made up of green metal sheeting and accommodation blocks, it was dead quiet and nobody was around. Reading the information in the Mile Post magazine, we found that it sits on its refrigerated base to ensure it doesn't melt the permafrost as it performs the task of slowing the oil down after it comes over Atigan Pass in the Brooks Range. A

refrigerated base is an interesting commitment to the environment, and obviously a self-preservation one as well.

On January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1971, the coldest recorded temperature in Alaska, a freezing -80 degrees F (-62 deg C) was registered at Prospect Creek. Thankfully it was not that cold as we rode past. Prospect Camp and creek being off the road was not one of our places to visit but with the whole area in a sort of natural basin we figured that the physical location must have helped with the formation of that record low. Looking for a camp close to the road we easily found a nice deserted gravel road where we made ourselves a campsite behind a large pile of road base gravel. Cooking and eating well away from our camp so as to continue with our anti-bear strategy, we were joined by Ralph and Pat for a short chat before they kicked on towards a camp at the Arctic Circle. Just after they left the rain set in yet again and they began to climb the hill in the rain as we dived into the tent to keep warm and dry.

Sleeping in a tent in the land of the midnight sun, we were resting in the silence of the great north land and awoke to yet another great looking day. The morning was cool but we began the day by climbing up the 3.2 km long hill that Pat and Ralph climbed in the rain yesterday. The road, built into the side of the hill took us to the top where at a place called Gobblers Knob we spent some time looking over a windswept landscape from a height of 1,500 ft, the views magnificent and back towards where we had just come from. Arriving just after a vehicle, we had to wait in a very cold wind before we could use the outhouse, the cold wind making us want to go even more, not only for the physical relief, but to enjoy a brief respite from the wind.

We had spent an hour climbing to the top of Gobblers Knob and less than 10 minutes to descend the other side. We were flying down and the hill at over 50 kilometres per hour, hands carefully and gently adjusting our path to ensure we missed the holes and eyes watering from the wind despite having our sunglasses on. Levelling out we arrived into a wooded area where we were still travelling at speed as we approached a bridge over a creek. As we approached there, sitting on the side of the road were Pat and Ralph. They had made it over Gobblers Knob as the rain was falling, and dropping down the other side like we had just done had got to the creek and the small cleared area next to it just as the rain intensified and the storm stopped them in their tracks. The Arctic Circle would have to wait for another day. We could see that they had their gear lying around everywhere trying to dry it and stopping for a chat we used them as an excuse to enjoy a quick bite to eat and the chance to filter some water from the small creek next to their campsite.

Stop over we left them to pack up their gear as we began passing through an area with lichens and the small plants of the Arctic Tundra growing and easily seen as we began to climb the open and windy Paradise Hill. We had no idea why it was named Paradise and considering the terrain and weather through here, especially in winter, it was far from the images the word Paradise conjures up.

Ralph and Pat caught up and overtook us well before the top and would make it to the invisible line around the world that marks the Arctic Circle at 66° well before us. Our descent down the other side of Paradise Hill was another one at breakneck speeds where we were both enjoying the thrill of moving so fast, dodging the potholes and pieces of road that were missing but then as we were descending the last part of the hill before the short climb up to the Arctic Circle, I felt the trike swerve off to one side, and as I was fighting to steer to avoid the disaster of either going off the road or hitting one of the large potholes life became very interesting. As I began to brake and to slow down quite quickly, I noticed a loud dragging noise behind me, evidence of the

problem. Eventually stopping near the side of the road and a very steep drop off, I could see that one of my panniers had somehow come off the rear rack, presumably when I went over a large bump in the road. Our rope, which was attached to the pannier had snagged on the trailer causing it to act like an anchor, shredding and ripping it in the process as we sped down the hill.

Repositioning the pannier on the trike then mustering and checking the contents we rode off with me wondering what the hell had happened and angry at myself for letting it occur, but when you struggle up the hills and there is another one to come, downhills are just meant to be taken advantage of and enjoyed!. A check of my speedometer showed that I had reached 70 km/h on the descent. Joanne had boasting an impressive 74.5km/h on an earlier descent, so I jokingly blamed her for sabotaging my trike to ensure I didn't beat her.

Climbing the hill with legs that were protesting quite badly, we eventually turned off the road and up into a turnout and camping area. There was the sign and interpretive area denoting our arrival at the Arctic Circle. We had imagined that the sign was on the highway, and that someone would have jokingly painted the Arctic Circle on the road, but it was actually off the highway where unwary travellers could miss it completely, leaving them to drive along wondering where this invisible line actually was.

Arriving at the Arctic Circle is a momentous occasion for anyone that makes the trip, and we were no different. We celebrated by setting the camera up on the tripod and taking our photo in front of the sign, both on our own and with Ralph and Pat. A number of people were visiting there for the day and came over for a chat, a very recognisable accent asking where we had got that Aussie Flag? Of all places to meet some Australians, we were talking with a group from Brisbane up on a tour from Fairbanks, and along with taking our photos they marvelled at our trip. As we arrived we had seen a man in a car looking sort of officious and we found out that he was taking a survey of the people coming to the Arctic Circle. How weird! Another strange thing under the midnight sun.





## 66° 33' - The Arctic Circle

Needing to fill our tanks we were going to utilise the campground facilities to enjoy lunch, but the squadrons of hungry mozzies had found us and had their picnic sets out. Realising that there was a breeze back down on the road we went back down to the road with Ralph and Pat and cooked up lunch and a coffee in an area where the wind was strong enough to keep the hungry hoard at bay and our blood in our bodies. Food always tasted good but there was something extra nice about it when it was made up and consumed on the side of the road and with a view. Lunch at the Arctic Circle - perfect!

It was a wonderful break in the day and to sit and chat with two fellow cyclists was just so pleasant. Ralph and Pat told us their story and we told them ours, and it was interesting to compare ideas and equipment, supplies, dreams and touring desires, but it was over all too soon and it was time to tackle Beaver Slide. Ralph and Pat left as we quietly packed up.

We had been told of some roadworks ahead on a 2-mile long hill named Beaver Slide, and after descending from the Arctic Circle stop we began the long climb up The Slide. The sun of course came out to warm not only the day, but us as we climbed. We were climbing this monster hill at around 4 km/h and things were getting rather uncomfortable. Adding to the misery were the mozzies, who were back for revenge as we were now too slow to out run them and they were hungrier than a grizzly bear after its winter hibernation. Dressed in mozzie nets we were sweltering as we clawed our way up, the net blocking the slight breeze from our faces as rivulets of sweat ran down our faces only to be absorbed by our shirts. Then a third of the way up the slide we came to where the roadworks began. The road had gone from tar to unsealed mush and mud. The mud collecting in our mudguards and bulging out of the sides, eventually forming in huge proportions and dropping out the bottom like a weird shaped sausage as we climbed. The further we went thicker the mud became and the further our tyres sank into the mush, until we were straining to push our way through.

Stopping and starting, stopping and starting we were working hard as we crawled our way up the slide, tyre tracks from Pat and Ralph could be seen zig zagging all over the place, evidence of their tacking their way up the hill trying to remain upright and balanced, then footprints as well, evidence of their having to push their loads through the mush. Large trucks filled with water were going up ahead of us to drop their load on the road and make the mush deeper and harder to ride through and then, just as we were stopped for a rest, a large piece of machinery rolling the road flat after it had been graded came down towards us. Stopping right in front of us like we had been playing a game of chicken, the driver yelled out over the noise of the engine, asking if we had a rope? *"The mud is thicker and mushier than this further up and you won't get through, if you have a rope I can tow you up when I come back through"* said the driver in a thick American accent. Informing him that I did indeed have a rope, we slowly continued up the road until he caught up to us on his return trip. Making a loop in the rope and connecting the front of our trikes to it we managed to get the rope from one trike up to the back of the roller and back down to the other trike without being too close to the engine and with the driver slowly moving off to take up the slack in the rope, we were off.

At the heady speed of 5 km/h, we were towed up the slide through the mushy mud with absolutely no effort on our part except for steering. We were enjoying our ride and while giving the Royal to the motorists going the other way we were causing them

to laugh, as we thanked our lucky stars. Without this bit of luck we would have spent quite some time trying to get up the hill through the mud.

Arriving at the top of Beaver Slide our mechanical assistance stopped where the roadworks ended and we unhooked ourselves from the rear of it. Stopping long enough to talk to our new found friend and to answer his questions John Sour told us how Pat and Ralph had to walk their bikes up the slide through the mush, how he had been in Alaska all his life and how we were about to ride through one of the largest Grizzly Bear populations in Alaska – such good news! John also told us that everyone on the road was talking about us on the radios, some flattering and some not so flattering comments apparently. But regardless of the comments, all the motorists that passed us did so safely and courteously. We also found out that there were two German photographers doing an article on the Dalton Highway for a German travel magazine, and that they had taken our photo to include in their report. It would have been nice to have a chat with them, but it was not to be.

So leaving John to roll back down the hill, we rolled down the other side, the sealed road allowing us a break from the gravel and increasing our speed quite dramatically, dirt flying off our wheels and the trikes in all directions as it dried. We had descended into an area of long open plains, the different colours of green and yellow mixed with small lakes and other water courses making for a beautiful open area to view and ride through, the vastness of Alaska yet again brought to mind. The ever present pipeline zig zagging so as to absorb flexing as it contracts and expands with the weather and movement of the ground alongside the road as we went, and passing at the rear of a small clump of buildings marked "Gift Shop and Cabin for Rent", an obvious attempt at supplementing the owners income. The road continuing across large open plain hills and visible for many kilometres ahead a constant reminder that the work wasn't over just yet.

Stopping for a breather at the Kanuti River drainage site and original site of the Old Man Camp, we could see the long steep climb up Finger Mountain ahead of us, the scene looking rather like a child's painting of a road heading almost straight up and over the hill, but as picturesque as the scene was or as simple the road looked, the climb was true. With the sun and wind in our face, we were about to test our resolve again as we climbed another challenge, and this time there would be no mechanical assistance. Finger Mountain sat there in front of us, almost devoid of vegetation except for tundra bog and the occasional spruce tree where its roots had managed to grab a hold of the earth amongst the rocky outcrops.

Starting with a small downhill we soon began the climb in earnest, getting a third of the way up the 16% gradient before we fatigued and stopped for a rest, the familiar "quince, quince, quince" in our ears as our chests throbbed rhythmically to the beat of our ever hard working hearts. We were again riding from roadside pole to roadside pole, sign to sign and shrub to shrub as we crawled our way up the mountainside, and keeping the pedals turning was hard due to our inability to spin them easily. A large truck carrying an equally large piece of earth moving equipment passing us barely faster than it and ourselves was so tempting to have tried to hitch a lift. Eventually arriving at the top of the mountain we found the very same truck parked in the rest area, the driver allowing the trucks engine to cool somewhat before continuing on.



Finger Mountain

We pulled into the very open, wind swept rest area where we found Pat and Ralph. After utilising the outhouses and while Joanne chatted with Pat and Ralph I took the short interpretive walk to the summit to enjoy the view of where we had just come from and more importantly, where we were going.

The whole area around Finger Mountain is covered with rock, small lichen and green plants growing in between and with no trees to block the wind, a cold blast makes life rather uncomfortable, but the best bit was definitely the view! The view was just magnificent, looking back over rolling hill after rolling hill I could see the road threading its way across the landscape, emulating the silver snake carrying oil that followed almost the same path, the peaks of the Brookes range and other mountains along the road off in the distance and all under a cloud filled sky interspersed with blue patches. Finger Mountain, named after the large rock pointing like a finger some distance away from the carpark standing there pointing in the direction we were heading like a silent sentinel guide. Pat and Ralph had arrived before us and had cooked their meal, so after we enjoyed a short chat with them they departed and we also cooked our meal. Crouching behind the large rocks to hide from the wind we managed to use them to shield the stove from the wind at the same time as hoping that the grizzlies that are known to frequent the area would not smell it and come to dinner with us. We had considered utilising the spot to camp for the night but added to the fact that it would have been like sleeping in a wind tunnel, the information we had received about the grizzlies in the area being known to come up to the area looking for food from human visitors confirmed our decision to move on.





The reason it is called Finger Mountain

Having sat there enjoying our meal with one eye peeled for large, furry dinner guests, we quickly cleaned up, put our equipment away and moved on looking for a campsite. The descent down the other side of Finger Mountain was excellent and it was amazing how quickly we forgot the struggle we had endured to climb to the top. Running along nicely without having to pedal we spied a gravel road that according to the Mile Post led up to an old gravel pit. This'll do us!

We were 319.9 miles from Deadhorse and after deciding not to go up the road to the former gravel pit to camp way from the road, chose the relative safety of being visible from the road instead. We set up camp, moved our food away from the tent and prepared for the very light night. There we were, sat on our trikes in brilliant daylight at 10pm, surrounded by low growing bush filled with blackened poles of what were once trees standing in silence like matchsticks across the terrain, we were dressed in our mosquito armour and headwear writing our respective journals, making small movies and attending to our normal days chores as our bodies tired from the days toil craved rest and sleep.

Despite the 24 hours of daylight we had managed to get some sleep and as we came out of the tent in the morning the mozzies were up early for their breakfast. Breakfast and packing up was over and done with in minimum time as we rode off hoping to out smart the little buggers by moving faster than them. My level of frustration with them showing when I was actually wanting a headwind to ride into, something I have never wanted before, or since.

We were a little low on water so one of the first tasks today was to find a reliable source and get some. Up and down, up and down the road went, crossing creeks that looked rather brown and brackish and not a good spot to get water. The day was warming up and along with the hills but despite wanting to quench our thirst and cool off by drinking we began to ration our water. We had reached the point where we were only taking a small swig of water at the top of the hills (of which there were plenty) and that meant that we were slowly dehydrating ourselves as we pressed on down the road constantly in search for a clean reliable water source. Adding to our dilemma we had been warned about the mining activity in the area and as such we were rather reluctant to get or even filter water when we came across it, so we continued on until, with only a mouthful of water left each we were forced to filter some from the best looking and smelling source we could find.

Leaving Joanne on bear watch up on the road with the trikes, I took the filter and our .357 magnum paperweight down to a creek near the bush. Making what I hoped was enough noise to announce my presence to any unsuspecting bear over the nose of the creek, I dropped the inlet hose of the filter into the fastest running part of the creek next to some rocks and began pumping the handle, hoping the ceramic filter was doing its job and all the while looking around me for that explosion of an angry bear as it came out of the bush. Water bag and bottles filled I made a hasty retreat back up to the relative safety of the road, and just as I got there, a truck driver stopped for a chat. Almost as if to prove how reliable the Dalton Highway telegraph was the driver told us who we were, where we were from, where we were going, what we were doing and how he knew roughly about where he would find us. We had never met him but he had heard about us when he was in Deadhorse. It was kind of spooky that people would know us even without ever meeting us, but also comforting to know they would be expecting us on the road somewhere.

Moving on from our truck driver friend as he crawled up the hill, gear change after gear change slowly propelling the monster faster and faster, while we tried to do the same. We crested a hill and all of a sudden the road opened up in front of us. There was the best and biggest roller coaster we had seen to date. The road disappeared from view down the hill to where we couldn't see the bottom but coming back into view somewhere up on the other side. Stopping to check our loads before we set off down the hill we steeled ourselves for the ride and seemingly plunged over the edge, hurtling down the gravel road at nearly 70 km/h, eyes watering behind our sunglasses, but with a sensible grip on the handlebars we began dodging the potholes and other accident causing parts of the road as we sped through the bottom of the descent, hoping that we had enough momentum to take us up the other, equally steep side – but we didn't. We came to a grinding halt about two thirds of the way up the hill, thankfully already in granny gear and ready to churn out the final third. This event was repeated a couple more times, and just as we were about to head down yet another hill we ground to a stop and met an older man from Germany on his way to Deadhorse. He told us in his broken English that he was finding the hills rather hard, and our confirming that there was more to come definitely didn't thrill him. His equipment looked rather interesting and looked mostly home or self made. His drinking water held in two large 5-litre plastic water containers that he had strapped onto his front wheel.

The hills kept coming and coming despite our knowing that we were actually descending towards the Yukon River, so it was with no surprise that with no creeks at the top of the hills and pretty crappy water at the bottom, we were very soon again rationing our water. Stopping at the Fort Hamlin Hills Creek I again took the .357 magnum paperweight down to the creek, filtered some water and dropped some

purification tablets in for good measure. The result turning the un-filtered brown water into filtered brown water, that tasted like a swimming pool, but it was better to be drinking that taste than not at all, or worst still water bad enough to give us a dose of beaver fever courtesy of the Giardia or other nasties.

And then, before we knew it we were out of the hills and starting a delightful yet slight descent towards the Yukon River and about 8 kilometres from our intended stop a car pulled up next to us. The occupants an English couple, had passed us on their way to the Arctic Circle and had kindly stopped to offer us a drink. Not having any water they were happy enough to give us a bottle of iced tea each in exchange for a chat. The husband was the only one to get out of the car as the mozzies were lined up for lunch at his wife's window and there was no way she was getting out of the car, and who would blame her! That couple certainly helped us get to our days campsite as we were again down to less than a bottle of water each when they stopped.

The couple left departed and the road turned nasty, fist sized rocks were all over the road looking like icebergs, the tops sticking out from the smoother surface causing us to be bounced from pillar to post, the motion and having to fight it sapping our energy as we rode. Then, just as we had had enough, into sight came a boom gate that announced the start of a bush runway. In remote parts of Australia the Royal Flying Doctor Service uses parts of the main highway as an emergency landing strip, and so we thought this might be the same, but instead it ran along the side of the road on a specially prepared piece of gravel and at even had a control tower at one end. Stopping long enough to eat a muesli bar each, we surveyed the immaculately maintained Five Mile Airstrip. Not long after we recommenced the ride the sweetest of views came into sight. There on the side of the road was the sign announcing the location and services of the Hot Spot Cafe, the sign boasting the biggest and best burgers in Alaska! It's amazing how much our spirits lifted when we knew the bouncing ride would almost be over for the day, and despite enjoying the solitude of the open country and road, we were looking forward to some semblance of civilisation.

With some renewed vigour we took the turnoff and rode through a large gravel pit area the size of a football field and on what turned out to be a loop road. Stopping to peruse the signs that told of the areas past when it was the former Five Mile Pipeline construction camp, and its current use as a self contained RV park.

Leaving the old camp we turned a corner in the bush and there it was, the ramshackle buildings that make up the Hot Spot Cafe. Buildings of all different shapes and sizes, painted in mission brown and covered with road signs and other paraphernalia they were arranged in some sort of weird order that only the creator of the place understood. There in central place was the kitchen, a large oval shaped neon sign flashing its "OPEN" message over the top of the servery window and under a large red paint stencilled ORDER HERE sign. A large tent stood nearby with items of clothing and other souvenirs inside and over to one side was a building with MOTEL painted on the side of it.

Pulling up next to the motorbikes, cars, RV's, trucks and busses, we were immediately surrounded by a group of motorbike riders, totally astounded that we would ride the Dalton from Deadhorse, and full of interesting stories of their own trip from Fairbanks and beyond. Some of them had passed us as they had ridden on their pilgrimage to the Arctic Circle before they turned around to return to the Hot Spot. We were like movie stars and after many questions and photo's we began to look around the place, and who should we meet but Pat and Ralph as they came out of the motel building



about to start their day after having taken advantage of the 24 hour sunlight and arriving at the Hot Spot around midnight last night.



Like Pat and Ralph, we were in need of a rest, so it was an easy decision to take the rest of the day off here, to enjoy a shower and the relative comfort of a motel room. Relative comfort meant a proper bed to sleep and not having to put the tent up, but that was about all. Showered and changed we ordered a famous Hot Spot Cafe burger and chatted with the cook as she prepared it for us. *"Out of necessity"* was her reply when we asked how the Hot Spot had started as we tucked into the rather large Teriyaki Hamburger that she had served up to us. The large burger big enough to require cutting into two halves and then the use of both hands to eat each half filled us quite well and was washed down with wonderfully cold chocolate milk, something we had not had since crossing Australia.

We sat there on garden variety plastic chairs at a long trestle table as it sat under the makeshift roof between the eat in area and the souvenir shop, reading stickers on the door that said things like "I married Mr Right, I just didn't know his first name was Always!", or "I don't suffer from insanity, I enjoy every minute of it!" and "PMS = Punish Men Severely", as our cook was there cooking for the summer in appreciation of the help she had received from her friend Theresa, the attractive buxom blonde in a pair of black shorts and halter neck top. Theresa being one half of the partnership that had started the place back in 1996.

Theresa's husband Dean was working for the State on the roads and realising that there was a need started the Hot Spot to service the truckers as they made their way up and down the Dalton, a service that despite its ramshackle appearance is now a very welcome oasis in the middle of nowhere. Most of the buildings and attachments in the place have been something else somewhere else in a previous life, but rather than

sitting somewhere rusting or falling apart, have been given a second chance on life as part of the Hot Spot Cafe.

Sitting there in the shade with a full stomach we were enjoying the time off of the trikes as they sat unloaded near the door to our dorm. Wandering around exploring the place to help the body digest what had been a very large meal was an interesting experience, doors opening outwards to not only confuse the patrons, but to stop the bears from opening them by pushing on them and coming inside. A trip to the bathroom taking us through the family living quarters and into the bathroom that they shared with their guests, it was kind of a strange experience and we initially felt a little like intruders.

## YUKON RIVER

As always, our respite from the rigours of the road was over too soon, and despite neither of us sleeping well courtesy of the window needing to remain shut to keep the mosquito air force out, as well as the bear that had been wandering around the place in search of an easy meal. The closed window meant the room, without air-conditioning and just an electric fan to move the hot air around, was a sweatbox. Leaving in the morning another day started with us sharing breakfast with some of the other guests. Our hosts presumably still asleep after finishing work in the wee hours of the morning as they usually do.

It was only a short distance on before we got our first sight of the mighty Yukon River as we crested a small hill. There, sitting at the base of the hills and visible through the trees was the river, glistening in the morning sun as it silent and powerfully ran through Yukon flats. We began our descent towards the river on the bumpy gravel road, again being bounced from pillar to post. Edging closer pedal stroke by pedal stroke, we could see the Yukon River Bridge that not only carries the road but also the pipeline across the river, and we also noted that it was going to be an uphill experience to cross it because although the bridge spans the river at a considerable height, the Northern bank is quite a bit lower than the Southern.

Pulling in and under the giant pipeline, the closest we had been to it yet we arrived at the BLM Visitor Centre consisting of a log cabin, wooden viewing deck, interpretive signs and of course an outhouse. A short walking track nearby heading off towards the river and affording the visitor a better look at both the river and the bridge. Wandering into the log cabin after our river and bridge viewing we were welcomed by an elderly couple who as it turns out each year volunteer for the job of looking after visitors to the area. Driving up from Florida for their summer job. Bob and Thelma are around 70 years old and can answer almost any question you may have about the Dalton, the Yukon River and the pipeline, and it was a real pleasure to spend some time with them in their log cabin oasis.



The bridge over the mighty Yukon River

Interpretive signs at the Visitors centre informed that before the bridge was built, travellers crossed the river by hovercraft in summer and by ice bridge during winter when the river was frozen. How the hell do you make an ice bridge was my thoughts, but then the explanation came, you wait until the river is frozen, then you carefully add more water onto the top, the water freezes and thickens the area and there you



have it, an ice bridge, and the more water you put on the top, the thicker it gets and the heavier the vehicle crossing can be, and no doubt, a scary and interesting trip as the river began to thaw!

The Yukon River starts at Tagish Lake on the Northern Border of British Columbia in Canada, it runs up through the Yukon Territory then into and across Alaska before spilling out into the Bearing Sea, a distance of 3185 kilometres from its source. Here at the Dalton Highway, some 800 miles from its destination, the crossing is over a fast flowing, brown looking mass over 2,000ft wide. We just stood on the observation deck mesmerised by it and our location as the river sped past, tugging at the huge concrete pylons that support the bridge as it crosses the river and disappears into the spruce trees on the other side.

Completed in October 1975 the bridge was formally known as the E.L Patton bridge and named after the President of the Alyeska (Alyeska is the Aleut word *Alaskax* meaning "mainland", "great country", or "great land", for which the name for the state of Alaska came from) Pipeline Service in 1982 after his death, the wooden decked bridge is 2,295 feet long and has a 6% grade. Looking at the bridge from the observation deck we could see where the covered pipeline hangs onto one side as the roadway makes its way over the river, and all under the watchful eyes of security cameras and loud speakers mounted on the light poles.

Leaving the visitors centre, riding back under the pipeline and crossing the road we came to another Hot Spot type cafe as it sat on the bank of the river. Not having been able to send or receive emails at Coldfoot or the Hot Spot Cafe we were hoping that the Yukon River Camp, a rustic lodge with gift shop, take away food and fuel might have the facilities for us to log on and send proof of life emails, but asking inside revealed that they didn't email access either.

A short climb and we were on the bridge proper and the first thing we noticed was the repair work that was needed on the huge wooden slabs that make up the bridges deck. Chunks of wood large enough to lose our helmets in were all over the deck as it resembled the pock marks of a bombing raid, holes large enough to damage a vehicles wheels should the driver misjudge them were everywhere and causing us to concentrate on where not to ride rather than enjoying the view of the river. "*Don't get a splinter in your tyres*" Joanne joked as we rode up the 6% grade, our legs straining with the work and our breathing becoming laboured.

Knowing that we were under surveillance on the security cameras, we kept moving despite wanting to stop for a break, large gulps of air being taken as we kept hoping that we would not meet any traffic on the bridge. Reaching the middle we could see down the river through the railings and it was here that we realised just exactly how wide the river was. Eventually reaching the other side we took a breather, and a few photos of the view back down the bridge as the road disappeared off into the bush.

Once over the bridge we were amongst some roadworks, the road having been graded and the sides brought in meant that the width had been reduced considerably, passing traffic would have to slow to a crawl to avoid scraping against each other, and we would be that much closer to the dust and rocks that would inevitably come from the wheels of passing vehicles.

Continuing to climb up away from the river on what seemed like a never-ending hill, we stopped as the road crossed the pipeline yet again and it was here that we enjoyed the magnificent vista of the Yukon River and back towards the Fort Hamlin Hills off in

the distance over the top of the trees. It was like standing on the top of the world. Break and photos over we continued the climb, passing Pump Station Number 6 as it sat silently amongst the spruce trees, large buildings and radio masts could be seen but once again, no life. Our climbing was becoming a rather hot affair with the sun beginning to really heat up, our working hard to make the climb and the lack of a breeze amongst the spruce trees making us uncomfortably hot and causing us to reach for our water bottles on a very regular basis. Bathed in sweat we were instantly reminded of our Nullarbor crossing in Australia where we had experienced many days over 40 degrees C with a top of 51 degrees.

Not far past the pump station the road began to level out and commence its undulating path across the landscape, and it wasn't long before our stomachs were asking for some fuel to replace what had just been expended. Lunch today was going to be an experiment - pancakes. We had managed to find bulk pancake mix in the supermarket in Calgary and seeing that we had packed some into the food drop we received in Coldfoot, we decided to give them a try- do bears like pancakes? We hoped not.

Finding a dirt road leading off into the bush, we went a little way in and stopped near a junction with yet another track. I began setting up the stove as Joanne began to mix the pancake powder, dehydrated egg and some water into a paste, and then under a watchful wildlife eye, we began to cook up lunch, the aroma of the pancakes making our mouths water. Using our little black carpet of cotton in the pan we poured the mix onto it and sat silently watching and waiting as it cooked. Adding caramel chocolate drops into the mix just prior to flipping it also meant that we made the pancake that little bit sweeter and the sugar burst would help the legs. Pancakes and lunch a success, we packed up and took a little nap as the day got warmer and the clouds and humidity began to build up.

Edging ever closer to the end of the Dalton, we were closing in on Livengood, but before we got anywhere near there, the road and humans would test us one more time. We had come to some roadworks, where a huge project to make the road better was underway. We were climbing on a 6% gradient and had arrived at what was arguably the worst piece of road that we had ever seen, let alone ridden on. Despite being there to make the road better, it had in fact made it worse. Large blue metal rocks and boulders the bigger than a grapefruit filled the road as it disappeared up the hill and around a corner. Loud thumps could be heard as vehicles went along and rocks were thrown around. We had been told that the roadworks went for 12 miles and looking at what we were going through at the time, considered that it would take 3-4 hours to cover that distance if it was all like this! It was not going to be a fun afternoon on the road.

We began to make our way through the rocks, slow, very deliberate pedal strokes propelled us forwards at a heady 3-4 km/h, our wheels riding over large rocks, sometimes stopping us in our tracks and causing us to worry about applying too much torque to the chain and snapping it. We were trying to find the safest way through the rocks in order to protect the rear wheel as it struggled and flexed with the weight of our gear on the trike as it was bouncing over the large rocks. Some parts of the road causing us to slow to a snails pace as the rear wheel came up over the rock and then came crashing down as the rock rolled underneath it, bouncing us from pillar to post. Perhaps 3-4 hours was a bit ambitious!

We continued to struggle up the hill, bathed in sweat, hearing the "quince, quince, quince" in our ears and again watching our body twitch rhythmically to our overworked heart beat. Stopping on a regular basis to rest and to check the trikes it seemed like

hours since we had stumbled into this all wheel drive workout and then as we rounded a corner, there it was, nirvana! A smoother part of the rocky road, albeit on the wrong side. Not caring about the traffic coming directly for us, we made our way across the road and onto the smoother area where there was less stress and strain on the trikes, and us, and the further up the road we went the smoother the surface became.

Arriving at the top of the hill we eventually caught up to the traffic that had been passing us, and the drivers who were no doubt thankful that they were not us. There at the roadblock in the middle of Alaska was the traffic control man, standing there like a yellow alien, fully decked out in a full day glow neon yellow suit as he held his lollipop stop sign. *"You can't ride through here"* he said with not one ounce of emotion on his face or in his voice, *"its too dangerous with all the machinery around so we will take you through the construction site in the pilot car. When she comes back up be ready to put your stuff in the back."* So with no other option, we gave in to his demand and got ready for our lift, wondering what big bad world lay ahead and that they had saved us from.

Our lift was a typically large American pickup truck and it arrived at the head of a column of vehicles as it snaked its way through the construction site. The black woman driving the pilot vehicle turned around and backed up to where we were. We loaded the trikes and trailer into the back of her pickup truck and then got in the cab with her. Then, leading another column of vehicles she drove us through a couple of miles of construction site, describing what was going on there and why, and marvelling at our trip. Australia, like most other Americans, was top of her list of places to visit – one day. Large earth moving equipment was removing huge quantities of mountain while other equally large pieces of equipment graded and flattened bits already done, other pieces dumped huge boulders the size of a car and crushed rock similar to what we had recently ridden on, and other pieces turned it all into a gravel road. This was definitely no place for us to be riding, or breaking down!

Stopping at the end of the worst bit of road and where another day glow neon yellow clad lollipop man stood, our chauffer dropped us off, letting the snaking column of traffic behind past and then after making sure we took some water bottles from her, she bid us goodbye and good luck then turned around to go and do it all over again.

Leaving the roadworks behind as we crested a large hill we could see the weather was continuing to build up, the sky turning a purple black colour as the rain was building up in the clouds. But before we tackled that problem we had a very long, fast and interesting gravel covered downhill to enjoy. Slipping over the crest we began to pick up speed, roaring down the hill we were dodging the holes, washboard and other obstacles while vehicles sat behind us waiting to see when and if we would "stack it". Down and down we went with our hair on fire, raising dust as we did so and totally enjoying the fast forward movement, totally opposite to what we had endured not long before. Halfway down we managed to pull over to let the vehicles pass and in preparation of the weather, put our wet weather clothing on. The large clouds had built up enough and we could sense the drenching we were about to receive as we continued down the rest of the hill.

With the humidity quite high and with our riding was in what was effectively a suna, we were getting wetter inside of the clothing that was meant to keep the water off of us than if it was raining, but then the heavens opened and the further we rode the harder the rain came down, the muddier the road got, the more we got covered in it, the wetter we became inside of our "keep me dry" clothing and the lower the temperature dropped. We were riding through a tree filled valley with large, tall road



cuttings into the hill on one side and a river on the other. Coming around a bend we could see the road stretching off ahead into the rain and mist, our surroundings suddenly turning into a lifeless, damp and unforgiving place, and of course the hills came back to add to the fun. It was time to make a decision, look for a camp and get out of it all, or just keep going to see if we could ride out of it, but before we did that, we had to eat. We had expended a lot of energy and as the conditions changed, the day grew older and we realised that we would be riding for quite a bit yet, we needed to again refuel our bodies.

Stopping in a small clearing on the side of the road just large enough to park a couple of cars in, we decided not to try and cook a meal in the rain, but to get a meal the easiest way we knew how. Opening a can of cold baked beans we stood there in the mud, rain and cold, swatting the hordes of mosquitos that had appeared out of nowhere and who were as hungry as we were, taking turns to eat a spoonful from a can and relishing the food. Main meal over we decided on some desert and opened a can of rice cream, the sweat and condensed milk mixed with rice lifting our spirits and our blood sugar levels as we did so. So there we were, in the middle of nowhere, sopping wet, getting cold, no real meal, nowhere to set up camp, rain pelting down and getting attacked by thousands of mosquitos. But the best bit? We were together, smiling and enjoying the adventure of our lives! No matter what happened, we would survive and be able to recount the day for many years to come, more than likely from the comfort of our home, and so far removed from the reality and conditions of the tale.

Having decided that where we were was not a good place to camp, despite our being so cold and wet, we opted to get some body heat back by riding, so with our empty meal tins in a plastic bag strapped to the top of the trike and rattling amongst the bumps, we rode off into the rain, the dark wet sky overhead, the grey stark trees closing in as the road seemed to get narrower and narrower, up hill, down dale, rounding corners looking for something - what we didn't know, but we figured we would recognise it when we saw it.

The further we rode the more the rain continued to pour, the road got muddier and muckier and sitting only 6 inches off the ground we were getting wetter and dirtier as we went, especially when the occasional vehicle would pass and spray us with more water and mud – we could taste the mud as it ran down our faces. Our riding was getting slower and slower, our mood getting lower and lower, and then, about an hour after we had eaten we crested a hill and came out into the open, and it was there that we spied a gravel track off to one side. A boom gate about 50 metres off the road stopped any further access into the bush, but right in front of the boom was a large mound of dirt, similar to that used as a ramp to load things into the back of a truck. Turning into the track we immediately began to investigate it as a possible campsite, but how would we get the tent up and us inside without getting it all wet and mucky inside as well?

Scouting around the area in search of bear activity we located two tree branches, both around 8 feet long and strong enough to use. So, a grand plan was hatched. We would back the trikes up to near where we wanted to put the tent at the base of the mound of dirt, then put the hootchie over the two poles and make something like a field stretcher. Then with one end of the poles on the mound of dirt and the other being supported by Joanne and one of the trikes, I would get in underneath the hootchie and put the tent together without it getting too wet. Once the tent was up, Joanne would get inside the front vestibule, get her wet clothes off, store them as best she could and then get in the tent proper, put warm clothes on and await my doing the same. In the

meantime I would stand outside in the rain and cold and pass various clean, dry pieces of bedding and clothing etc into the vestibule where Joanne was to assemble it all when she was in the warm and dry. In the meantime I would put the trikes together outside the tent door, put the hootchie over the top of them to try and keep them covered as best as possible, take the food bag away from the camp so as to not attract the bears to us and then hop into the vestibule, strip my wet clothing off, climb into the tent proper, put some warm clothing on and get into bed to keep warm. As so we did. Best of all it all worked like a charm and exactly how we wanted it to, and we didn't fall out with each other once. The worst bit though, was that 30 minutes after we did all that and as we were feeling rather smug, the rain stopped – bloody typical!

Being warm and dry, we elected to sort our stuff in the vestibule so as to allow the air to get to it in the vain hope that it might dry a little. There was just no way that was going to happen but we could always hope. Lying there in our dry warm clothes in our dry, warm comforting tent we were exhausted and tired, but we could feel the energy and relaxation beginning to flood back, happy that we had survived another interesting and rewarding day, and wondering what tomorrow would bring for us.

Of course we slept like the dead and awoke to a cool, moist and foggy morning, our gear stored in the vestibule was as predicted, still wet. But as the very welcome sun began to come out we got up and were able to lay it all out on the ground, arranged like some sort of garage sale for used camping equipment. So while the sun warmed our bodies and spirits we cooked some breakfast and sorted ourselves out ready for the day.



Trying to dry our gear out the next morning

We were around 60 kilometres from Livengood and the end of the Dalton Highway, and around 100 kilometres from Fairbanks. Thankfully the weather was reasonably kind to us as we dodged the puddles and mud from the previous days rain passing through more boreal forest, some of which had been burnt out, the lifeless trees standing in rows looking like the quills on a porcupines back.

We were back amongst the climbs again and as much as we enjoyed the downhills, the 3 mile uphill were taking their toll on us, the gravel, heat and gravity causing us to work hard to get up the hills, stopping frequently for a rest and to get our breath, but at least it wasn't raining!

Arriving at some sealed road we thought that we might have found the end of the dirt, but alas no, it was just 5 kilometres of beautifully smooth sealed road in the middle of nowhere and before long we were back on the gravel. Stopping for lunch at the top of a hill in a little lay-by, we again laid everything out on the ground to dry while we ate, and must have looked a real sight to the drivers of the vehicles, including some motor homes as they went past.

Lunch over we descended for about 5 kilometres before the price of all that fun had to be paid, and another 5 kilometre hill struggle was underway. Reaching the top we were afforded beautiful vistas of the ranges we were riding through as they went back off into the distance as far as the eye could see. Another fast downhill and then we hit it, the mother of all climbs. A 15% grade, gravel, traffic and another 3 mile climb, and to make matters worse we were out of water! After checking and discarding the idea of filtering from the brown yucky looking creek we squeezed the last remaining drop out of our water bags into our bottles and set off up the hill.

About a third of the way up and on a really bad cambered corner the fun really began to start when the gearing on Pip decided to give me some curry. Every time I tried to pedal, the gears would mash and slip, causing me to fear that I would break the chain if I continued, the problem however was that because of the grade of the road, with the weight of the trike my brakes wouldn't hold on the gravel and I was unable to get out of the saddle for fear of it tipping or sliding back down the hill. Joanne was in a similar position about 20 metres in front. So we hatched another plan. Joanne would very carefully roll backwards into the drainage area on the side of the road and then, with her trike up against something and on a slight angle, would unclip her feet and get out of the trike, quickly get a rock under the back wheel and then come to rescue me.

Joanne managed to carry out the plan to perfection and then with her helping me by holding the trike in place, I managed to unclip my feet and free myself from the trike, almost falling over as I stood up on the steep gravel road. Together we then strategically placed the trike on the hill and with a very large rock behind the rear wheel and the trailer, began an inspection of the problem. Looking into the rear wheel area I could see the chain was spread across the whole cluster, despite the de-railier being in place for first gear. Pushing the trike and pedalling it got the chain back in position but the gear slip continued while in first gear- there was nothing else for it but to pedal the rest of the way up the hill in a much higher gear. Stopping frequently to rest the legs and lungs before they burst then starting off and counting another 20 pedal strokes before stopping again and again, all the way up the very long hill, until with great relief that we reached the top and just as we did, the rain and lightening danced all around and thankfully, not on us.



After all the drama of the uphill and without being able to fix the gear and chain issues, we began to descend and towards the bottom we came to some sealed road, and then there it was! The sign that denoted the Southern end of the James W Dalton Highway - we had done it! We had triked the Dalton. Joanne took some pictures of me near the sign doing the Toyota "Oh what a feeling jump", and it was then that a huge feeling of achievement came over us. I wanted to get some pictures and film of the both of us but Joanne had just had enough and wanted to get to Livengood, so after taking a short video, where I described the ride as miles and miles of dirt, pain, torment, dust, mosquito's, hills, cold, wet and a damned good ride" we pressed on with a huge sense of achievement firmly pressed into our faces and enjoying the smooth tar road as it went ahead of us forever.



We eventually came to a sign that said Livengood 2, meaning that we had to go off the main road to get there, so seeing that we were out of water again, we rode the 2 mile dirt road to a small clearing in the bush where we found a road maintenance camp and some cabins off in the bush, but nobody around just like a ghost town. We tried a few places to no avail and after not even seeing a water tap began to ride back out and to the Livengood Creek. Filtering some water from the brackish looking creek and dropping in some purification tablets for good measure, we replenished our water supplies before heading back out to the road where we cooked our main meal in a truck parking bay.

Meal over it was time to find a campsite, and after riding up a large hill we eventually found a track leading off into what looked like a gravel pit, and after a quick inspection for recent bear activity we commenced putting the tent up. By this time it was about 9.30 pm and we were looking forward to bed, but our plans were to be thwarted once

again. As we were about to put our sleeping gear into the tent we were invaded by thousands and I mean thousands, of little black flies. They were getting into everything and everywhere and the mozzies were taking advantage of the commotion and diving in for their evening meal – on us! There was nothing else to do but pack up and leave.

During our whole trip we had managed not to ride late into the day or the night, despite being able to do so with the 24 hours of daylight. But today was shaping up to be the day that we did ride that late. We just rode and rode in almost zomby like fashion, the body on autopilot. Then just as we were resigned to riding all the way into Fairbanks in one foul swoop, we came to a nice campsite right on the Tolovana River. It was 10.30 pm and so after a bear activity check, we quickly set up camp, dodged just a few black flies and their mates the mozzies, had a wash in the river and dived into the tent to do our journals. By the time we were ready to sleep it was midnight, our latest night yet and the sun was still up and light enough to read a book. Just another interesting day on the road in the land of the midnight sun.

Waking around 6.30 am the next morning to the sound of the river as it gurgles its way along just 20 feet from our tent, we debated whether or not to take a day off and rest the legs, but the sun was already baking us with 21 deg C and our mates the flies and mozzies were all up waiting for us. Reluctantly we rose and after laying a few things out to dry off and packing the rest we filtered some water for the days ride and began enjoying breakfast despite the kamikaze insects that were landing in our meal.

Starting off with tired legs was not fun the muscles sore right from the core and taking some time to loosen up, but as the road immediately went uphill it sped the process up and really woke the legs and lungs up. Coming to another parking bay, complete with outhouse and bear proof litter barrels at the Colorado River Trail Head, we utilised the facilities before commencing yet another long hard climb.

After struggling up the large 5 kilometre hill we coasted down a kilometre or so before arriving at the Arctic Circle Trading Post, a double story log cabin complete with grass and moss growing on the roof. The trading post has been run by the Carlsen family (Mum, Dad and 23 kids, 18 of which were adopted) for over 30 years but despite wanting to keep going, we couldn't resist stopping in for a chat and a look at the place. We grabbed a drink from the powerless fridge and wandered around the place looking at the souvenirs and other interesting things, chatting and being told that the family used to live in the building during the winter and in the other house or tent during the summer.

Arriving at the Tatalina River with the temperature in the sun reaching 31 deg C (who said Alaska was cold?), we sat in the shade, ate lunch and did some journal work, occasionally waving to the motorbike riders as they sped over the bridge.

Distance waits for nobody so with journals updated and stomachs full again it was time to get the pedals moving, albeit straight up hill. The hill went up and up and up, eventually topping out after about 6 kilometres at a grade that varied between 3 and 11%. We were moving quite slow and stopping on a very regular basis to let the heart rate and breathing come down and the legs to rest. With a slight tailwind there was precious little fresh air blowing on our faces to cool us down but thankfully the poplar trees were close to the road and there was some shade being cast. Our rest stops timed for the shade spots, which caused a chill to run through us, the hill taking over an hour to conquer.

A long downhill after all that climbing was a godsend and we were enjoying the fast, long period of no pedalling, the trouble being that when we did have to pedal again the legs refused to work, lactic acid build up in our tired and sore muscles burning painfully as we tried to get the legs to work again. Bottoming out at the Globe Creek we were again out of water, so stopping to filter some water we left the trikes on the road and with the .357 paperweight in hand, we wandered down to the creek, announcing our presence by making heaps of noise in the scrub so the bears could leave before we got there. And as many times before, I was balanced on some rocks underneath the road bridge and filtering some water into our carry bag.

Water collected and stored we debated whether to stop or not for the day at a nearby turnout but eventually agreed to get some more distance in, after all, we were getting so close to Fairbanks and we were getting excited about being amongst civilisation again. But that was where the fun excitement finished and more hill climbing really started. For the next seven kilometres we battled up a hill, pedal stroke by pedal stroke, stopping often and wishing it was all just a bad dream. The hill was steep and our legs tired enough that we couldn't get any sort of cadence going. Joanne was doing slightly better than me and took the lead, stopping every now and then to ensure I was still following. With knees hurting, muscles burning and legs that were going numb, we pedalled on, bit by bit, until eventually we reached the turnout at the top. Taking a short rest we inspected the area for bear activity, got the stove out and a meal going. It is amazing how great you feel with a full stomach.

We were fed and sitting there bathed in brilliant sunshine and 23 deg C at 9.20 pm and had decided to call it a day. Where to camp was a problem as the turnout was sealed and the grass was on the down slope. So with nowhere to get a flat spot or a tent peg in, or any rocks to use to secure the tent, we resorted to lashing the front of the tent to the back of the trikes and the back of the tent to the trailer, breaking for the first time our rule of having our food near our tent, but we were too tired to care. We had got away with it this time, but in hindsight, it was a stupid thing to do, and we vowed that no matter how tired we were next time; we would continue to obey the common sense rule of no food near or in the tent.

Camped in the turnout on the topside of a hill, the night was a warm one but at some stage the wind had picked up, violently shaking the tent and making us wonder if we had secured it enough. The bonus was that it blew away most of the flies that had accumulated between the inner tent and the outer fly, but despite the wind, they seemed to find their way back just as we were enjoying breakfast.

For once, we commenced our day by heading down a hill for a change, and after enjoying some tight turns at speed as we passed through the poplar and spruce treed bush we levelled out somewhat. Then there ahead of us was something we had been eagerly looking for as we had ridden along. It was the size of a horse and had just wandered out of the bush and onto the road – a moose! I called out to Joanne to slow down as she was in front but looking elsewhere, hoping that my call would not spook the animal and that we would get a good look at it. Stopping in time, we managed to view the young animal, its horse like body on very spindly legs, its large hump on its withers, unmistakably large ears and long snout all silhouetted in the sun as it stood in the middle of the road. Rushing to get the camera out and desperately trying not to spook it we managed to get a photo and a couple of seconds of video before we watched the young moose wander off into the bush to join the noise that was coming from within, and what we presumed was its mother ahead of it. Added to the list, we now had a wildlife-spotting list of moose, caribou, bear and porcupine.





The baby Moose crossing the road

As always seems to be the case we steadily climbed and climbed, enjoyed some nice downhill and despite legs that were complaining we were making reasonable progress. Reaching an artesian bore on the side of the road where the water came up out of the ground through a large metal pipe and with no tap to control it it spewed out and was expelled down the slope and into the bush. Figuring that if the water was just going to go onto the ground it was a great excuse for a birdbath, but what a shock. It was the coldest water we have ever experienced, cold enough to have come straight from the Arctic Ocean! Shiveringly refreshed and smelling somewhat better, we also took the opportunity to fill our water bags and bottles, dropping in a couple of purification tablets in there just in case, despite our wondered how anything could live in water that cold. Climbing again, and now with a full load of water onboard to make the climb that little bit harder, we eventually reached the turn out at the top of Wickersham Dome, a large mountain where there is a trail that you can hike or snow ski on, depending on the time of the year.

Downhill and straight into some roadworks where they were straightening the road, we were enjoying the downhill into it but not the uphill that followed, especially with the sun that was blazing and making us wonder if we were in Alaska or Australia. Around lunchtime we spied some shade and set up our stove near the Haystack Mountain road as it made its way up to a small community. A long table like structure covered with a roof sat at the start of the road, and mounted underneath were numerous mailboxes, their little red indicator flags all in the down position informing all that there had been no mail delivered yet. Sitting there in the shade we were cooking pancakes for our lunch, strange looks coming from passers by and community members as they went

up the road. Lunch over we continued on in earnest, eventually reaching the truck stop at Hilltop. Walking inside we enjoyed the cool of the air-conditioning and the atmosphere of a typical American truck stop diner, compete with waitresses in pink dresses, white pinafore, tiara type hat, order book, and yes, chewing gum.

Leaving the diner after a bite to eat and a nice cold chocolate milk drink, we began dropping down the hill. Enjoying not having to pedal for a bit I jokingly mentioned to Joanne that the downhill would go all the way to Fox, and it pretty well did, eventually running out at the intersection where the Howling Dog Saloon is located.

The Howling Dog had been recommended to us as having nice, cheap cabins as it sits opposite the Silver Gulch Brewery, (the most northern brewery in the USA). The bar is very interesting and entertaining, its ceiling covered with underwear, dollar bills with peoples names on them, t-shirts, caps and all sorts of other stuff to keep you amused while enjoying a beer. Obtaining a cabin for the night we enjoyed a shower, cooked something to eat sitting on the porch and settled in for the night. Joanne went to ring Donnie whom we had met at the Sag River DOT to see if it was still okay for us to visit, returning to the cabin to tell me that Donnie was at home and coming to see us, and so unceremoniously, our trip down the Dalton Highway ended.

**A final word about the Dalton Highway.**

Make no mistake about it the Dalton Highway is for anybody, especially a cyclist, as tough as the location of where it goes to or comes from. No matter which direction you are heading in, the mostly course gravel road has many steep grades that have to be negotiated. Heading South, much of the road is on a grade between 3 and 12%, so bring your climbing legs with you.

Traffic on the Dalton is mostly trucks taking mining associated equipment of all sorts to or from Deadhorse. The truck drivers are on the whole very courteous and will lookout for other travellers and would no doubt assist if required, and with the number of trucks going up and down this road you are not alone for long, someone will always be along.

The temperature you will experience depends on the time of the year you go, but in winter it will be extremely cold and cycling then seems almost impossible. Facilities such as groceries, Internet and lodging are almost non-existent with truck stop fare being the main food available at centre of Coldfoot. Mobile (cell) phone range is non-existent and satellite phone would be the only communications possibility.

The Dalton takes you through a very remote, dangerous place, and travellers should ensure they research the trip thoroughly and learn what to do if an encounter with any of the animals that call it home occurs. Simple common sense steps should get you safely through without the need for firearms, but if having one makes you feel safer - take one, just make sure you know how to use it properly and safely.

No matter how bleak or scary the picture I have just painted it, there are no words to describe the scenery that will definitely take your mind off your tired body, and have you shooting and shooting with that camera. Take plenty of memory cards or films - you'll need them all. The Great North Land is as stunningly beautiful and captivating as is it dangerous.

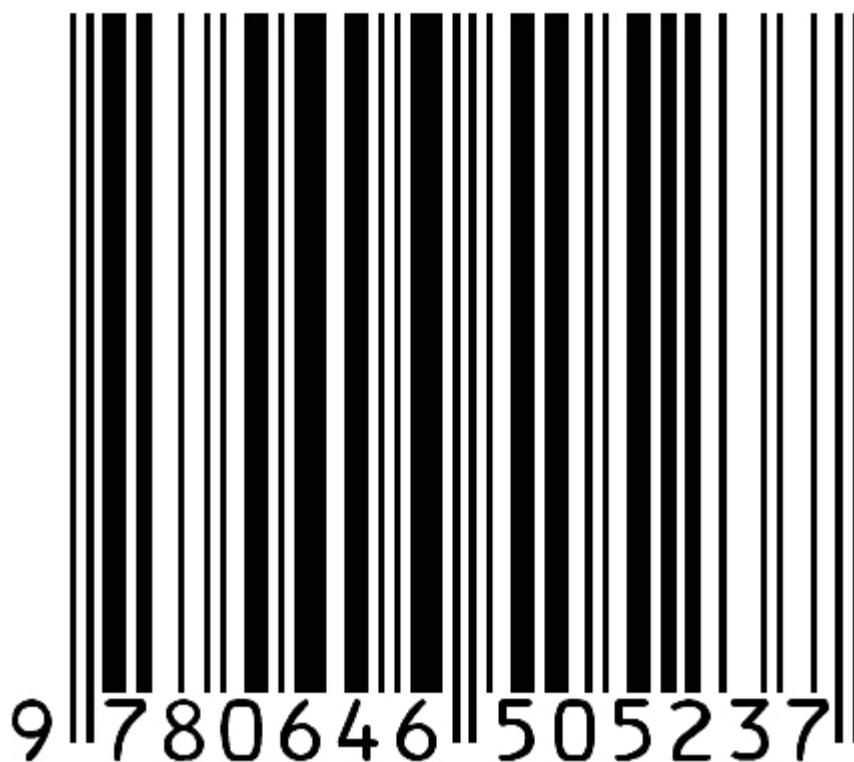
When we travelled the Dalton there were a lot of roadworks, all designed to make the trip safer and obviously faster. With the eventual improved road more and more people will travel North to the Arctic and so, like many roads before it, it will become just another road, changing forever the unique character of it. The views and harshness will burn their beauty into your soul where it will remain forever.

After completing the Dalton, regardless of whether you are heading North or South, once at the end you will, without fail, feel a huge sense of achievement, and know that you have ridden one of the harshest roads in one of the final frontiers on earth.

Make sure you get one of the stickers that proudly says "I survived the Dalton!" You will have deserved it.



ISBN 978-0-646-50523-7



Written, Edited, Published and Distributed by

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[where2pedalto.com](http://where2pedalto.com)



Beginning in Deadhorse Alaska on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, the James W Dalton Highway is a 414 mile gravel road trip to Fairbanks. Inhabited only by wild bears, giant moose, herds of caribou, unrelenting mosquitos, oil pump stations and a few hardy people, the road follows the Oil Pipeline as it crosses the Brookes Range and heads South.

Ride with us as we endure the magnificance of the isolation, rough road, cold, heat, 24 hour daylight, mud, hills, sweat, pain, the experience of a lifetime, and a bloody good ride!