



MEET THE AUTHOR

Donivan Berube is an international adventure cyclist and travel writer.

He's taken solo long-distance bicycle tours across the United States, France, Iceland, Ireland, and this one from Alaska to Argentina. Learn more at donivanberube.com



THROWN TO THE WOLVES

Adventure cyclist and travel writer **Donivan Berube** sets out on an 18-month journey to ride the 30,000-kilometre Pacific Coast route from Alaska to Argentina. In this extract from the opening days, bears, rabid wolves and sub-freezing temperatures make for an interesting beginning...

It was 50 kilometres south of Coldfoot, Alaska when a government truck U-turned in the road ahead, sending a muddy shrapnel of gravel rocks and shale blocks skidding into my spokes with metallic chime. It groaned to a rigid stop right in front of me, engine idling into a sombre whine. A middle-aged woman stepped out from behind the wheel, brushing her gloves off against the sides of her work pants. I pulled down my winter facemask and stole a glance at the license plate while she approached. 'For federal use only', it read.

The sky was impenetrably grey, temperature buried below freezing for days on end. She wanted to warn me about a wolf a few miles ahead exhibiting 'strange' behaviour. I wondered what constitutes strange behaviour for a wolf this close to the North Pole. "I don't know what your deal is," she said, emphasising the 'deal' while pointing at my bike mistrustfully, "or what you want to do with this information, but judging by the way it lunged at my truck and lashed out

“Cycling became my favourite mode of travel, magnetised by the Earth’s most remote wonders



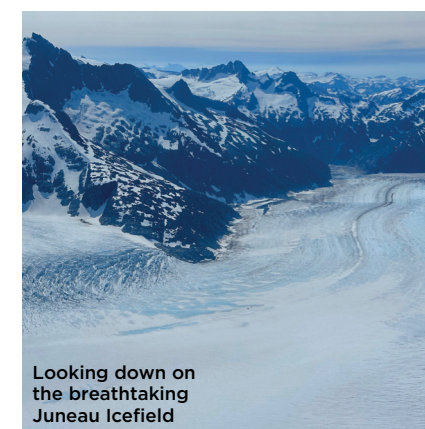
against passing semis, it suggests rabies and will come for you, too.” Just days before, I’d flown 400 kilometres into the Arctic Circle, rebuilt my bicycle on an airstrip at the Arctic Ocean, and begun a two-year trek south for the bottom of Argentina’s Tierra del Fuego Archipelago. I’d been warned about bears, of course, expected them en masse and planned accordingly. But this was something else.

Call of the wild

While far longer than even the most audacious of my prior bike tours, it was not the first. I’d ridden across the United States on a single-speed Jamis Beatnik one decade earlier, a kind of gateway trip to the perennial hunt for cheap flights to further away countries such as France, Ireland and as far north as Iceland’s punishing Ring Road. I’d grown used to the frigid brume of the north, staggering down endless dirt lanes through abandoned territories, ice roads crossed over empty tundra and overgrown trail lines connecting nowhere with nothingness.

Cycling became my favourite mode of travel, magnetised by the Earth’s most remote wonders, seduced by the subtle grandeur of getting as far and away as humanly possible before pedalling back in slow return to life as I’d known it. That’s what made Alaska-to-Argentina the prize, a daring race against the latitudes, a slice of hallowed adventure as long as two continents. Plane-hopping overnight en route through Anchorage, I lay on the floor against the boarding gate’s rain-splattered windows with my bike bag as a pillow. Littered all about the terminal were others like me, sprawled face-down on bench seats in heavy construction clothes. I rolled sleepless with anxiety while they seemed expertly at ease, steel-toed boots unlaced and strewn about, comfortably accustomed to the commute ahead.

Prudhoe Bay, our destination, has a camp-like infrastructure built strictly in service of its offshore oil industry. Everyone on the flight except for me was going there for work, gruelling weeks-long and year-round shifts in extracting the underlying oil deposits



Looking down on the breathtaking Juneau Icefield



No escaping the mud while on the open road

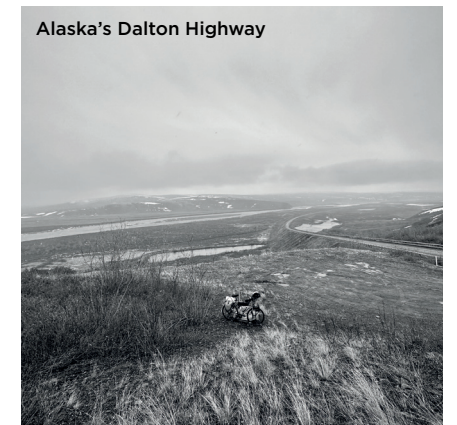


The view from a glacial mountain river

and transporting them south through the Trans-Alaskan Pipeline. There was a palpable familiarity between everyone on board as flight attendants, seemingly old friends with each passenger, used first names to welcome them back for another month on the job.

Once airborne, I could watch from our plane as the terrain below slowly transitioned into one uniform shade of bright, brilliant white, from the dreary drab of Anchorage to the snow-packed Brooks Range mountains peaking out atop the clouds, all dissolving into a marbled alien scrub of green, blue and ice-coloured glacial tidepools. It was a blinding expanse of emptiness with not a tree in sight, just lichened pits of snow and shrub puddled together ad nauseam. I tried to sleep like the rest of them, but the enormity of the trek ahead had my ears ringing like a bomb siren, doubts and insecurities ballooning with apprehension over what I’d gotten myself into.

Dropping in from the cloud shelf above Prudhoe Bay was a complete



Alaska’s Dalton Highway

desaturation, like bending backwards through time into some strange new planet, barren and sterile and devoid of colour. The permafrost is over 600m thick in some places, an endless horizon of tundra scrub layered in the polar hues of bright glacial ice. How will I escape this?

Shaky start

The bicycle itself I’d carefully broken down into a padded cardboard crate



of its own. I'd also packed an additional box-load of gear: tarps, tools, wilderness camp supplies, front and rear panniers stuffed full of warm winter clothes, and enough food to last two weeks. I took my time rebuilding the bike, at once eager and wary of setting off for good. There was a monumental sigh of relief in finding that all its parts were still there, nothing damaged or awry, as I tightened every last screw and filled my water bottles in the bathroom sink. An older woman stationed at Alaskan



Sheltering from the wind

Airlines' reception desk pointed towards the door in warning.

"There was a grizzly out there in the parking lot last night," she cautioned shakily. "They ran it off someplace, I don't know where."

This wasn't necessarily the first bit of news I wanted to hear before I'd even reached mile zero. She asked if I'd brought a gun; everyone in Alaska thought I should fight bears with guns. I layered up in my thickest coats and pushed the bike outside for one last inspection. Resituating some weight and tightening loose straps, I took a lap around the building to test run my drivetrain, double-checking that all gears were shifting, brakes were gripping and tubes holding pressure. It was 1 June, but the air was still thinned by a frigid pink veil of resilient winter sky reflecting a vibrant pane like cracked stained glass ready to shatter in snow-laden granules at any moment.

I set out along a wet gravel road with no clear signs for direction, just braids of rubble twisting in flat knots across the cold crystalline void. The

surrounding township of Deadhorse couldn't offer much but a few sturdy lodges and a general store to buy shop gloves and bear spray. Trucks seemed to carve their own course across the blue swathe, so I navigated my escape in their rocky wake. It was 400km from there to Coldfoot Station, a trucking outpost with similarly limited services. There was a cell phone tower and a hand pump for potable water. There was coffee and a small diner, but no groceries. That was it until the Yukon River, a rabid wolf lurking somewhere in-between.

Words of warning

By the time the government woman stopped to warn me, I'd been cycling for days across barren tundra and muddy mountain roads in sideways snow. I showed her my map and pressed for more information, perhaps a landmark or kilometre signpost to watch for. "You'll go up a hill," she offered. "There will be a vault toilet on both sides of the road. Then you go down the hill, and that's where the wolf is."

This clue turned out to be non-existent, but for each descent thereafter I scanned the roadsides in terror looking for anything that moved. Fear overrode all exhaustion as I stayed in top gear for the next 60km. Nightfall was nowhere to be found; the sun would set for hours until it was also somehow rising. At 10pm, I peaked at the day's highest hill, known as 'Gobbler's Knob', where two State Troopers were hunting for the wolf with guns and ATVs. The older one looked exactly like the host of the *Cash Cab* game show, tall and wide with a matter-of-fact drawl. The younger one might've been Paul Dano, the actor, lips chapped and face burned pink from the wind.

Cash Cab said a trucker reached out via radio that the wolf was last seen chasing him right where we were standing. "So I can't camp up here in this little clearing then?" I pleaded. It was late. I'd been fully spent. "Can't advise that," Paul Dano shot down. "Your scent will carry." He reminded me that even if I called for SOS rescue, the



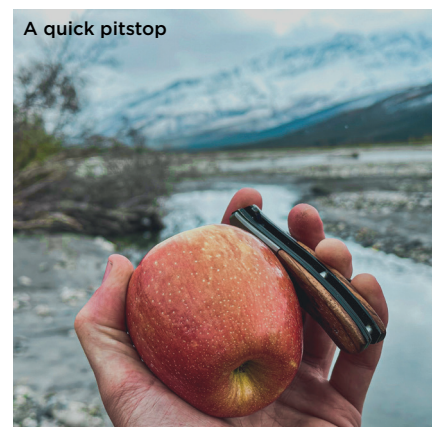
Cycling through Denali National Park



Getting some rest in a winter dogsled shelter



Mud, glorious mud



A quick pitstop



If the wolf did track me, at least I'd be barricaded in a locked cockpit

nearest station was nowhere close. "It'll take us an hour to get here." *Cash Cab* levelled that he too biked across the country once, but would never ride Alaska. Under the circumstances, I couldn't help but to share his sentiment. The wind was vicious and the rain thickening with ice, so I bombed another slope looking for a safer place to lay low. Left down a turbid pipeline access route was an industrial broom sweeper construction vehicle parked in the mud. I tried my luck with the right door. Locked.

Cold comfort

Leaning my bike against the machine's massive engine, I climbed around to the left door and tried again. It was unlatched with keys in the ignition. I figured if the wolf did track me, at least I'd be barricaded in a locked cockpit with a bit more time to radio for help. In any

case, it beat pitching my tent in the rain once more and welcoming the wolf to an easy dinner. Trying to sleep sitting up in sub-freezing temperatures was torturous, but there were fruit snacks inside. Word preceded me with each day that followed, natives and flaggers asking if I "knew what was going on out there" and proudly showing videos of the wolf on their phones. But once I arrived in Denali there'd been a perplexing update: "Did you hear what happened with those wolves?" I noted the local's curious choice of words: 'happened' in past tense and 'wolves' plural. It turned out to be not one, but an entire rabid pack.

Coincidentally, Alaska's first case of rabid moose would be recorded in the week that followed, further west toward the Bering Strait in Nome. 'Dispatched' is the diplomatic word they used to indicate that the troopers found them

after all. But I was caught in a new web of worries by then. On a mossy hill just beyond kilometre 99 of the Denali Park Road, I was struggling to hold my bike upright amidst hurricane-force winds hurling down from the highest peak in North America.

Curling out ahead was Thorofare Pass, a cavernous purple nebula of brooding clouds and ice melt. In the vale between, a lone grizzly bear roved atop the bridge I needed to cross. It pawed around to the left, foraged a bit to the right, then turned to the road straight in my direction. Nearing midnight once again, I considered it best to backtrack a few miles and seek shelter from the threatening potential of a close encounter. Beneath a concrete bridge wall in the adjacent river valley, I cached away my bags and food, pitched my tent and laid still, in hopes that the bear would be gone by morning... 🐾

Photography: Donovan Berube