

UNCHARTED BRITISH COLUMBIA

A week of riding timeless, un-timed singletrack through unknown British Columbia with the BC Bike Race crew.

WORDS DANIELLE BAKER **PHOTOGRAPHY** DAVE SILVER

A few of us are sitting together at the edge of the water at the historical Cassiar Cannery near Prince Rupert, a small island town on the north-west coast of Canada, a stone's throw from the Alaskan border. We're really out there...

The inaugural BC Bike Ride North – a six-day, all-inclusive guided mountain bike tour through northern British Columbia – has come to an end. We've spent the last week riding pockets of hand-built singletrack across a vast distance of over 700 kilometres. Each town we've pulled into has been unassuming – mostly residential, with single-storey industrial buildings that sprawl along rivers or are centred around sawmills. But as we left each one, the uniqueness of the experience – the riding, the people, the vistas, and even the food – left imprints on us to last a lifetime. Now we're relaxing and watching the ocean ripple through the reflection of the brightly coloured cabins that dot the shoreline as we process our memories of the last week and share our stories.



A week ago, we all gathered in North Vancouver – nearly 1,500km from where we now sit – to register and ‘warm up’. Some may have found the location a bit ambitious as a starter lap, but Olympian Adam Craig thought it was a great way to begin: “Welcome to Canada, this is mountain biking here!” Being my backyard, I was thrilled to share what we have with our visitors. Guides toured us around the famous technical riding – the steeps, tight switchbacks, roots, and woodwork of the North Shore. “I’ve got a soft spot for riding on the shore, it’s awesome there,” says Adam. “Any biking road trip around British Columbia should start there in my opinion. That’s kind of the port of entry and that’s where some of the best riding in the world is, so it would be rude not to!”

Adam Craig take the trouble-maker’s back seat.



The team that organises BC Bike Ride North also runs the renowned BC Bike Race that takes racers from their registration – also in North Vancouver – over to Vancouver Island, the Sunshine Coast, and back to the Sea-to-Sky corridor over seven days. These two events, while benefitting from the same skilled logistics and organisational team, are quite different. One is a multi-day timed stage race, while the new expansion is more of a ‘choose your own adventure’ tour that takes participants north to a rather unexplored section of the province and immerses them deeply, not only in the riding, but also in the culture. The pace is much more relaxed and allows riders to choose from a daily smorgasbord of options to suit their specific wants and interests.



We’re assuming this ^ isn’t off this v



This Prince George was here first.

The day after our orientation we loaded onto two private planes and flew north to Prince George. Having only previously travelled this route by way of a 12-hour drive, I, like Adam, was glued to the window the whole time. I really, really love flying over mountain ranges and terrain, especially that which you have a bit of familiarity with. Flying over Whistler and the Pemberton Ice Cap; just looking at places we’d both been, it was beautiful. And then seeing the landscape change as we travelled north and made it over the Coast Range and out into the foothills and the upper Fraser River Valley – it’s a pretty neat way to tie it all together.

Our road trip followed Northern British Columbia’s east-west corridor, Route 16, from Prince George through Burns Lake, Smithers and Terrace, along the way to our final destination near Prince Rupert. The Fraser and Nechako rivers meet in Prince George and support an abundance of diverse wildlife. For this reason, thousands of years ago, the Carrier First Nations settled here. Today the city boasts over 74,000 inhabitants and is by far the most populated area we visited.

Ben Yeager grew up in Prince George and accompanied us as a guide for our first few days. The first time I met Ben, he was a teenager with a fresh driver’s licence, driving himself thousands of kilometres around the province to follow the provincial downhill race series, so having such a large group of riders come to his backyard was a little unusual. “It was definitely strange seeing the whole BC Bike Ride convoy roll up into our trail area parking lot and deploy all their gear and people. The trails are often pretty quiet, so to see such a big crew out there was really cool! I bumped into a few buddies on the trails that day and they also thought it was great

that Prince George was being considered a mountain bike destination for a big event.” Showing off his local trails to us didn’t come without a little anxiety about how we were going to enjoy them. “I wasn’t sure what people were expecting and it made me think about riding all of my local trails for the first time again. I was really blown away by people’s reactions and it made me feel stoked and proud of my community!”

Prince George offered us two main trail networks. Otway had smooth and sandy undulating bench-cut trails that criss-crossed to create what seemed like a never-ending combination of loops that spread out from their Nordic ski centre. The trails were so fast and flowy that even the climbing was smooth and with so few people riding them they were in incredible condition. We hit up a classic ‘local’s loop’ that was full of drops, rises, and tight twists and turns through the sometimes-narrow trees that kept us on our toes and left us grinning from ear to ear. It was the perfect way to stretch our legs immediately after getting off the plane.

The Pidherny trails stepped things up a notch with steeper and looser favourites. The Kitchen Sink – as the name implies – has a little bit of everything for everyone on it. This all-mountain trail put everyone to the test with everything from berms to jumps and from log rides and skinnies to ladder bridges. One of its many unique and well-crafted woodwork features was the 16-foot high, hand-built roller that gave some of us more than a second thought before riding it. “Prince George had quintessential local trails,” reckoned Adam. “No huge hills, just a river valley providing enough relief for the locals to carve out the kind of trails that get you excited to go on a road trip.”





Exploring all the different ways of getting splinters...



Burns Lake. The blank slate dream.

By contrast to the city of Prince George, Burns Lake, our next stop, has a population of only 1,000 people. We camped just north of the town, and were treated to ride-in/ride-out access to the trails and post-ride swims. Despite the relatively small community, Burns Lake is recognised as one of the most progressive, sanctioned, and sustainable trail networks anywhere. “Trail Centres are popping up in rural communities all around the world and the riding in Burns Lake is a great example of this done right,” says Adam. “Stacked loops from the lovely lakeside trailhead, shuttle and epic options, and every inch of trail perfectly placed to ride like it should. Burns Lake is the top-notch realisation of the blank slate dream.”

By our second night of camping, we had all settled into the routine that would take us through the rest of our

week. Wake up, have breakfast, attend the morning chat about what to expect, gear up, load up or pedal up, and ride. We were always riding in that comfortable mid-morning sweet spot. In the afternoons we rode more or travelled to our next destination, then swimming, dinner, and some time spent drinking beers around the campfire before climbing into our tents. The energy built through the day’s ride and into the evening hours. Refuel, relive, repeat.

The evenings somehow struck a balance between restful and lively. As everyone became more comfortable in their nomadic surroundings, our little community became more social. Stories and jokes were told and the numbers around the campfire were slow to dwindle as we were all trying to stretch each day out as long as we could.



Waking up in Burn's Lake began, again, with our lead guides, Darren Butler and Kelli Sherbinin, presenting our daily ride plan. They offered the same advice each morning – and it's still ringing in my ears: "Pre-ride, re-ride, before you freeride." And so, Burns Lake day started with a cross-country-inspired warm-up lap around the campground before choosing how we wanted to explore the abundant network of trails. From guided pedals and shuttles to unguided recommendations, I found it hard to settle on a plan at first. Some set off for a 'full epic' – a four to five hour endeavour that offered plenty of rocky sections, flowy switchbacks, and smooth berms. To switch things up, the afternoon shuttles dropped riders off to shred it the opposite way while adding in a nice, classic, 'jumpy and pumpy' flow trail called Charlotte's Web. While some of the trails we rode offered 'down-country' – a shuttle access trail that still has plenty of pedalling – others were simply flowy downhill with deep berms and floaty jumps. Burns Lake delivered and, regardless of ability or speed, we all loved what we found there. With over 800 acres of land available to the Burns

Lake Mountain Bike Association (BLMA) for legal mountain bike trails, it was impressive to see what this community has created so far.

That evening, the community came together to put on a concert with local bands and singer-songwriters. Rachelle van Zanten, one of the performers, who was one of our guides, writes her own music about life in the north, inspired by the fresh water, the trees, the air, the community, and the recreation. Surrounded by the community who showed up with their kids and dogs in tow to enjoy this special night with us, it was truly a magical experience. While we were honoured to have spent the day riding on the unceded territory of the Carrier Sekani Nation, our meal was provided by the Babine Lake First Nations who served us tasty and unique fare that included local traditional favourites like bannock, moose stew, and hand-whipped soap berries. "I really appreciated dining at the Burns Lake trailhead, sitting with everyone outside, enjoying dinner prepared by the proud locals who were genuinely excited to host us in their beautiful little corner of the world," recalls Adam.



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Crash landing?



Dream-state riding. Adam is happy.

Smithers was up next, and this is where Adam found perfection: “The factors that create good mountain biking are terrain and soil. Smithers is just about on the balance point of perfection in those areas. Dream-state riding. Mountain bikers ideally practice their craft in the mountains and Smithers was the day we properly entered the Coast Range, with everyone warmed up and ready for the challenge. Our time there didn’t disappoint.”

Originally founded at the turn of the century as a divisional point on the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, Smithers has become a thriving mecca for outdoor recreation, mountain

culture, and community. As we headed out from our base camp along the Bulkley River on the unceded territory of the Wet’suwet’en Nation, to ride the Bluff Trails, a moose and her calf ran right through our group – does it get more Canadian than that? We rode The Long Way up to the top, which offered up some technical sections and made it an engaging climb. Along the way we stumbled on the Wheel of Fortune; hung up in a tree, the contraption has a string to engage the spinning wheel (yes, just like the game show) and it tells you which trail to ride. Given that ours landed on one that required much, much, more climbing, we went against fate

and dropped into the popular Anti Flo. We were rewarded for the steep and technical switchbacks up top and mid-section looseness with the fast and flowy machine-built jumps and berms at the bottom. There’s nothing better than a trail that has you questioning your abilities, but still leaves you feeling like a rock star at the end!

Once we returned to basecamp we were shuttled up Hudson’s Bay Mountain. At the top, advanced riders took the guided tour down Backdoor – a double black diamond ride with no ‘out’. The commitment started with loamy subalpine and wide open singletrack that made full use of the rolling

terrain. As the trail got steeper, it also became more technical with roots and rocks that seemed to go on forever as it wound through the open of the ski runs and patches of trees that divided them. Strong riders could let off the brakes here and pick up speed to float through the rough sections, popping off little hits along the way. Finally we hit the forest at the bottom and the trail changed again, with loamy and impossibly fast sections with natural trail features broken up by steep chutes, tight corners, and a sprinkling of man-made senders for good measure. Adam, among others, loved it and he listed it as one of his all-time top five trails.



Moose sightings are common.

Terrace. Did they run out of good town names?

After an incredible day and a half exploring Smithers and another night of telling stories and (now) singing around the campfire, we loaded on the bus and headed to Terrace. The mountain views and winding river along the way were stunning and as we pulled across the small bridge to our basecamp we realised that we would be sleeping on an island in the middle of the Skeena River on the territory of the Tsimshian Nation – a popular angling area, at dusk all the banks were still lined with hopeful fishermen.

Aleksa Havelaar joined us to guide for the day in Terrace. As a transplant from the Greater Vancouver Lower Mainland, living a more isolated life in the north is still relatively new to her. “The reason we moved here was for a new adventure. When my husband told me that he had the opportunity to transfer to Terrace, we looked it up on Google Maps, saw that it was part of the Coast Mountain range and still close enough to the ocean, and we thought, ‘what’s stopping us?’ We also made sure there were bike trails in town – that would have been a deal breaker.”

Terrace offered the best of all worlds for experienced riders. On Copper Mountain we enjoyed shuttle laps with a variety of terrain; everything from old school downhill with rowdy lines and janky tech to smooth, bermed, flowy jump trails. Big Easy – a favourite trail of the week – had impossibly sustained steps that seemed to go on forever, but had enough traction to keep us on our bikes. Across the river, Terrace Mountain was the exact opposite. The trails had difficult technical climbs, but rewarded us with incredible views and fast descents with unique terrain features. Downtube was especially fun with flowy fast new-school sections mixed in with killer rock slabs, short punchy climbs, and rocky spine traverses. These trails took us through everything from lush coastal forests to drier pine stands. “I was with a group of riders who had the pleasure (and pain) of exploring Flathead and Downtube on Terrace Mountain,” says Aleksa proudly. “These two trails really showcase the best of everything Terrace has to offer and what is still yet to come.”



RIP 9

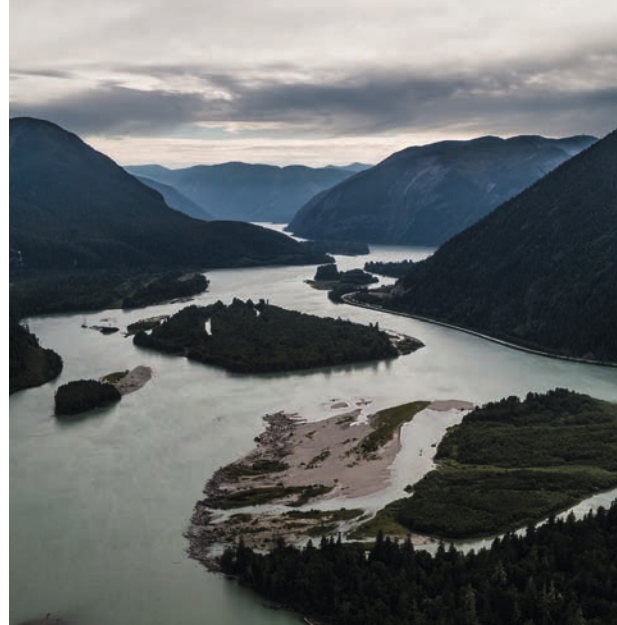
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Much like Ben had experienced when showing off his backyard, Aleksa was a little nervous about what we would think of her trails. “The three riding areas they experienced before Terrace have a bit less in the way of technical climbing. But I was riding with a group of people from Mexico, and once they hit the descent on Flathead, I knew they were stoked. I could hear lots of ‘woo-hoos’ and they were grinning from ear to ear when we got to the bottom of the rock slabs. Some of the riders talked about how they would never have ridden some of the features here if they hadn’t been part of BC Bike Ride. I think starting in Prince George and moving west from there was a really great way for riders to see their progression and gain confidence.”

The week seemed to build perfectly as the style of riding slowly changed day-to-day from smooth, confidence-inducing flow to the more technical style trails where you have to earn your flow. It was as though each day added a new set of skills that helped us to better enjoy what was coming next.



Is this a smile or a scream?

To the ocean. To the end of time.

After Terrace, our bikes were shipped back to North Vancouver where we would pick them up a few days later, and we continued following the Skeena River to where it meets the ocean. We were welcomed to the Cassiar Cannery by First Nations performers and a salmon feast. With two nights here, we were able to rest, take in the abundant surrounding nature, and also participate in fishing, jet boating, and canoe excursions. But perhaps the most valuable of all those options was simply enjoying the moment and reflecting on everything we'd just been introduced to. "It stands to reason that after riding our bikes along the way to the fabled northern coast of BC, we would want to relax and enjoy the scenery a bit," suggests Adam. "We were sufficiently exhausted from the riding, so it was great to have a couple of casual mornings to recover physically and let our minds return to a normal

amount of adrenaline. A lovely rainy afternoon confirmed that we indeed didn't need to ride bikes every day until the end of time, which I was considering after the last ride in Terrace."

Travelling along Route 16 showcases what a raw and wild place Northern British Columbia is. The wide-open surrounding space makes you feel like you are truly a million miles from everything, but then you find yourself in these warm and welcoming little communities that are offering up world-class mountain biking, beer, coffee, and people. "The reality is, as humans travel farther from the equatorial jungles where we are most likely to thrive, our population steadily thins and becomes heartier," Adam tells us. "The folks in the north have learned to work in harmony with their challenging environment, and, in the process, developed a special way of connecting with the land and each other."



Connor Fearon / Maydena Tasmania. Photo: Caleb Smith

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