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The Stupids Invade Montana

by Colleen Friesen

Photos by Tom Robertson



On a clear July morning, just south of Creston, British Columbia, a navy blue Suburban approaches the U.S. border crossing of Porthill-Rykerts, Idaho.

It is towing a large U-Haul. Roped and wedged between panniers, bins, and boxes of various sizes are seven well-used bicycles. If the waiting border guard were to listen closely, he might also hear the muffled clink of hidden Canadian beer bottles.

The vehicle stops. Irene, that day's driver, lowers her window. The hot summer air quickly replaces the cooled interior atmosphere. She removes her sunglasses, pushing back her blonde hair as she turns to face the uniformed man.

"What's going on here?" He waits for Irene's response, then adds, "We're going to need you to open up that trailer."

"No problem, let me find the key." She swivels back to the window, holding up the trailer key, "We're heading down to Bonners Ferry. That's where we'll begin our week-long cycling trip to Missoula, Montana."

He inserts himself into the opened window, his trained gaze falling on each of the seven female passengers. He seems to hesitate a little, as seven women, all of whom are probably older than his mother, gaze back at him.

He takes in all those Mom-like faces, "Is this ... is this for a cause or something?"

Irene's voice carries to the very back of the van. "No. Well ..." She begins to laugh. She is, after all, a woman only recently released from her elementary-school teaching job. She laughs harder, "A cause? Well, maybe our mental health!"

His voice can no longer be heard as the crazy-old ladies snort and cheer from their seats in the van. He hears someone yell, "Yeah, that's it, our mental health!"

He waves them through.

These women aren't cycling for a cause. They're simply embarking on their 23rd annual bicycle trip.

These tours began with three women in 1988. Over the years it evolved to become a core group of 10, though the numbers varied each year depending on who could make it.

They call themselves the Hell-On-Wheels tour, because when they started back in their 20s, they believed they were

raising a little hell.

On that first trip, they had also discovered that nine days of cycling over the crazy terrain of British Columbia's Gulf Islands was, quite simply, hellish. Of course, it might have helped if they had ever done any cycling before. Even just a little.

But for those reasons, the moniker stuck. Hell On Wheels.

But why cycle Montana?

There were a few reasons. On the previous year's trip, they had cycled the Canadian Rockies from Jasper to Banff. The hostels had been a fun alternative and they wanted to continue down that Rocky Mountain spine. They pulled out a large map of Southern British Columbia and Montana and traced a route south.

It was soon obvious that once over the border, there were no more hostels and there were large distances between each town. This would mean camping.

The group owned tons of camping gear, but most of them had passed the half-century mark and were no longer as keen about rolling up a sleeping bag and a Therm-a-Rest each morning. Plus, motels held the allure of hot showers and quasi-decent beds.

The group started looking for secondary roads, and ones where there might be a possibility of a motel or two.

It was determined that by driving to



Lucky mascot. A "stupid" copilot in lamb's clothing (with piercings).

Bonnars Ferry, Idaho, and cycling to Troy, Montana, they could travel on the secondary highway to Missoula. There seemed to be enough towns dotting the route. They would take turns driving the SAG-wagon combo of the big rental SUV and U-Haul, and hope like hell that they'd never have to back the thing up.

There was some hesitation about going to Montana. These women (and perhaps it's now time to admit that I am one of them) were in various stages of dangerous hormonal flux.

Being in the throes of perimenopause myself, I will grant you that this is a particularly special time of life.

Our collective concerns were various. Would the good citizens of Montana take offense to our raging hot flashes? How would these people, who were seriously in favor of the quite un-Canadian right to bear arms, take to the loud and unladylike snorkage? Would we be annoying enough that they'd shoot us?

And was it even legal to constantly ingest ibuprofen chased with thin American beer?

The list of concerns was long and potentially dangerous.

Suddenly, another reason to travel to Montana displaced all those piffling concerns.

Paparazzi.

I had written to Mike Deme, the editor of *Adventure Cyclist* and told him we were heading to his part of the world. Perhaps he'd be interested in a story about our group cycling in Montana?

He wrote back, "Sure. We'll call it the Return of the Stupids[ital]."

He was not being rude. Not especially.

The first story I'd done for Mr. Deme had been about our group on the eve of our 20th anniversary. In that article, I'd explained that we affectionately referred to ourselves as 'the Stupids' because, well there was a story involved, but the upshot was that when we got together our behavior was probably more age appropriate to tweens than fully-grown women.

NATHAN TAYLOR



This, in spite of the fact that this year's group of seven had a combined total of 196 years of marriage and 15 kids. We were women who were not only coping with aging, dying parents, kids who weren't quite launched, and husbands having their own mid-life crises, but were weathering hot flashes, insomnia, and heart palpitations at the same time.

Was it any wonder we acted stupid when we were released from our usual routines?

But suddenly, we were not only going on a great new cycling trip, but we were to be photographed by this magazine somewhere between Plains and Dixon. Cameras would be monitoring our every move ... well, at least one camera for maybe an hour or so.

We hoped the photographer, Tom Robertson, would smear a little Vaseline on the lens, blurring the increasingly startling lines of reality. Then again, it didn't matter what he did, because we were going to be stars! After 23 years of making as much noise as womanly possible, we were about to be noticed.

But first, we actually had to do some cycling. The photo shoot wouldn't happen until the later part of the trip.

It was almost lunch by the time we pedaled out of Idaho and across the Montana border. The day was sizzling hot. Surely, we could get some cold drinks at the Stateline House bar near Troy to go with our packed lunches?

Admittedly, our bikes looked a little scrawny next to the bad-ass Harleys lined up in the blazing noon-day sun of the parking lot. But we opened the creaky door anyway, entering the dim saloon light and the cool blue smell of pool-table chalk and stale beer.

Perhaps we'd blend in?

All the men with multiple tattoos and

the women in tight muscle shirts stopped and stared as we entered.

Apparently the blending thing wasn't working. Clearly, it was hard to look like a bar-hanging local whilst wearing Lycra shorts.

It didn't matter. We were soon laughing with the bartender and the friendly patrons, even though we risked insulting them by declining their generous offers of Jell-O shots.

We risked further offense when we turned down the chance to participate in the bar's triathlon; a staggering endurance

test of shuffleboard, darts, and horseshoes.

All the events were bound to be enhanced with the aforementioned booze-infused gelatin. Some of the patrons had already consumed a fair number of those wiggly shots with their beer chasers.

They shared the news that the Fourth of July party was to be held at the Home Bar in Troy. We cheered along with our new friends. Before we could leave, the owner stopped us, "Please step outside. I want a photo of all of you with your bikes for the Stateline House bar Facebook page."

Paparazzi-fever was building.

Most importantly, we had a Fourth of July party plan.

It was still cooking hot and getting more interesting with every mile we headed south on Highway 2. None of us had ever seen so many Harley-riding guys and gals. Regular intervals of hog-riding bikers roared north. Most of the men had handlebar mustaches or long grey braids. The women's hair matched the buttercups and the endless fields of mustard-colored flowers.

The bikers gave us either a low-five, high-five, peace-sign, or wave as they blasted by. Nary a helmet in sight, they were born to be wild, riding hard and



Ride the white line. Four of the Hell-on-Wheels gang hug the shoulder along Montana's Clark Fork River on Highway 200.

The journey is the objective.

Not the end.

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It was all going so well ...

The pick-up truck slowed beside Debbie. As she described to us later, “the passenger window was open and I could see an arm and a gun. He shot the cap gun and then they took off.”

Aside from that idiot trying to scare Debbie to death, we found that people in Montana were friendly to a fault.

Admittedly, later that day, we gave a very wide berth to a truck, the entire windshield of which was wrapped with a large decal that read, ‘Hippie Hater.’ Probably, we thought, not a good time to discuss our Canadian socialized health care system.

That night, the Home Bar was packed for the big party. We walked through the bar past a sweaty man laying face-down on a long table, a tattoo artist hunched over his inky back.

There was a sea of worn leather, faded jeans, and cowboy boots out on the back deck, rocking it to the Copper Mountain Band. Some of our biker friends from the Stateline House bar had made the trek. Surprisingly, they were still upright.

I left the other Stupids dancing near the stage and went back to the inner bar to watch the tattooing operations. The room was hot after the cool of the deck, the room close with the smell of anxious sweat, booze, and blood.

A young woman watched and waited in line. She held a big binder open to the design she had picked, a word in fluid Arabic script.

I introduced myself and asked, “What does that mean?”

“I’m just back from two years in Iraq,”

All the men with multiple tattoos and the women in tight muscle shirts stopped and stared as we entered.

she said, “and this is the Arabic word for ‘Infidel.’ I’m just not certain if I’m getting it across my back or on my arm.”

Another young woman showed me her latest piercings; multiple cubic zirconian studs embedded into the centre of her sternum like sparkling mini-buttons. “It’s sort of like when you get your ears pierced ... the stud just gets punched through and hooks into the cartilage, except you never take these ones out ... aren’t they beautiful?”



Tight formation. Colleen takes the lead position as the women cross the Clark Fork River.

Late that night, we stumbled back to our cabins, each Stupid proudly wearing a very-sweaty Copper Mountain Band muscle shirt.

Sometime in the the night, the heat broke and the air went wild with thunder, lightning, and rain. We slept drunk with the smug knowledge (and quite a few beers) that there was more than a tent between us and the rain.

The day’s ride from Troy to Noxon was white-hot. No interesting bars, no Jell-O shots, and though no one busted any caps, we did see a garage sale with guns on offer.

We were all thinking about those garage-sale goods when Debbie and Irene disappeared down a dirt driveway past

to be found on any menu. Unless of course you counted tater tots, Jo Jos, cheddar munchers, and spirals — amazingly greasy (and delicious) ways of frying potatoes.

None of us could recall a trip where we met so many people on a first-name basis. Dolores from the Noxon Motel, Andy at Sneakers Saloon, Chris from the Motherlode Saloon and Restaurant, and Rick from the Stateline House bar.

The days of cycling rolled on. Every day we met more angels-in-disguise as people took time to talk to us or help us with everything from bent derailleurs to backing up that big old U-Haul.

Finally, it was time for the photo shoot. We were to meet Mike Deme and the photographer at a place called Perma. Perma, Montana, it turned out, was more of a dot on a map than much of an actual place in the world.

But we found the little dusty store that declared itself as Perma, and met the owner, Harold, whose friend, a former logger, owned the ice cream store down the street. Harold pointed to his friend, who was coming for his daily cup of coffee on the way to his ice cream store. His red shirt declared: “Wait. Let me drop everything so I can solve your problem.”

Mike Deme and Tom Robertson pulled in, with Viola showing up a little later. She unloaded her bike from the U-Haul and joined us as we listened to the instructions for the big shoot.

And then, much to the amusement of

the work crew, we rode across the nearby bridge. Then we turned around and did it again. Here. Then there. There. Then here. All the while, Tom zoomed ahead and around, his camera clicking steadily.

We rode one last time past the cheering work crew and waved goodbye to Mike and Tom, pushing against a hot headwind as we made for Dixon, coming to an abrupt stop at The Bison Inn where the sign promised Fry Bread. We bought stacks of the fragrant dough while the server delivered pitcher after pitcher of ice water.

Stuffed, we left the Bison Inn and carried on toward Arlee. Viola drove to meet us, waving us down. “There’s a massive thunderstorm up ahead,” she said, “you’re heading right into it. I can load you all up now if you want.”

We talked it over. But we’re not called the Stupids for nothing. We decided to keep riding. A few miles down the road, Deb, Irene, Judy, and I stopped as some fat drops sizzled on the asphalt. We waited for Susan and Karen to catch up as the air boiled and banged up ahead.

A big truck pulled up with Karen and Susan inside. Don, from the Salish & Kootenai Tribal Police, had seen them working on a flattened tire, flashed them his badge, and was driving them the last 10 miles to Arlee for repairs.

The rest of us kept riding, somehow missing every cloud burst, evidenced by sections of rain-slick pavement.

The thunderstorm blew itself out, leaving us to take in a freshly-scrubbed Western landscape of blue hills and more of those endless yellow-flowered fields and long fences; the kind of view that brought thoughts of selling everything, buying a horse, and riding the range.

And then, just like that, our trip was almost over. It is our last morning to ride. We’re at the Russian Olive B & B outside of Arlee. It’s early. The house is still asleep. I am alone on the sofa, looking out the window at a massive honey locust tree. A soft breeze, cool as a cotton sheet, slides in through the window.

Deb is sitting to the right of that tree. She is alone in the early sun. Her tipped-back head and posture suggest worship; her coffee cup cradled in both hands like a pagan communion.

I imagine I know what each of my friends will do as she rouses herself to start the day.

Judy will go through her yoga routine, demonstrating the self-discipline that

carried her through 3,000 kilometres of cycling with her husband in New Zealand earlier in the year.

Viola will likely emerge next. She will quietly rummage in the cooler for the canned milk she prefers for her coffee, and then her needles will start clicking as she casts on and off, working on her next creation.

Karen might chat a little about her plans for the exercise classes she teaches back home or maybe she’ll just flip through a magazine, commenting on outfits and reading out bits of silly celebrity gossip.

Irene will come out, dressed and ready, perhaps she’ll edit some of her photos or walk out to take a few more.

Susan will remind us not to rush the morning. She will likely sit with her coffee, jotting notes in her diary or maybe just taking in the view. Every now and then, she will sigh, content.

And me? I’ll be writing in my journal, trying to capture these last moments of my

23rd trip of traveling with these strong and funny women, these friends that I love.

I write as fast as I can, hoping that my notes will help me tuck these memories somewhere safe, so I can pull them out like magical Polaroids, turning them over and over, gifts that I can hand to my future self.

They will be the presents I open on those days when life doesn’t feel like a great ride with your best friends.

And that’s when I realize. Maybe we’ve been riding for a cause all along. Aren’t friendships, laughter, and exercise considered to be the keys to good mental health?

My tired body is quite okay with this being the last day of riding. But my heart? Not so much. **AC**

Colleen Friesen spends way too much time in airports. She travels as much as possible but hates to leave her home in British Columbia. She is also an award-winning member of the Travel Media Association of Canada. You can follow her at colleenfriesen.com/blog.



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