

From [The Great North American Sticky Bun Hunt](#)

By [Leo Woodland](#)

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August 29: Rampart Creek to Lake Louise, Alberta



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Bound for Patagonia: the youngest on wheels is six.

AN IMPRESSIVE MOMENT this morning. An hour of chilly, misty and empty road from the charm of Rampart Creek brought us to Saskatchewan River Crossing. It sounds as romantic as a candlelit dinner. The very name suggests a trading post with furs on wooden beams, a ferry with smoke rising from a pot-bellied chimney, horses hitched to a rail. There should be a sudden commotion and women should haul their children indoors as outlaws arrived on sweating ponies, fleeing a chasing posse.

In fact, it is no better than a service station on any autobahn, freeway or motorway in the world. It has a grocery store you just know will sell 16 flavours of Pringles but little else, and it has a large restaurant with a serve-yourself breakfast that has long lost the heat that the chef cooked into it. None of that, however, stopped us greeting it like a long-lost cousin and we had several helpings of breakfast and as many refills of coffee as our conscience would allow. We watched through the window as Swiss Rebecca and her boyfriend rode slowly by. And then a few moments later came another couple on bikes, younger this time, a small boy flying the largest French flag I have ever seen on a bike outside the world championships.

In moments their numbers grew until they became a family of six, the youngest travelling in a trailer behind his father. We let them settle into their coffees and then went to pester them. Who were they? Where were they going? Where had they been?

The mother, Marie-Claude, was a slim woman dressed in a waterproof jacket, her face pinched from the effort and the cold. She made us gasp when she said they were taking 20 months to reach the southern tip of South America.



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"We arrived in Halifax," she said, speaking of their journey from Grenoble, below the Alps, "and then we rode to Toronto before we caught the train to Jasper."

The youngest child was four and he rode in a covered trailer behind his father, Jean-Roch, who also supervised the next youngest, the six-year-old boy with the flag. The others were nine and 13. Marie-Claude pulled a trailer with most of their baggage and there was more, no doubt, beneath the sleeping infant.



There was an air of gritty detachment to them that we couldn't quite grasp. They were friendly but they did no more than answer our questions dutifully.

"Perhaps they've been asked everything so many times," Steph suggested, remembering how we had from time to time had to explain what we were doing, how many tyres we'd used. Personally, I thought the clue lay in the balaclava that Jean-Roch was wearing. To travel at the speed of a six-year-old, and to ride the short distances that he could cover, would mean never being properly warm on the bike and having to spend many cold hours on a campsite after it. They had camped across the road from where the hostel and we chose the hostel because it was close to freezing. If they had come to Jasper in August, not unreasonably expecting sunshine and a happy start to their *périple*, then they had every right to be disgruntled.

They did their research before they set off, naturally. They are not the first family to take that route. We know of another who rode much the way round the world, starting with South America, giving their children lessons with books sent out by their school. By the time they returned home, they were not only ahead of their classmates but they had seen the world and, through playing with others as they went, they'd learned the basics of half a dozen languages.

Nevertheless...

The Icefields Parkway is not flat. It is not a gruelling challenge, not at any rate if you have ridden a bike much before, but to get over Sunwapta pass as an adult with a child and luggage behind you, or the luggage of four people behind you, or simply as a six-year-old with no luggage at all, is hard to imagine before you have done it. Ahead of them now, in this service station of a cafe, lay Howes pass - an elongated hill but a lung-churner nevertheless - and then Bows pass, another excursion beyond 2,000 metres.

We bade them *bon voyage* and promised to send on the photos we had taken. You can follow their progress at www.cyclaubertein.com.



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Bow's pass is higher than Sunwapta but it seems lower because there are no ice fields for dramatic effect. Once more we gasped in the thin air. Once more we sweated even though the temperature was falling. It began snowing at the summit. Not big fluffy flakes but little, mean bullets of snow of not the least romantic value. We parked the bikes and walked to the very summit of the mountain on a conveniently laid path and looked down on the sparkling turquoise of



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Peytoe lake: it started to snow as we gazed at it. We rode down the mountain in grim weather.

Peytoe lake (pronounced Pee-toe, incidentally, after a colourful local of days passed). We sat in the snow with our sandwiches, then came to our senses. We still had a way to go and being on a mountain even in light snow is not what the textbooks recommend.

Yesterday we dropped from Sunwapta into the top of a cloud, rode straight through it in thick, miserable drizzle, then out the bottom. When we told the story later, someone remarked that in a car you'd do no more than turn on the lights and the windscreen wipers. It wouldn't occur that you were passing through a cloud. On a bike, on the other hand, it is face-tighteningly obvious.

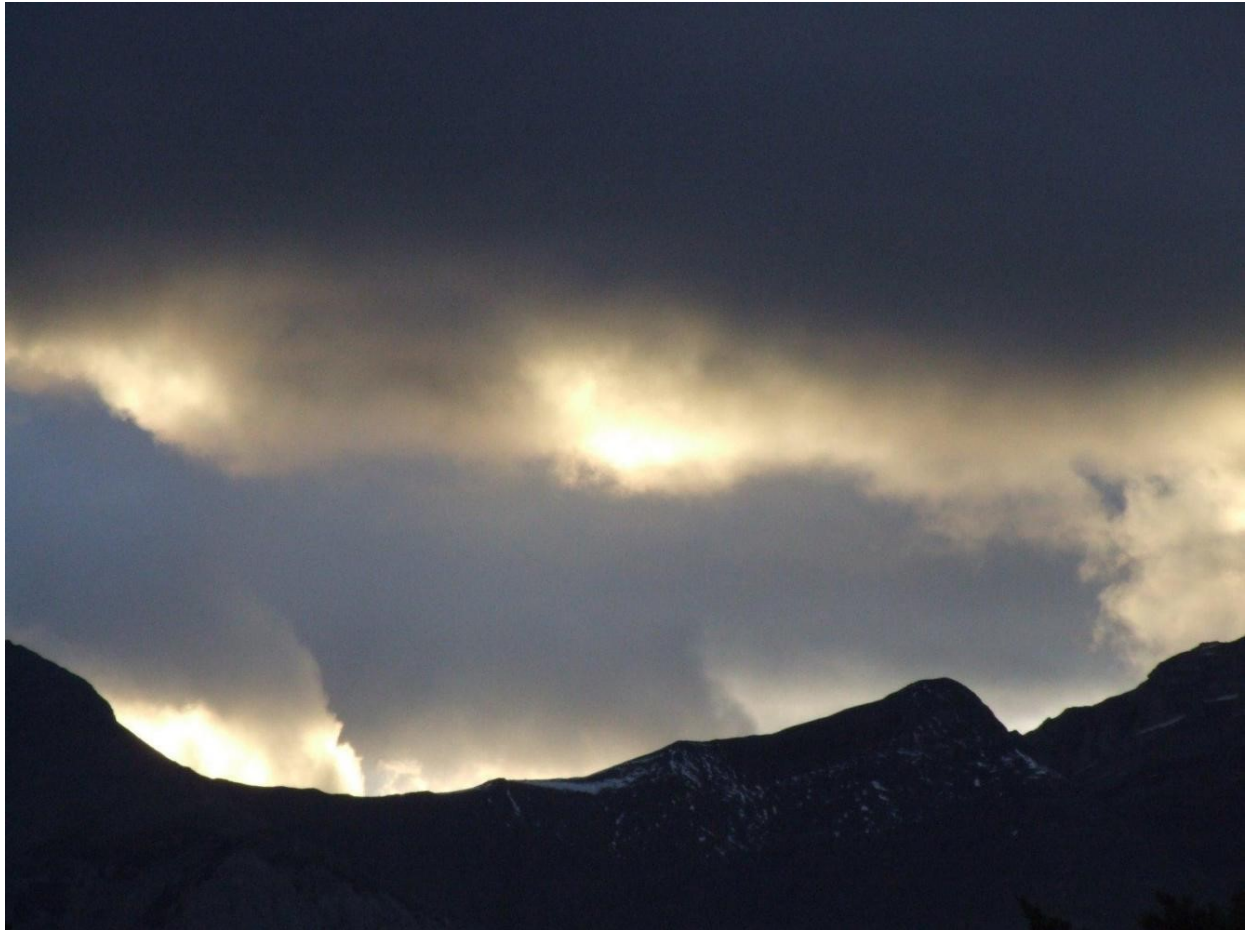
Today we did the same thing but, whereas Sunwapta had the grace to go down pretty much as soon as it had finished going up, Bows pass bobbled along at the same height on a rolling plateau. The less it lost height, the more the cloud stayed with us. It was character-improving.

Twice on the plateau, once the rain had stopped, we were slowed by what we thought was an accident. Cars were parked haphazardly beside the road and people were running to low trees and bushes that lined its left side. A white car was parked there at an angle, as though it had hit or been hit by another vehicle which had subsequently fallen over the side. We slowed to help, only to find we had run into a bear jam, people who had seen a bear feeding beside the road and had braked and parked as fast as they could to take its picture.

Latecomers ran across our path and between other moving traffic, cameras in their hand, excited looks on their faces. When they reached the verge, they moved it seemed almost to touching distance of the bear, although in truth they were further back. They were still closer than caution advised, though, and as Steph said: "You'd never think that was a dangerous animal they were getting close to, would you? They're treating it like a dog. One unwise movement and it could become alarmed and move to the attack."

No point in running, either: for all they appear to lumber, a bear can run the speed of a horse uphill and down.

We smiled afterwards as we realised we had become blasé about the things. We have been seeing them at intervals ever since we crossed back into the USA after the loop through Cardston. When we haven't seen them, we have been very aware of them. At night we have used lockers for our food where they were available and we strung all our bags from branches of trees when they weren't. Campsite owners were taken aback sometimes when we asked where we could put our bags behind a closed door for the night, bears having



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a nose for food that would outclass Billy Bunter. "Oh, they'd say, there have been bears around in the past but they'll be no trouble if you don't leave garbage spread about." They saw our point when we reminded them we were in a tent, not an RV, that we had just a millimetre's thickness of fabric between us and the outside world.

Again today we pushed on further than our plan. Having abandoned camping after 50km because of the rain and cold, and because we reached the first hostel an hour before it opened at five, we pressed on for Lake Louise. The road finally threw itself down into a valley, down to the junction with the ill-met Trans-Canada Highway, and on into the tiny town and its enormous hostel. We arrived in fresh, cold rain and dripped like Niagara drips.

The harder we try to lose time, the more we gain it. Fifty kilometres a day has turned into 90 a day. We planned just one day's rest here. Now we will have two and set off on the third. The forecast is still for way under the seasonal average and snow hasn't been ruled out overnight. I think staying indoors will be the right plan, don't you?

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