

A DREAM COME TRUE

Introduction

Jean Hervé and I had talked about it for years while growing up in France: we wanted to ride our bikes across the United States. At the time, neither of us had ever been to the U.S. and we both knew that it would be almost impossible to accomplish such a dream. When my parents and I moved to Texas in 1983 and a year later to Ecuador, South America, the dream of a long cross-country trip was tucked away as a childhood fantasy. After graduating from high school in Ecuador and moving to Chicago to attend Moody Bible Institute, I went to France to visit my family and friends during the summer. During my stay, Jean Hervé and I began to dream once again about a bike trip; so we began to make plans for a month-long expedition in 1991. I returned to Chicago to research a possible itinerary by looking at books, magazines, and maps. I knew that we would be able to travel between 1000 and 1500 miles during the five weeks we would have available for the trip. A few weeks later, I had chosen an itinerary which would take us from Kalispell, Montana to Portland, Oregon. We would travel almost 1000 miles in the Rocky Mountains and another 300 to 500 miles along the Pacific coasts of Washington and Oregon.

To prepare for our adventure, we purchased bicycles, tools, spare parts, and camping equipment; we also trained for three months by riding twenty to thirty miles a day. July came very quickly and Jean Hervé arrived in the U.S. for the final days of preparation. A few days later, we found ourselves in an airplane headed towards Kalispell. After a day there to assemble the bikes and to purchase last minute items, we were on our way toward Portland, not knowing what to expect or what adventures awaited us. We were so excited we could hardly stand it!

Our trip to Portland was a complete success! We would either camp by rivers and lakes or we would ask farmers if we could stay on their land for the night. It was not unusual to be offered dinner or breakfast. Our average riding distance was fifty-five miles per day, well beyond the forty-three miles we had planned to ride. We enjoyed our ride across the Rocky Mountains, meeting wonderful people and taking in all of God's beautiful creation that surrounded us day after day. Our itinerary took us through western Montana, a small portion of Idaho, a few days in British Columbia Canada, the north and west sides of Washington, and a final week along the Oregon coast. By the time we reached Portland, we had been on the road twenty-five days and still had ten days to spare. So to make good use of our time, we extended the itinerary to the central part of Oregon and back once again to Portland.

We arrived in Portland excited that we had accomplished our goal and grateful that our trip had been so wonderful. Yet we were sad that it was over. We had saved money, trained hard, and constantly dreamed about the trip for the two previous years; now it was all over. So we then began talking about another bicycle trip, but this time a longer and more challenging one. We considered a two month trip around Europe or another adventure through North America and even Alaska. But after Jean Hervé returned to

France and I moved to Jackson, TN, the dream of a second trip seemed to fade. I began attending Union University as a Computer Science student and was hired by the school two years later. I realized that by accepting the job it would be difficult for me to ever take an entire summer off from work.

However, the following year I began talking to my boss about the possibility of taking a summer off for a bicycle trip. I was amazed by his support and encouragement to pursue this dream. So I called Jean Hervé, who was working in England at the time, to find out if he was still interested; he told me to count him in. I also went to visit a friend in east Tennessee named Eric Zimmerman. He had shown interest in the first bike trip but had not been able to go. I knew that he would make every effort to join us for this second trip. Even though he too was interested, he was unable to commit himself at the time so he asked me to keep him informed in case his circumstances changed.

Before we could prepare for the trip, we had to decide once again on an itinerary. Jean Hervé told me he would go along with my recommendation since I lived in the U.S. and was better able to research the possibilities. Looking at several options in North America, I decided on a route which would take us from Denver, Colorado to Anchorage, Alaska. The 3800-mile distance seemed reasonable for a three-month trip and the scenery we would travel through would be spectacular for much of the way. The idea of riding to Alaska seemed both thrilling and challenging. We would travel long distances apart from any civilization and so we would have to pack more food and supplies than we had on the previous trip.

In January of 1996, Jean Hervé and I agreed that the trip was a definite go. Even if Eric could not join us, the two of us were onboard. I received approval from Union University for a three-month leave of absence thanks to the support of many administrators, my boss, and other colleagues. In early March, Eric called me and said: "Oliver, we are going to have the most awesome time on this trip! I am able to come!" The three of us were so excited that our dream trip to Alaska was only a few months away. During those months, we saved money, trained, and purchased all the equipment necessary for such an expedition. From spare parts to emergency food reserves, we had everything worked out and were ready for the adventure of a lifetime!

"We'll Never Get Out of Colorado!"

Jean Hervé, Eric and I met in Denver on May 28, 1996. We had much to talk about, bikes to unpack and assemble, equipment to check out and pack, and a lot of excitement to try to contain. We found an empty corner at the airport where we assembled our bikes and slept for a few hours. We awoke early the next morning to finish our preparations and then we hit the road. As we were leaving the airport, listening to the planes landing and taking off behind us, I could only wonder how our trip was going to turn out. I was certain that the trip would be a life-style change as well as an incredible adventure, but I wondered if we would actually make it to Anchorage, a destination almost 4000 miles

away. Would we all get along for three months? Would we avoid accidents and illness? I had to trust that the God who had opened so many doors to make this trip possible would also protect and grant us a successful journey.

On that first day of riding, we had not ridden thirty miles until we began to feel very tired. We were starting the ascent of the first mountain range west of Denver. I knew that I had not trained as much as I should have because of the busyness of the semester leading up to the trip. I had planned to consider the first week of the journey as training, knowing that I would get tired. And so there I was exhausted and quickly out of breath—a condition that would last almost four days. During those first few days, we rode and camped at altitudes between 9,000 and 10,000 feet, which only made things more difficult for all of us. But the bike trip had finally begun and being tired was just a part of it! We had chosen a challenging itinerary and a tiring mode of transportation – one that would allow us to go fast enough to reach Alaska in three months but slow enough to enjoy every mile of the way!

On our second day, after riding only forty-three miles, we stopped in a wooded area to set up camp. The wind was picking up strength as we were trying to cook dinner and a paper bag flew away. Jean Hervé ran after the bag only to trip on a rock and sprang his ankle. He was in intense pain and we all knew that the entire trip was in jeopardy. He went in his tent to get some sleep as we prayed that his ankle would not force us to cancel the trip we had so long been dreaming of. By morning, his ankle was very swollen but he decided to try riding to see what would happen. He rode off on his bike as Eric and I packed up. We caught up with him a few miles later and noticed that he was struggling with every pedal stroke, but he was strong and kept trying very hard to keep going. He was determined to do what he could to continue. After a couple of hard days he was feeling much better and the ankle bothered him less and less. It had been a close call but God had allowed us to continue and we were very grateful for that. A slightly worse sprain would have meant the end of the trip for at least one of us.

Our first destination was Rocky Mountains National Park, only 120 miles from Denver. We arrived at the entrance of the park on our third day and stopped at the first campground inside the park to rest and get ready for the next day's 6,000-foot ascent and twenty-mile uphill ride to the Trail Ridge pass. We got up at five the next morning to allow for a full day of riding. The beautiful mountains all around us caused us to stop every few minutes for pictures. Low scattered clouds, waterfalls, rivers, and snow-covered mountains made that morning even more spectacular. While Eric stayed behind to take more pictures, Jean Hervé and I continued toward the pass knowing that Eric would have no trouble catching up to us later. We rode uphill for three hours until a ranger car pulled up beside us to inform us that the road was being closed at the pass because of a snow storm on the other side of the range. We had to turn around and either wait the storm out or find an alternate route. The way back down to the valley was again very beautiful. We could see no sign of a snow storm, but could only trust the rangers that it was indeed a risk for us to keep going. We regrouped with Eric on the way down and went to the nearby town of Estes Park to get out the maps and make a decision as to what to do. We decided to head back toward the Denver valley in order to take an

alternate route north of Rocky Mountains National Park.

Later that evening we were exhausted as we looked for a place to camp. It had been a very long day! But to our despair, both sides of the road were fenced off for miles, making it impossible for us to find a suitable place to spend the night. We rode until seven o'clock that evening, desperately looking for anything which might accommodate two tents. We finally found a road sign which read "Open Range," which we interpreted as land that was open for all to use. It was a beautiful area in a lush valley with a great view of the surrounding mountains. After setting up the tents and cooking dinner, a car traveled off the road and headed toward our location. Inside, a man and a woman screamed at us, "Get off our land! What do you think this is—open land?" We explained to them that we were very sorry and had not realized that the land was private. But our attempts to calm them down were futile as they told us we needed to pack up and leave. We found out that evening that the "Open Range" sign simply meant that cattle were free to move about in the area. We had learned the hard way. Though it was dusk, we had no choice but to move on to another location. Of the thousands of people we were to meet on the trip, those were the only ones with whom we had a bad experience. We packed up quickly and rode in the dark for an hour until we found a rest area near a river. We camped there under the stars and began to wonder if we were ever going to get out of Colorado. During the first four days of our trip we had experienced a sprained ankle, a closed road, and a local deportation! We fell asleep with a bit of anxiety and anticipation over the adventures that awaited us.

Though we had ridden up our fair share of hills during the first few days, we could not have anticipated the amount of uphill climbs which would be required of us the next day. We started off early again, realizing that the forty-four miles of steep roads we had spotted on the map would undoubtedly be a day-long challenge. The first ten miles were fine as we followed a river on a low-grade hill. We thought it would be no trouble to accomplish the same thing four more times until we would reach the pass. But the difficulty of the climb increased and we began to slow down as the day progressed. By the time we had ridden thirty miles, we were stopping every 100 feet to rest and catch our breath. I was personally exhausted, reaching deep inside for the strength needed for every pedal stroke. Finally we made it to the pass and to the KOA campground we had planned to reach that day. By the next morning, Colorado had been conquered!

Windy Wyoming

Compared to the snow-covered mountains of Colorado, Wyoming was flat as we entered the state from the southeast corner. For three days we battled strong head winds, which have a way of being very discouraging. While a hill is an obvious challenge to conquer, winds make easy terrain deceptively difficult. Given the choice, I would rather ride a long uphill than a flat road with head winds.

As we approached the northwestern area of the state, mountains surrounded us once again

with beautiful scenery. The winds finally calmed down resulting in an increase in our daily riding average to sixty miles. Before reaching the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone, we stopped one day in Lander, a small town which left a big impression on us. A free campground in the town park became our home for the night as we took the rest of the day to visit Lander. One man told us that Lander had been chosen as one of the top five towns in America to live in. We could believe it. Everyone was so friendly and the town was clean and well maintained. The park was full of parents playing with their kids and the town seemed to be alive and safe.

The following day we rode thirty-five miles uphill in severe thunderstorms. As we approached the Teton mountain range, a clearing in the clouds allowed us to see the mountains in a spectacular sunset light. But the clouds quickly covered the mountains as we rode two more hours in hail and rain toward our destination for the day, another KOA campground. We were overdue for laundry and hot showers, but an unexpected Jacuzzi altered our plans. We spent the entire evening enjoying ice cream and watching the Teton Mountains. By lunch the next day we had entered the Grand Teton National Park. We rode out of our way for a few hours to get closer to the mountains and took many pictures of the incredible scenery. That night we stayed at a campground and met a couple from Germany with whom we became friends. We later saw them again in Yellowstone National Park and again had a wonderful time sharing and laughing with them. They gave us many ideas and warnings from their own trip to Alaska through Canada a few years earlier. We learned to take the necessary precautions when dealing with bears in the wilderness, especially since adventure cyclists like us are affectionately referred to as “meals on wheels.”

We spent the next five days in the Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks enjoying the beautiful mountains and wildlife. Geysers, waterfalls, beautiful lush valleys, and burnt forests best describe our memories of Yellowstone. The 1986 fire in Yellowstone had taken its toll on the park but much beauty remained for us to admire. Before reaching our campsite on our last day in the park, a herd of buffaloes took over the road and delayed traffic for over an hour. Even after we reached our campsite, buffaloes roamed around our tents looking for food.

During our last day in Yellowstone we rode to Old Faithful and had a buffet breakfast in the Old Faithful Inn. Each time we got a chance we stopped at buffet restaurants. There was no way that any of those restaurants made money off of us. We joked that by the time other bicyclists reached those restaurants a sign would read, “Please, no cyclists.” On our way out of Yellowstone we spent a few hours in the town of West Yellowstone, where we inquired about the Imax Theater. Talking with whom we thought was the gardener, we asked what was playing. The man told us about the film and then asked us about our trip. He was so excited to meet cyclists on their way to Alaska that he admitted to being the owner of the theater and gave us free tickets to the spectacular Yellowstone feature film!

The Comforts of Montana

We entered the state of Montana excited to have reached our third state. We had a short two-day ride to Bozeman where we spent a day with one of Eric's friends named Keri. Not only did we take a day off but we enjoyed the luxuries of beds, showers, movies, and home-cooked meals. Our time in Bozeman was also a time to reorganize and rearrange our gear as well as to purchase a few items that we needed.

After this much needed break we began to ride toward Missoula where we would stop to visit a friend whom Eric and I knew from Moody Bible Institute. We could tell it would take three days to ride to Missoula, so we planned to ride as much as we could the first day in order to have less to ride the remaining two days. On that first day we reached the first milestone of the trip: 1000 miles! We also broke our riding record for a single day by riding 104 miles. It was late and starting to rain when we reached Helena that evening, so we began to look for a place to camp. After stopping at the local Wendy's and cleaning out their buffet (literally!), I asked someone if we could set up our tents in their yard. The people there agreed and later invited us in for a drink and for breakfast the next morning. Our new friends even gave us money to enjoy a steak dinner in the next town. We were amazed that people whom we did not know the day before not only agreed to let strangers stay on their land, they even took such good care of us!

We reached Missoula on schedule after two days of rain and cold weather. A few miles before reaching our friend's house, while riding in the rain, I rode into a pothole in the street which I had not seen because it was filled with water. I almost lost my balance but caught myself before falling. The front wheel of my bike was destroyed and had to be replaced. The fact that the small incident happened a mile from a bike shop was amazing considering the fact that the average distance between bike shops for the entire trip was over 400 miles! We arrived later that evening at the house where we were treated like royalty for two days by our friends.

We left Missoula excited that we would be in Glacier National Park two days later. Jean Hervé and I had ridden through the park five years earlier and had a wonderful memory of the spectacular mountains, the Going-to-the-Sun Road, and Logan Pass. Our only concern was that the road inside the park had not yet opened for the season because of a prolonged winter. Amazingly the road was opened the day we arrived, but it was too late for us to ride to the top that late in the day. We camped at the bottom of the fifteen-mile steep hill, ready to conquer the pass the next morning. I left ahead of Jean Hervé and Eric the next morning and rode five miles only to find the road closed by a gate. I waited at the gate while Eric and Jean Hervé caught up with me. We fixed some hot chocolate to keep warm and kill time as we waited to see if the road would be opened later that morning. An hour later a park ranger came by to open the gate and told us to be careful since he had just seen a grizzly bear a few miles ahead on the road. Jean Hervé felt good that morning and wanted to take off to the top as fast as he could. I tried to keep up with him for a few minutes but slowed down to a slower pace ahead of Eric who was behind me taking pictures. We all climbed at our own pace for the next three hours until I caught up with Jean Hervé at the pass. We were thrilled to have made it and decided to

wait for Eric. We waited a few minutes, but the cold weather convinced us to ride down to a lower altitude and wait for Eric at our designated meeting point at the East Visitor Center. Once there, we waited for Eric several hours but there was no sign of him. We began to wonder if something had happened to him. On our way down, we had seen gates closing along the road and several emergency vehicles heading up the mountain. I called 911 to see if they knew anything about what was going on at the pass. I was told that there had been an accident and that there was a cyclist at the pass, but that he was fine. We waited the rest of day, wondering what was going on. It was only towards the evening that Eric finally arrived. He had been stuck at the pass for several hours due to a rock slide. A man in a car had been killed by a boulder the size of a van and it had been impossible for Eric to cross the area. Emergency workers helped him to carry his bike across the boulders as small rocks were still coming down. The amazing part of all this was that I was only 10 minutes ahead of Eric going up to the pass and the incident occurred sometime between the two of us. Eric later recalled having been delayed ten minutes changing the batteries in his camera, something which normally took no time at all. “The batteries simply would not go in,” he explained. “I could not understand why, because I have replaced those batteries many times before without any trouble.” We all believe that God protected us that day. If Eric had arrived at the rock slide area ten minutes earlier, he could very well have been where that unfortunate car driver was at the time of the accident. Thank you God for your protection—once again!

Mosquitoes and Bears

(Alberta and British Colombia)

We had been on the road four weeks by the time we entered Canada. This was a major milestone and we had plans to stay in Canada six weeks before reaching Alaska. We entered Canada under heavy rain and very cold weather. We took refuge our first evening at a government campground. After taking a nap in our wet tents, Jean Hervé got up to explore the area. He found what he thought was a little house with no one in it and a wooden stove. He called Eric and me to come check it out. Sure enough, it looked as though we could go in there to dry our tents and ourselves for the night. Since the shelter was in the middle of the campground, we decided to move in for the night. We later met others who also came to take refuge in the house. We soon found out that all government campgrounds in Canada have these cooking shelters! We spent the evening with a couple from England that was on a two-year backpacking trip across the Rockies.

After two days in Canada we had reached the entrance of Banff National Park. The mountains surrounded us and we were amazed at their beauty. We rode to the town of Banff inside the park where we spent a day to enjoy the town and view a movie. The next day we rode a short distance to Lake Louise, a beautiful lake known for its spectacular blue-green color. We took a chairlift to the top of a mountain and enjoyed a wonderful buffet meal with a beautiful view of the valley below us. We headed toward Jasper National Park the next morning. We had planned on a normal riding day but the campground where we had planned to stay was closed, forcing us to ride thirty more

miles to the next campground. After two passes and ninety-eight miles that day, we arrived late in the evening and slept ten hours straight! We normally did not stay in campgrounds, but it is illegal in all National Parks in the U.S. and Canada to camp anywhere other than at a campground.

Our ride through Banff and Jasper was spectacular. The Icefield Highway, which is over 200 miles long and travels through the length of both parks, was perfect for cycling due to its wide shoulders. The weather was very nice and we were enjoying days of sunshine with only an occasional afternoon thundershower. We left the parks knowing that our trip would change for the next few weeks as we entered the most isolated area our itinerary would take us through. We were in Prince George two days later where we had planned to spend a full day in order to plan out the food and supplies we would need for the ride on the long and desolate Cassiar Highway.

It took us a while to get out of Prince George, but by four o'clock the next afternoon, we were on the road again. We rode thirty miles to a power line access road where we decided to spend the night. For the first time since we had started our bike trip, mosquitoes invaded our site and made life very difficult. We managed to cook dinner as best we could and quickly made preparations to go inside the tents and leave the millions of mosquitoes surrounding us outside. Since Jean Hervé was our cook, it was the responsibility of Eric and me to take care of putting up all our food in trees to avoid a steal from bears. We found an adequate branch, but during our first attempt at hanging the food the rope decided to break. We got out another rope and tried it again, but this time the branch broke. At this point, mosquitoes were swarming around our faces and it was difficult to do the simplest of tasks. We finally found another branch and were successful on our third attempt. Walking back to the tent, Eric said "if a bear wants our food tonight, it will be able to get it; the food was hung too low." I agreed but we were not about to try another hang. All we cared about was getting away from the mosquitoes! While we had been hanging the food, Jean Hervé had realized that our jar of seasoned salt had been left out of the food bag. He threw it into the woods and said he would get it back the next morning.

The most important thing in dealing with food and bears is to make sure that no odor of food is on or near us while we sleep in our tents. For that reason, we ate at least 100 yards from our tents and hung the food to reduce the risk of a bear getting to our much needed food supply. Five minutes after Eric and I entered our tent we heard loud noises coming from the direction of the seasoned salt and our food. I heard Jean Hervé say from the other tent, "Something is trying to get our food." We were all very uneasy about the idea of a bear visiting our camp site. We knew that a hiker had been killed by a bear not far from our location just few weeks earlier. Jean Hervé opened his tent to look outside to find himself only a few yards from a grizzly bear. It had tried to get to our food and was now roaming around near the tents. All we could do was wait and hope the bear did not try to come inside the tents. If it did, our bear spray (which was in our hands and ready to be used) would be our last resort and hope of making it out alive. The bear eventually left and we all went to sleep. The next morning Jean Hervé woke us up by telling us to open our tent and look at the jar of seasoned salt he had just found on the ground. The bear had apparently liked the salt because the jar was destroyed. Though

our food was still hanging, claw marks were at the bottom of one of the bags. We had been very close to loosing our food. Once again, God had been with us during this incident which we now call “the Grizzly Encounter.”

We continued toward the Cassiar Highway meeting other cyclists daily and enjoying our last few days before total separation from civilization. Three days later we reached the start of the road and began our ride north. Within a few miles the scenery became even more spectacular than it had been since Banff and Jasper. Rivers and lakes were all around us and the distant mountains reminded us that we were still in the Rockies. We reached the foothills of the mountains within a day and found ourselves surrounded by total beauty. While the beauty of the road was amazing, mosquitoes seemed to make life very difficult. During breakfasts we had granola with powdered milk. We could not eat in the tents because we had to keep food smells away from it. Eating outside was also out the question because of the mosquitoes. The only solution was to eat while walking. The second we stopped walking hundreds of mosquitoes were upon us trying to get a stomach-full of our blood.

Civilization on the Cassiar was scarce. We did find a few service stations every few hundred miles. It was not unusual for us to ride a day or even two days without seeing a sign of civilization other than the road itself and a few cars. One of the highlights of the Cassiar Highway was the encounters we had with other cyclists, many of whom were on one- or two-year trips around the world. Besides crazy cyclists like us, we also encountered twenty bears as well as several moose and foxes. We left the Cassiar 500 miles later with a sense of accomplishment and relief. The road had been one of the most spectacular of our trip and we had seen it in great weather.

Going North to the Arctic Ocean (Yukon and Northwest Territories)

The end of the Cassiar Highway also meant the end of our travels through British Columbia. We entered the Yukon, known for its 17,000 bears and frequent fatal bear encounters by travelers. As we approached the city of Whitehorse (where 22,000 of the 33,000 people in the Yukon live), we were faced with a decision. We had to choose whether to take the southern or northern road to Alaska. The southern route was easier and more direct, but everyone we asked told us that the northern road—also called the Top of the World Highway—was more spectacular. Even though some of the highway was only graveled, we decided to attempt the northern route since we were ahead of schedule by about two weeks. Over the next few days we decided to change our trip itinerary even more so that we could ride our bikes to Inuvik, a town close to the shore of the Arctic Ocean. The 450-mile unpaved Dempster Highway would take us there. We were so excited about this new goal that we were even willing to forgo arriving in Anchorage by bicycle if need be. As long as we reached Inuvik, we did not mind the thought of catching a bus to Anchorage in order to catch our outgoing flight.

The day before reaching the start of the Dempster Highway, the frame on my bike broke, rendering my bike useless until it could be fixed. Fortunately, we were next to an RV park where Eric and I talked to people until we found a ride to Dawson City for the next morning. The three of us could have ridden in the RV and then continued biking from Dawson City 120 miles up the road, but we considered that cheating and would not do it unless we had to. Eric and I would get the bike welded back together and then find a ride back to meet up with Jean Hervé in order to continue riding from the place where my bike had broken. Eric and I packed my bike into the back of the RV the next morning and rode with a very nice couple. It took most of the day to find a place willing to attempt welding the soft-metal of my bike. Finally, by six in the evening, my bike was repaired and ready to go. However, we were unable to find a ride back to where Jean Hervé was waiting for us. So we spent the night in a construction site, staying warm with blankets loaned to us by a very nice lady who tried very hard to help us as much as she could. The next morning we found a ride back with another couple in a camper, and by lunch we had met back with Jean Hervé and were getting our bikes ready for the road again.

The broken frame held just fine, but we were leery of attempting the 900-mile unpaved road to and from Inuvik so far away from civilization. We changed our route once again back to Anchorage. We decided to ride to Dawson City and rent a car there for the trip to Inuvik. The Dempster was very beautiful. The vegetation changed to tundra—a moss-like ground replacing all plants and trees. We reached the Arctic Circle and later that evening the small town of Inuvik. In the town, we went to a show and buffet for dinner, which was very fun and gave us an opportunity to better understand the local culture and sample such foods as muskox, caribou, and arctic fish. We could hardly stand the thought of being so close to the Arctic Ocean yet far enough that we could not swim in it. Since the road stopped in Inuvik, there was no way for us to ride any further. The only solution was to fly in a small plane and join a tour group for a day trip to the town of Tuktoyaktuk, an Eskimo village on the shore of the Arctic Ocean. Despite the cost, we made a unanimous decision to join the tour. We knew that none of us would ever be in this part of the world again and that this was our opportunity to do something that very few people ever get to do.

By eight the next morning, we were flying over the beautiful tundra of the MacKenzie River delta. During the flight, the pilot lowered the plane and circled around a group of Beluga whales. The hour-long flight took us to Tuk—as the locals call it—where we spent the next three hours enjoying a well-prepared and enjoyable tour of the area. Then came the moment we had been waiting for: the swim in the Arctic Ocean! Under the watchful eyes of our tour partners, who thought we were crazy, we ran into the freezing water and ran back out even faster. We were all proud to be able to say, “Yes, we swam in the Arctic Ocean!” Jean Hervé, Eric, and I even received certificates for our swim! It was a long twelve-hour drive back to Dawson City, but we made it back just in time to return our car, which had more than suffered during the 900 miles on the Dempster.

We spent part of the following day visiting Dawson City, a town known as the center of the gold rush in the late 1800s. For the better part of the afternoon, we watched the

Atlanta Summer Olympics from a satellite feed at a restaurant. After some shopping and bike repairs, we headed toward the mountains and rode thirty miles on a gravel road. Then we camped along the side the road, only twenty-five miles from Alaska!

The Best for Last

(Alaska)

I must admit that we were quite excited as we reached the border between Canada and Alaska! We had worked hard to reach this point and were now very close to reaching our goal of riding to Anchorage. We rode three days in almost constant rain and mud. Our bikes began to have minor mechanical problems due to mud and we had to do maintenance and clean them almost daily. We arrived in Tok, a small town but a major intersection of two of the three major roads in the state. We spent an afternoon there warming up and making plans for the next few days of biking. We had two options: we could either take the direct route to Anchorage and so end our trip early or we could take a detour to Fairbanks and arrive in Anchorage only a week before our flight home. Because the weather seemed unpredictable and we did not know how long the welded bike frame would hold, we opted for the road to Anchorage.

After a night in Tok of discussion and planning, we left for Anchorage. We were only 350 miles from our final destination; we knew our trip was approaching its final phase. Toward the end of the day we reached the Wrangell Mountains and were able to witness a beautiful sunset over their caps. Then we camped in a field with a view on the mountains after having ridden 100 miles for the day. Two days later, we arrived in Anchorage tired, wet, but thrilled to have accomplished our goal. We rode another hour to the house of our friends in Anchorage, whom I had met over the Internet. They had agreed to house us while we would be in Anchorage. They provided us with home-cooked meals, showers, and beds!

We had planned to ride about five more days in the Kenai Peninsula area starting the next morning, but as I prepared my bike I found that the back wheel hub was broken and had to be replaced. Since we had reached our goal and were very satisfied with our biking on the trip, we decided to look into renting a car for the remaining two weeks so we could see even more of Alaska than we could have by bicycle. I called fifteen car rental companies until I found one that had a deal we could not pass up. The biking was over and we had ridden 4150 miles through some of the world's most beautiful scenery. We had a sense of accomplishment and thankfulness to God for his protection. It had truly been an incredible adventure we would never forget.

We left Anchorage by car a couple of days later and headed toward Denali National Park. Since one of Eric's dreams was to someday climb mount McKinley, we were going to make a special effort to see the mountain. The only problem was that we knew that only twenty percent of those who attempt to see McKinley ever get the opportunity because it is usually covered in clouds. Mount McKinley is the tallest mountain in North America

and the tallest mountain in the world from its base in the valley to the top of its peak. We parked the car at a scenic viewing area from where the mountain could sometimes be seen. Though we could not make it out, we knew it wasn't far away. We camped there that night, hoping that the next morning we would see "the high one," as the locals call it. At six in the next morning, Eric woke me up saying, "It's time to take some pictures, my friend!" I opened the tent to find myself in front of one of the most beautiful scenes I had ever seen in my life. The mountain was totally uncovered and beaming in the light of dawn. The valley below us was filled with fog, adding to the incredible view. We sat there absorbing the scene taking pictures for almost two hours until the clouds finally reclaimed the mountain from our sight. We were so excited that we had seen McKinley and could now move on to see other areas of Alaska.

We drove to the entrance of Denali National Park where we had made reservations for a tour of the park two days later. Cars are not allowed in the park and only tour buses can take tourists to see the mountains and wildlife. We went for a short hike that day where we witnessed the construction of a new dam by beavers. During the next two days, we drove to Fairbanks and the mountains toward the north before returning to Denali for our scheduled tour.

Our bus left at six in the morning and we were looking forward to what we would see that day. We were used to riding our bikes, so being confined inside a bus for eleven hours, with only a couple of breaks, was indeed a challenge. However, the day turned out to be very wonderful and interesting. We saw many moose, caribou, marmots, eagles, mountain goats, and elk. But a day would not be complete in Denali without the sighting of some bears. We saw seven bears that day, two of which (a mother and her cub) were next to the road eating blueberries. The bus stopped for about fifteen minutes as we took pictures and admired these powerful animals. For the first time, we could enjoy the bears without fearing for our lives. We reached the end of the Denali road at Wonder Lake by noon and returned to the entrance of the park by late afternoon. Mount McKinley had been hidden from us that day, but we were glad to have seen it a few days earlier. Many of the tour members in the bus with us were quite disappointed because this had been their only chance to see the mountain.

We continued our visit of Alaska by driving on the beautiful Denali Highway across from the National Park then to Tok and the Wrangell Mountains. Before returning to Anchorage, we took a side trip to the Wrangell/St. Elias National Park and the town of Valdez. The three of us found that part of Alaska to be among the most beautiful areas we had seen on the trip. Waterfalls and rivers brought the mountains to life. We found our best campsite ever during those days at a pass overlooking a beautiful valley and a spectacular mountain range. The evening we spent at that campsite was one of the most incredible in my entire life. After a wonderful fresh salmon dinner Jean Hervé cooked for us, I went for a walk alone for a time of reflection and prayer. God was so present in that place. His beauty was evident through the scenery around me and the wonderful time he had allowed us to have on this trip.

During our drive back to Anchorage, Eric talked of his dream to move to Alaska and train

for his assent of Mount McKinley. He decided that as Jean Hervé and I explored the Kenai Peninsula south of Anchorage, he would rent his own car for a day and try to find a job. During that time, Jean Hervé and I traveled by the ocean and found a great place to camp overlooking the water on one side and three 12,000-foot mountains on the other. We met up with an excited Eric the next day who announced to us that he had found a job and that he was moving to Anchorage in two weeks!

We had three days left before our return flights home, which was just enough time to take one more adventure before leaving. We opted for a one-day cruise of the Prince William Sound bay near Anchorage. We took a train to Whittier, a small port town not accessible by road. From there, the Klondike Express ship took us to see the incredible glaciers dropping into the ocean. We very much enjoyed the beauty of the glaciers, the icebergs, and the wildlife.

Alaska 96 was over and had been all that we had expected and much more. The things we experienced and witnessed will stay with me forever. I will always remember the friendship that Eric, Jean Hervé, and I shared as well as the incredible adventure it was to camp out for almost three months and ride our bikes six to ten hours each day. There were difficult days but never once did I regret being on the trip or experiencing this opportunity of a lifetime. The three of us were sad that the bike trip was over but looked forward to seeing our families and friends again and being able to share with them the events of our incredible adventure.

At the risk of forgetting someone, I would like to thank the following individuals without whom this bike trip would not have been possible:

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