

CANADIAN Cycling MAGAZINE

Your First Century

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Alex Stieda

25 years later

A **14,000 km**
family
bike trip

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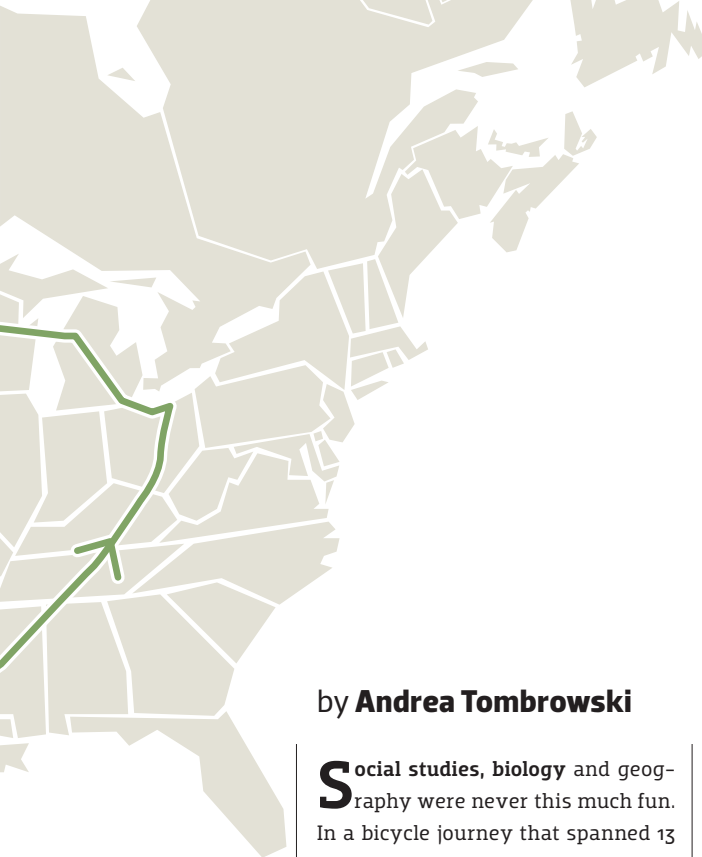


Alberta family takes a **14000KM** road trip



Family





Cycling through three countries

Departing from the back door of their Calgary home, the family cycled west through Banff, then south to Cranbook, B.C. They entered the United States through Idaho and cycled along the western coast down to La Paz, Mexico. From La Paz, they flew to Mexico City. Their return trip took them as far east as Ohio, ultimately heading northwest from Michigan to Montana. They entered their home province near Waterton National Park, relishing exhilarating tail winds that lifted their spirits as they cycled north up the homestretch. Throughout the trip, the family kept to secondary and back roads as much as possible, averaging roughly 65 km per day, cycling six days per week.

by **Andrea Tombrowski**

Social studies, biology and geography were never this much fun. In a bicycle journey that spanned 13 months, Rick and Tanya McFerrin and their three young children walked in the footsteps of Civil War soldiers, identified more insects, reptiles, birds and mammals than you can find in most zoos, crossed the mighty Mississippi, picked cotton, and even examined a fossil of a woolly mammoth at an archaeological dig. They sampled fresh cheese in Wisconsin, celebrated Christmas in San Ignacio and endured merciless headwinds in Death Valley.

While the family was well-prepared for this trip, Rick and Tanya admit that their first major foray into bicycle touring 16 years earlier wasn't quite as well-engineered. "We didn't know anything about cycling," says Rick. "We didn't even have tools," adds Tanya. Still, that didn't stop the intrepid pair from cycling through New Zealand for a month in 1993. Even before the couple returned home, they were already planning a bold round-the-world cycling trip.

Seven years later, the couple realized their dream, visiting 43 countries in 25 months, travelling more than

but the couple agrees that they value education. Rick holds a BA in International Relations and an MBA in International Management from the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California. Tanya earned a BA in Environmental Design from the University of California at Berkeley and a Master's in Special Education. Rick speaks five languages.

He is the founder and director of Two-Wheel View (twowheelview.org), a charitable organization that uses the bike as a tool to foster leadership skills, enhance self-esteem and increase cultural understanding

Affair

OPPOSITE TOP
It took two days to ride 20 km and climb from 550 m to almost 1,525 m elevation against strong head winds with 7 to 10 per cent grades over the summit of Towne Pass, Death Valley, California

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Getting closer to home – Waterton Lakes National Park

Nuisances like ticks and mosquitoes only added to their experience. Every good journey requires an unforgettable anecdote, like the story of the renegade dog that peed on Tanya's backpack in the American Midwest.

From July 15, 2009 to August 23, 2010, the McFerrin family from Calgary embarked on a 14,000 km bike trip that took Rick, now 43, Tanya, 41, Sampson, 10, Markos, eight and Tarn, six, through two Canadian provinces, 17 American states and six Mexican states.

25,000 km. Shortly after returning home from that trip, Tanya gave birth to their first child, Sampson. Two more boys joined him over the next three years.

The McFerrin family lives in a modest, century-old home in Calgary's inner city. They come across as your average family. Yet, when one starts peeling back the layers, a surprising and refreshing richness is revealed. For one, the couple is well-educated. "Over-educated," says Rick with a laugh,

through cycling trips and educational programs for youth. He splits work between his home and the office, cycling to the latter, which is 15 blocks away. Tanya, who worked in the public school system as a teacher and aide for eight years, now operates a day home from their residence. Throughout their North American expedition, Rick and Tanya home schooled their children, keeping in contact with Sampson's former classmates during his absence from school. Each of the children also



“We got to see our kids experience new things. We got to talk to them all the time and answer their questions.”

TOP LEFT
Tarn, 4, Sampson, 8, Markos, 6. Tough kids getting tougher, camping with friends near Grand Forks, B.C.

TOP CENTRE
Sampson and Tarn, Tropic of Cancer, Mexico

OPPOSITE TOP
Tarn prepared for all types of weather. Dish washing gloves were a great value for waterproof hand wear as seen on Markos in the background.

RIGHT
Riding out of Ensenada, Baja, Mexico. “The traffic in Mexico was not an issue. The cars and trucks were very cautious when they passed us. Our only concern was when RVs and SUVs with U.S. and Canada license plates passed us – drivers in Mexico always gave us plenty of room and slowed down to pass. Not so much for North American drivers,” said Rick McFerrin.

maintained a journal to record their daily adventures; Tarn's entries generally consisted of a sentence or two, since he was only four years old when the journey started.

Upon returning to Calgary, each of the children assisted their parents with presentations at their school. “The other classmates thought it was pretty cool,” says Rick of their trip. He should know. When Rick rides his tandem bike to school to drop off his kids, the unusual bike attracts school kids like bees to nectar. “I tell them to bring their helmets tomorrow,” Rick says, and sure enough, with helmets in hand, the school kids wait eagerly for their turn on the tandem bike the following day.

As for their house, the McFerrins leased it to a family who was looking for a place to live for a year before they took off on their own travels. The family took over the usual house expenses like water and heat and paid monthly rent, which provided the McFerrin family with cash while on the road. The family was also given the authority to open any urgent-looking mail, relaying relevant news to Rick and Tanya through phone or email. Junk mail was discarded and personal mail was left for the McFerrins to open upon their return. They pre-arranged things with their bank so that financial matters, which would normally require a signature or in-person visit, could be accomplished over the phone. Pre-authorized payments were set up where required and an accountant took care of their taxes.

The family budgeted about \$2,000 per month during the trip, generally spending less than that. “It doesn't have to be expensive,” says Tanya. The family camped out most of the time, bought clothes at second-hand stores and stayed in whatever places were offered to them, from barns and backyards to city parks and soft beds. “The big investment was the bikes and the riding gear,” says Tanya about the entire trip.



Wheels & Equipment

The family's two Co-Motion Periscope tandem bikes garnered attention wherever they went. Tanya and Markos rode on one bike, while Rick and Sampson, with Tarn on a Burley Kazoo, formed the other unit. Couplings allowed the frames to be easily disassembled for air travel. With the kids' weights and panniers included, Rick was pulling more than 200 kg (450 lb), not including his weight, and Tanya, in excess of 135 kg (300 lb), also not including her weight. The kids contributed their own pedal power throughout the trip.

Rick and Tanya chose durable wheels for their bikes. The family went through three sets of tires, three sets of chains and 13 pairs of shoes during the 13 months. For camping, they cooked on a multi-fuel stove and slept in a pair of three-person tents. To keep them entertained on the trip, they brought along cards, backgammon, cribbage and dice.

Photos: Rick McFerrin


CANCER



BOTTOM RIGHT
Road schooling at Santos Reyes in Metztitlán, Hidalgo, Mexico, built in 1538. "We spent the night inside the monastery to get relief from heavy rains. The cobblestone road up to the monastery was so steep we had to push the bikes up," said Rick McFerrin.

One of the lessons the couple learned from their experience was the importance of family. "We knew that before," says Rick, "but doing a trip like this reinforces it." Tanya agrees. "We got to see our kids experience new things. We got to talk to them all the time, answer their questions. We were riding right next to them all day. At any point in time, we could talk to them about anything."

The parents also watched their children mature on the trip. "They are excellent guests now. And that's from a lot of exposure to different situations – from a nice house to a chicken coop," says Tanya. No doubt the McFerrin kids have travelling in their blood. Every year since the kids were each babies, Rick and Tanya have made it a point to spend a month travelling abroad with their children. One year, when Tarn was two months old, they made a road trip to Mexico. "We did a road trip because that's what we could afford that year," says Tanya.

And just how does one follow up a 14,000 km cycling trip through three countries? You go further south, as the family anticipates a trip to South America some time in the next two to four years. The plan is to enrol the children in a school there for one year, allowing the boys to learn the language while Rick and Tanya hone their own Spanish-speaking skills. The family would then spend the following year cycling throughout the continent. 

Andrea Tombrowski is a freelance writer and photographer based in Calgary.



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"Yesterday when we were biking we saw a big black snake that was alive and the big black snake turned out to be a Water Moccasin. Yesterday too, Mom saw something moving on the side of the road. Then it ran across the road and it was a bobcat. We also saw a wild turkey with a blue head. We had a grasshopper stay on the bike the whole day."

–Markos (7 years old)