

ALASKA96 - By OLIVER DOSSMANN

The Dream of a Lifetime

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 one of us had ever been to the US 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 later to Ecuador, South America in 1984, the dream of a long cross-country trip was tucked away as a childhood fantasy. I graduated from High School in Ecuador in 1988 and moved to Chicago to attend Moody Bible Institute. During the summer of 1990, I went to France to visit my relatives and friends. It was during that summer that Jean Hervé and I began to talk again about a bike trip and began to make plans for a 1991 month-long trip. 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 at least 1,000 miles but no more than 1,500 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 1,000 miles in the Rocky Mountains and another 300-500 miles on the Pacific coasts of Washington and Oregon.

Planning included purchasing bicycles, tools, spare parts, and camping equipment, as well as training by riding 20-30 miles each day for three months. July came very quickly and Jean Hervé arrived in the US 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 towards Portland, not knowing what to expect and what adventures awaited us. We were so excited that we could hardly stand it!

Our trip to Portland was a total success. We camped out by rivers and lakes and sometimes asked farmers if we could stay on their land for the night. It was not unusual to be offered dinner and/or breakfast. Our average riding distance was 55 miles per day, well beyond the 43 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 which surrounded us day after day. Our itinerary took us through western Montana, the northern tip of Idaho, a few days in British Columbia, Canada, the north and west edges of Washington State, and a final week along the Oregon coast. By the time we reached Portland, we had been on the road 25 days and still had 10 spare days. To make good use of our time, we extended the itinerary to the central region of Oregon and back to Portland.

We arrived in Portland excited that we had accomplished our goal and that our trip had been so wonderful. But we were sad that it was over. We had saved money, trained and thought about the trip for the two prior years, and now it was all over. It was at that point that we began talking about another bicycle trip, longer and more challenging. We considered a two-month trip through Europe. We also talked about another trip within North America, maybe towards Alaska. But after Jean Hervé returned to France, the idea of a second trip faded as I moved to Jackson, Tennessee to attend Union University as a Computer Science student. I was hired by the university two years later and by accepting that job I knew that it would be difficult to ever take an entire summer off from my new job.

The following year, I began talking to my boss about the possibility of taking a summer off for a bicycle trip and was amazed by his support and encouragement to follow through with this dream. I called Jean Hervé, who was working in England at the time, to find out if he was still interested. He was very interested and told me to count him in. I also went to visit another friend in East Tennessee, Eric Zimmerman. Eric had shown interest in the first bike trip but had not been able to go.

I knew that if he could, he would make every effort to make the second trip. He was interested but could not commit at the time. He asked me to keep him informed in case things would work out for him to go.

Before more could be decided about the trip, we had to come up with an itinerary. Jean Hervé told me to make a recommendation and that he would just go along with my decision since I lived in the United States and was better equipped to research the possibilities. Looking at various options in North America, I decided on a route that would take us from Denver, Colorado to Anchorage, Alaska. The 3,800-mile distance seemed reasonable for a three-month trip and the scenery we would travel through would be spectacular. The idea of going towards Alaska seemed thrilling and challenging at the same time. We would travel long distances with very little civilization, and we would have to pack more food and supplies than we had on the first 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 would go for sure. I received approval from Union University for a three-month leave of absence thanks to the support of many administrators, my supervisor, 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'm going!" 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.

Chapter 1 - "We'll Never get out of Colorado!"

Jean Hervé, Eric and I met at the Denver airport on May 28th, 1996. We had so much to talk about, bikes to unpack and assemble, equipment to check out and pack, and much 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 were on the road by mid-morning. As we were leaving the airport and hearing the planes landing and taking off behind us, I could only wonder what adventure awaited us. It would be a life-style change and an incredible undertaking - that I knew - but would we make it to Anchorage almost 4,000 miles away? Would we all get along for three months? Would we avoid accidents and illnesses? I knew that God had opened many doors for us to be where we were and that His protection would be a must for us to have a successful trip.

On that first day of riding, we had not been riding 30 miles that we began to feel very tired. We were starting the ascent of the first mountain range west of Denver. I knew that I hadn't trained as much as I should have, but the busy semester before the trip had prevented me from being able to do all that I had wanted. I had planned to consider the first week of the trip as training, knowing that I would get tired.

Well there I was, tired and out of breath, a condition which would last about four days. During the first few days, we rode and camped at altitudes between 9,000 and 10,000 feet, increasing the difficulty of those days for all of us.

On our second day, after riding only 43 miles, we stopped in a wooden area to set up camp. The wind was picking up 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 sprain his ankle. He was in pain and we knew that the entire trip was in jeopardy.

He went into his tent to get some sleep as we all prayed that his ankle would not force us to cancel the trip we had been dreaming of for so long. The next morning, his ankle was very swollen, but he decided to try riding to see what would happen. He left on his bike as Eric and I packed up. We caught up with him a few miles later, as he was struggling with every pedal stroke. But he was strong and was 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 aware of that. A slightly worst 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 fourth 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 20 miles of uphill ride to the Trail Ridge pass. We got up at 5 am the next morning to allow for a full day of riding. The beautiful mountains were all around us. We stopped every few minutes for pictures. Low scattered clouds, waterfalls, rivers and snow-covered mountains made that morning very spectacular. While Eric stayed behind to take more pictures, Jean Hervé and I continued towards 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 beside us to inform us that the road was being closed at the pass because of a snowstorm. We had to turn around and either wait out the storm or find an alternate route. The way back down to the valley was again very beautiful. We could see no sign of a snowstorm 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 the maps out and make a decision as to what to do. We decided to head back towards Denver and to find an alternate route around Rocky Mountains National Park.

Later that evening we were exhausted and were looking for a place to camp. But to our despair, both sides of the road were fenced off, making it impossible for us to find a suitable place to spend the night. We rode until 7 pm, desperately looking for anything that would accommodate two tents. We finally did find a road sign saying "OPEN RANGE" which we interpreted as meaning the land we were now on 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 rode off the road and headed towards our location. A man and woman in the car screamed at us "Get out of 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 were in. We had learned the hard way and now we had to move out of our site. It was dusk, but we had no choice but to move to another location. 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. It was that evening that we began to wonder if we were ever going to get out of Colorado.

During the first four days of the trip, we had had a sprained ankle, a closed road, and had been ousted from a campsite! We knew that more adventures awaited us and it was with some anxiety and a lot of excitement that we fell asleep.

We had ridden our fair share of uphill's during the first few days but could not have anticipated the climb that would be required of us the next day. We started early again, realizing that the 44 miles of uphill we had spotted on the map would undoubtedly be a day-long challenge. The first 10 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 30 miles, we were stopping every 100 feet to rest and catch our breath.

I was personally exhausted and only motivation kept me reaching for the strength I needed for every pedal stroke. We eventually made it to the pass and to the KOA campground we planned to reach that day. By the next morning, Colorado had been conquered!

Chapter 2 - Windy Wyoming

Compared to the snow-covered mountains of Colorado, Wyoming was flat as we entered the state's south-east corner. For three days we battled strong headwinds. The wind has a way of being very discouraging. While hills presented themselves as challenges to conquer, winds made it difficult to ride in seemingly easy terrain. Given a choice, I would rather ride a long uphill than a flat road with headwinds.

As we approached the north-western corner of the state, mountains surrounded us and once again we found ourselves in the middle of beautiful scenery. The winds calmed down, resulting in an increase in our daily riding average to 60 miles. Before reaching the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone we stopped one day in Lander, a small town that 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, as 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 35 miles uphill in severe thunderstorms. As we approached the Grand Teton mountain range, a clearing in the clouds allowed us to see the mountains in spectacular sunset light. But the clouds quickly covered the mountains as we rode two more hours in hail and rain towards our destination for the day - a KOA campground. We were due for laundry and hot showers... But we had not expected a Jacuzzi, where we spent the entire evening enjoying ice-cream and watching the Grand Teton mountains. By lunch the next day we had entered Grand Teton National Park. We rode out of our way for a few hours to approach the mountains and took many pictures of these incredible mountains. That night we stayed at a campground and met a couple from Germany with whom we became good friends. We saw them again in Yellowstone National Park and again had a wonderful time of sharing and laughing. They gave us many ideas and warnings from their own trip to Alaska through Canada a few years earlier. Talking about bears and precautions necessary in dealing with them, they called adventure cyclists like us "meals on wheels".

We spent the next five days in 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. 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 show "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 then asked us about our trip. He was so excited to meet cyclists on their way to Alaska that he admitted being the owner of the theater and gave us free tickets to the spectacular Yellowstone feature.

Chapter 3 - 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 - 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 we needed.

After our break in Bozeman, we began the ride towards Missoula, where we were planning to stop and visit a friend of Eric and me from Moody Bible Institute. We knew it would take three days to ride to Missoula and had planned to ride as much as we could the first day to have less to ride the remaining two days. On that first day, we reached the first milestone of the trip: 1,000 miles! We also broke our riding record for a single day by riding 104 miles. It was late and starting to rain as we reached Helena that evening, so we began to look for a place to camp. I asked at a house if we could set up our tents in their yard. The people there agreed and later invited us to come into their house for a drink and the next morning for breakfast. Our new friends in Helena also became sponsors of Alaska96. It was amazing to us that people we did not know the day before agreed to let strangers stay on their land and then 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 friends' house, while riding in the rain, I rode into a pothole which I had not seen because it was filled with water. I almost lost my balance but caught myself before falling. The back 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 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 royally 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 open for the season because of a prolonged winter. 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 18-mile steep hill, ready to conquer the pass the next morning. I left ahead of Jean Hervé and Eric the next morning and rode 5 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 as he had just seen a grizzly bear a few miles ahead alongside 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 several hours for Eric but there was no sign of him. We began to wonder if something was wrong. 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 for the rest of the 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 rockslide.

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 rocks 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 remembered having been delayed five minutes to change the batteries in his camera, something that normally took no time at all. "The batteries simply would not go in" he recalled. "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 rockslide area five 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!

Chapter 4 - Mosquitoes and Bears (Alberta & British Columbia)

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 on 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 to check it out and sure enough, it looked as though we could go in there to dry our tents and stay dry for the night. Since the shelter was in the middle of the campground we decided to move in for the evening and night. We later met others who came to also take refuge and found out that all government campgrounds in Canada have 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. Mountains surrounded us and we were amazed at the beauty everywhere. We rode to the town of Banff within the park where we spent a day enjoying the town and see a couple of movies. The next day we rode a short distance to Lake Louise, a beautiful lake known for its spectacular blue-green coloring. We took a chairlift to the top of a mountain and had a wonderful buffet meal at the top with a beautiful view of the valley below. We headed towards 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 30 more miles to the next campground. After two passes and 98 miles that day we arrived late in the evening and slept 12 hours straight!

Our ride through Banff and Jasper was spectacular. The Icefield Highway, which is over 200 miles long and goes through the length of the parks, was beautiful and perfect for riding with its wide shoulders. The weather was perfect, and we enjoyed numerous days of sunshine with only occasional thundershowers. We left the parks knowing that our trip would change for the next few weeks as we entered the most isolated segment on our itinerary.

We were in Prince George two days later where we had planned to spend a day 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 4 pm the next day we were on the road again. We rode 30 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. 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 broke. We got another rope and tried it again - that time the branch broke and we had to start all over again. Mosquitoes were swarming around our faces and it was difficult to do the smallest tasks. We finally found another branch and were successful on our third attempt.

Walking back to the tent, Eric said that "if a bear wants our food tonight, it will be able to get it, the food is hung too low." I agreed but we weren't 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 figured he would get it 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 campsite and of an encounter with one. We knew that a hiker had been killed by a bear not far from our location just a 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 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) could be our last hope to make 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 destroyed it but apparently didn't like the salt because most of it was still in the jar... Our food had been untouched, but claw marks were at the bottom of one of the bags. We had been very close to losing our food. God, once again, had been with us during this incident which we came to call "Grizzly Encounter."

We continued towards the Cassiar Highway meeting other cyclists daily and enjoying our last few days before total separation from civilization. Three days later, we reached the beginning 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 and that the uphill climbs were not over with. We reached the foothills of the mountains within a day and found ourselves surrounded by incredible 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. The only solution to be somewhat in peace from the mosquitoes was to eat while walking. The second we stopped walking, hundreds of mosquitoes swarmed around us trying to get a stomach-full of our blood.

Civilization on the Cassiar Highway 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 and RVs.

One of the highlights of the Cassiar Highway was the encounters we had with other cyclists, many of which were on one to two-year trips around the world. Besides crazy cyclists like us, we also encountered 20 bears as well as several mooses 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.

Chapter 5 - 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 routes to Alaska. The southern route was easier and more direct. But everyone we asked told us that the northern route, also called the Top of the World Highway, was more spectacular. Even though some of the roads on the northern route were not paved, we decided to attempt the northern route since we were ahead of schedule by about two weeks and had plenty of time to ride extra miles. Over the next few days, we decided to change our trip itinerary even more and to ride our bikes to Inuvik, a town close to the shore of the Arctic Ocean. The 450 mile-long unpaved Dempster Highway would take us there and back.

We were excited about the new goal for our trip which would allow us to see a part of the world that very few people see. 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, then continued biking from Dawson City 120 miles up the road, but we would have considered that cheating and would not do it unless we had to. Eric and I would go get the bike welded then find a ride back to meet up with Jean Hervé and continue the ride from the place the bike had broken down. 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 my bike back together. By 6 pm the bike was ready to go again but we were unable to find a ride back to where Jean Hervé was waiting for us. We spent the night in a gas station under construction, keeping 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 a couple in a camper and by lunch, we had rejoined Jean Hervé.

The broken frame held just fine, but we were leery of attempting the 900-mile unpaved road to Inuvik so removed away from civilization. We decided to ride to Dawson City and rent a car there for the trip to Inuvik. The Dempster was very beautiful, as the vegetation changed to tundra which is a moss-like ground replacing all plants and trees. We reached the Arctic Circle and later that evening the small town of Inuvik. We went to a dinner show & buffet for dinner which was very fun and allowed us to better understand the local culture and sample such foods as muskox, caribou and arctic fish. We could hardly stand the thought of being in Inuvik, 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 this was our opportunity to do something that very few people ever get to do.

By 8 am 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 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 very well prepared and enjoyable tour of the area. Then came the moment we had been waiting for: a 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 12-hour drive back to Dawson City but we made it back just in time to return our car which had more than suffered on the 900 miles of the Dempster.

We spent part of the following day visiting Dawson City, a town known as the center of the gold rush of the late 1800s. For the better part of the afternoon, we watched the Olympics in Atlanta from a satellite feed at a restaurant. After some shopping and bike repairs, we headed towards the mountains and rode 30 miles on a gravel road. We camped along the side of the road, only 25 miles from Alaska!

Chapter 6 - 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 near-constant rain and mud. Our bikes began to experience minor mechanical problems due to the 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 main 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. One, we could take the direct route to Anchorage, therefore winning the trip, then decide what we wanted to do with the rest of our time from there. Or two, we could take a detour to Fairbanks and still arrive in Anchorage a week before our flights home. Because the weather seemed unpredictable, and because 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 towards Anchorage. We were only 350 miles from our final destination, and we knew that our trip was approaching its final phase. Towards the end of the day, we reached the Wrangell Mountains and were able to see them very well along with a beautiful sunset. We camped in a field with a view on the mountains after having ridden 100 miles that day. Two days later, we arrived in Anchorage, tired, wet, but thrilled to have arrived and 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. We enjoyed a home-cooked meal, showers, and beds!

We had planned to ride about five more days in the Kenai Peninsula area starting the next morning. I prepared my bike the next morning only to find 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 and therefore see even more of Alaska than would be possible by bicycle. I called 15 car rental companies until I found one which had a deal we could not pass up. The biking was over, and we had ridden 4165 miles through some of the world's most beautiful landscapes. We had a sense of accomplishment and thankfulness to God for His protection. It had truly been an incredible adventure which we would never forget.

We left Anchorage by car a couple of days later and headed towards 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 20% of the people who try to see McKinley ever get to see it 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. We parked the car at a scenic viewing area where the mountain could sometimes be seen from. We could not see it, but we knew it was there and not far away. We stayed overnight, hoping that the next morning we would see "the high one", as the locals call it. At 6 am 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 uncovered and beaming in the light of dawn. The valley below us was filled with fog, adding to the incredible view. We sat there watching it and taking pictures for almost two hours until the clouds finally reclaimed the mountain from our sight. We were excited that we had seen it and could now move on to see other areas of Alaska.

We drove to the entrance of Denali National Park where we 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 towards the north, before returning to Denali for our scheduled tour.

Our bus left at 6 am 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 11 hours, with only a couple of breaks, was challenging. The day turned out to be very wonderful and interesting. We saw many mooses, caribou, marmots, eagles, mountain goats and elk. But a day would not be complete in Denali without sighting 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 15 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 early evening. Mount McKinley had been hidden from us that day, but we were glad to have seen it a few days earlier.

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 of the entire trip during those days at a pass overlooking a beautiful valley and spectacular mountains. The evening we spent at that campsite was one of the most awesome of 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 ascent of Mount McKinley. He decided that as Jean Hervé and I explored the Kenai Peninsula south of Anchorage, he would rent a 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 ocean 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 two weeks later!

We had three days left before our return flights home and wanted to do one more great thing 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 seaside 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 wildlife.

Alaska96 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 and living this experience of a lifetime. The three of us were sad that the bike trip was over but looked forward to seeing our friends again and sharing with them the events our incredible adventure.

*** the end ***

A Word of Thanks

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

My parents for your support from the beginning for the idea of a bike trip.

Rachel for taking care of things at home and for maintaining the Internet updates.

My boss David Porter for your support and letting me leave three months from work.

Mr. Gary Carter and Dr. Howard Newell for allowing me to take a leave of absence from Union University.

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The Tags for your hospitality in Missoula, Montana.

The Bells for your hospitality in Helena, Montana.

The Dillers for your hospitality in Anchorage, Alaska.

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Bruce "Ole" Ohlson and Regina Hartzell for a wonderful evening on the Cassiar Hwy. We will never forget the poetry recital!

Our sponsors who helped make the trip possible.

The Adventure Cyclist Club for your hospitality in Missoula.

All my friends. You supported me and encouraged me to pursue this dream.

And most of all:

God - for Your protection and guidance. It would have been impossible without You.

Trip Information & Statistics

Biking (Oliver)

Bike	Trek Multitrack 720 (23")
Weight	30 pounds + 40 pounds of gear
Number of flat tires	9
Number of broken spokes	4
Other bike trouble	1 broken frame 2 broken pedals 1 broken gear cable

Itinerary

Distance	4,165 miles (6723 kms)
States/Provinces visited	Colorado (USA) Wyoming (USA) Montana (USA) Alberta (Canada) British Columbia (Canada) Yukon (Canada) Northwest Territories (Canada) Alaska (USA)

National Parks visited

Rocky Mountains National Park (Colorado)
Grand Teton National Park (Wyoming)
Yellowstone National Park (Wyoming)
Glacier National Park (Montana)
Waterton National Park (Alberta)
Banff National Park (Alberta)
Jasper National Park (Alberta)
Denali National Park (Alaska)
Wrangell/St. Elias National Park (Alaska)

Riding & physical

Average speed	11.2 miles per hour (18.1 kms per hour)
Longest hill	44 miles (71.3 kms)
Steepest hill	15 degrees
Longest day	126.4 miles (205 kms)
Riding days	69
Average daily distance	60.1 miles (97.4 kms)
Water consumption	75+ gallons (riding days only)
Vertical climb	150,000+ feet (28 miles/riding days only)
Average daily vertical climb	2,174 feet

Where are they now?

Oliver Dossmann

After Alaska96, Oliver returned to Jackson, Tennessee to finish his Masters in Business Administration (MBA) at Union University. He later accepted a position at Kirkland's (www.kirklands.com) as Director of Information Systems where he worked three years before starting his own computer and website design business (www.ExpressionSolutions.com). Oliver is married to Rachel (the same Rachel who maintained the email updates during the bike trip) and they have four children. They live in Fairfield Glade, Tennessee where Oliver serves as the President of EdenRidge, a retreat center for missionaries he founded. To learn more visit www.EdenRidge.org.

Eric Zimmerman

Eric moved to Alaska after the bike trip to work as an aircraft mechanic. Soon after, he met his wife, Casey, at a church he, Oliver, and Jean Hervé had visited in Anchorage at the end of the bike trip. Eric and Casey have two boys and they serve as missionaries in Papua New Guinea with Ethnos 360.

Jean Hervé Vernat

After the bike trip, Jean Hervé returned to Europe and worked a variety of jobs in France and England. He also spent a year in Florida as a student at the University of Orlando. Jean Hervé and Oliver stayed in touch throughout the years and saw each other several times in the United States and France. Sadly, Jean Hervé passed away in 2016 while living in southern France.