



WHERE The Yukon and Alaska, North America
START & FINISH Dawson, Canada & Deadhorse, Alaska
DISTANCE 885 miles **WORDS** Steve Fabes
PICTURES Steve Fabes



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CALL OF THE WILD

Last summer, as part of his round-the-world tour, **Steve Fabes** cycled the Top of the World Highway between Canada and Alaska, continuing on to Deadhorse

The ribbon of road climbed out of view. Highway Nine's nickname is an apt one. Where the Top of the World Highway disappeared from sight, I knew there were 12 more miles of uphill biking before it reached the ridge-slashed tundra, high above the tree line, where caribou roam. The 'top' might also be interpreted in terms of latitude – it marries the northern Canadian territory of the Yukon, an almost unpeopled hinterland of bear-inhabited forest and scattered lakes, with the wilds of Alaska. For both the road's elevation and its location, it's a stunning place for cycle touring.

It was early August, a good month to tackle an adventure that had long been on my to-ride list, the route closes for winter each October. The quirky Canadian town of Dawson marks one end of the highway. It's a town of two seasons. In the winter it's host to a smattering of hardy locals who dust off their snow machines as the temperature drops to minus 40 and the sun heads south. In the long days of summer, when I was there, Dawson

IN THE PHOTOS
1) The Top of the World Highway is part tarmac, part dirt road
2) Cycling to Deadhorse means crossing the Arctic Circle



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effervesced with life. Tourists wandered about this Wild West style town, where wooden houses nudge up against boardwalks, and took in the nightly can-can show. In amongst the hordes of travellers, I spotted two sitting by loaded bicycles and decided to introduce myself. Aurélie and Layko, a Swiss couple, were touring North America. They had no solid plan or timeline. After some bonding over a beer, we decided that the next day we would set off to ride the Top of The World Highway together.

CLIMBING OUT OF CANADA
 The next morning I emerged from my tent to find the world clear skied, gold-tinged, and still. I loaded up my bike and boarded a free boat that ferried me across the Yukon River, spotting the Swiss couple waiting for me on the other side. Behind them lay the escalating start of the highway. We exchanged high fives and hastily consumed some



granola bars. Soon we were pedalling slowly upwards alongside black spruce trees and swathes of pastel-hued vegetation, broken by vivid sprays of intermingled pink and saffron wild flowers and riven by crooked corridors of flat foliage – trails made by foraging black bears.

The gradient was tame enough, but as the kilometres passed, laboured breathing began to take the place of chatter as we each found our rhythm and let our imaginations roam. About an hour into the climb we spotted two more cycle tourists dozing under a tree. They were the most laden bikers I have ever seen. Inside their bulging panniers and overflowing trailer was a toolkit that looked like it could service an aircraft carrier, plus a strange choice of essentials: a sitar, a mandolin and a didgeridoo.

'I don't get it!' bemoaned the guy, slumped on the ground, rosy and exhausted. 'It's taking us ages!'

None of us mentioned that riding over mountain passes is easier when you leave the orchestra behind.

As the road continued its tortuous creep upwards, the land dropped away at the side into a rash of spruce trees concealing remote streams. In the distance, the mountains were blue-tinged and bleary; somewhere a wild fire had taken hold in the forest, and the smoke was now mushrooming skyward like the aftermath of a

“We were pedalling upwards alongside black spruce trees and swathes of pastel-hued vegetation. Crooked corridors of flat foliage marked trails made by foraging bears”



IN THE PHOTOS

3) Distances are vast and facilities few. In places, you'll need to carry plenty of water

4) Even in August, snow is possible. From October on, the Haul Road is not rideable at all

5) Camping by the Brooks Range, northern Alaska

nuclear bomb.

There were grazing caribou on the ridges around us, antlers silhouetted against the sky. After surveying us, they scarpered away from the road, their white tails bobbing up and down. Layko reminded me that grizzly bears hunt the caribou, so when day finally trickled into evening, we hauled our food away from our tents to ensure we didn't inadvertently invite Canada's other, less timid, residents.

WELCOME TO CHICKEN

The next day, after an inching ascent at a more brutal grade, the US border came slowly into view. Relief tempered our exhaustion. The US immigration official doled out the formalities brusquely, and with passports stamped we rode out into the Alaskan wilderness.

A signpost emblazoned with the word 'Chicken' grabbed my attention. Near the sign were dawdling men with prodigious moustaches who pierced cans of beer with knives, chugged the contents and flashed me a thumbs up. The bustling metropolis of Chicken, population 30, gets a steady stream of tourists who pose by the town's signpost and buy bumper stickers and rubber chickens from the town's souvenir shop, one of only three establishments. The other two were more tempting for us: a bakery and a pub.

When morning broke, we packed up our makeshift campsite beside the bakery (we had been good customers) and began to pedal deeper into Alaska. Scores of fire-blackened and long-dead spruce trees scattered the hills, protruding from an inky swamp. The Taylor Complex wildfire of 2004 wiped out great swathes of forest here and contributed to the six-and-a-half

**IN THE PHOTOS**

6) After the Brooks Range, it's the tundra of the North Slope

7) Caribou are common. Watch out for them wandering on roads



7 million acres of Alaska that went up in smoke that year, an area greater than that of Wales. Already, though, a scintillating rug of fireweed was bringing life and colour back to the burned landscape.

We approached the town of Tok through a crepuscular light, as smoke encroached from the nearby Moon Lake wildfire. We were on floodplains that must see torrents in spring. In late summer, there was just a network of cement-coloured streams trickling through. Ground squirrels scampered across the road. At one point, a moose loped onto the road, forcing some emergency braking from Aurélie. We just escaped an epic Tour-de-France-style pile up. The moose was unmoved and continued its shamble across the tarmac.

DIRT ROAD UPS AND DOWNS

Fairbanks is Alaska's second largest city, albeit in a state not renowned for them. It was where I waved goodbye to Aurélie and Layko. I was keen to cycle as far north as possible whilst the summer allowed. North meant the 500

**DO IT YOURSELF**

› Dawson is 330 miles by the Klondike Highway from Whitehorse, the capital of the Yukon, which has an airport. The route is also possible by bike and there are scattered campsites along the way. Fairbanks has a major airport and Deadhorse has a small one, so riding this route in reverse is a possibility. Hitchhiking, even with a bike, is easy enough out of Deadhorse (there's only one way out) providing you're not in a hurry. It can take 12 hours or more by road to Fairbanks depending on the conditions.

miles of road between Fairbanks and the Arctic Ocean, known as the Dalton Highway, or more colloquially as the Haul Road. Opened to the public in 1994, the Dalton is a supply route for the trans-Alaskan oil pipeline and oil fields of the North Slope. It runs through a huge tract of sparsely populated back country. The Haul Road turned out to be an apt description. With no grocery stores en route, I would have to lug a week's supply of food with me. My bike was as heavy as it's ever been.

On my third day from Fairbanks, an ominous, metallic sky drooped low over the forest. Rain-laden clouds almost enveloped the spiny tops of the spruce trees. Soon rain was falling in sheets. The calcium chloride deposited over the unpaved road to reduce dust transformed into a brown goo, the consistency of toothpaste, which soon stuck to every part of my bike. A bank of one of the many rivers made serviceable campgrounds so I lugged my bike down to the water, submerged it and scrubbed it clean.

The sun broke out the following day, baking the mud and firming up the road. I arrived at the Arctic Circle to get my obligatory shot by the signpost and was soon surrounded by curious tourists on organised tours who asked for photos with me. There is a certain kudos that comes with bicycle travel this far north and tourers here can expect to be treated like strange wildlife.

The Atigun Pass is the only protracted climb between Fairbanks and Deadhorse, traversing the Brooks Range and the Continental Divide. I ascended into a shroud of cloud while a headwind slowed me to a wobbly crawl. The top had just a light dusting of snow, while the slopes of the mountains were vivid with the burnt colours of

CANADA Great Rides ALASKA

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autumn – a season which comes early here. Truckers offered me honks of encouragement and plenty of room as they passed, whilst bands of hunters occasionally stopped to offer me a snack.

SNOW IN AUGUST

'Hey Steve, there's three inches of snow, and it's still coming down!' The voice belonged to Leonard, a Canadian biker I had rough-camped with on the northern side of the pass. He was heading south. I unzipped my tent, confident he was winding me up, only to find that we had been engulfed in a white-out. I packed up quickly, cursing and shaking snow from my tent before setting out alone into the bleak white murk.

Snow fell all day. The mountains, only peppered yesterday, became completely coated. Ridges, cloud and peaks were difficult to make out. By the following day, however, much of the snow had melted, and I reached the North Slope, a vast, even expanse of tussocks and pools. In the distance I could make out the dark blots of roaming musk ox on the plains. Up above, snow geese broke the silence with their honks as they flew in their malformed Vs and Ws, heading to warmer climes, while I continued to the top of the continent.

Eight days after leaving Fairbanks, Deadhorse in Prudhoe Bay finally came into view. It's the last town on the Dalton, sitting by the Arctic Ocean, and was the farthest north I could ride in North America. It's assumed the eponymous horse died of the cold, but when you visit Deadhorse you have to wonder whether boredom wasn't the actual cause of death. It wasn't the climax I'd hoped for. It's a place for oil workers rather than tourists. But the town does have a long-heralded grocery store and warm places to cosy down for a while. ☺

IN THE PHOTOS

8) The Atigun Pass rises to 1,444 metres. It's a tough climb but the only big one from Fairbanks to Deadhorse

FACT FILE

DAWSON TO DEADHORSE

Distance: The Top of the World Highway from Dawson in Canada to Tok in Alaska is 185 miles (part paved, part dirt road), then it's 200 to Fairbanks (paved) and 500 to Deadhorse (partly paved).

When to go: June to August. May and September often see thick snow. June is alive with mosquitoes. The Top of the World Highway closes from October to May. Check online for the status of nearby wildfires, which can sometimes cause road closures.

Essential kit: Self-sufficient camping and cooking kit, including a four-season sleeping bag and an insulated sleeping mat. Clothing for both cold and warm weather – take layers. Tyres for dirt roads. A mirror to keep an eye out for trucks. Insect repellent (DEET based). Remove mudguards on the Dalton Highway; if it rains, mud will clog them.

Water: No natural sources between Dawson and the US border, so carry plenty, e.g. a 10-litre water bag or several bottles. Elsewhere there

are lots of streams, but there is a risk of giardia; take a water filter.

Facilities: Few. There are scattered campsites between Dawson and Fairbanks. On the Dalton Highway, carry a week's food (no grocery shops) and expect to be rough camping. You can get a hot meal, a shower and bed at Coldfoot and the Yukon River Crossing. In Deadhorse there's an ATM, wi-fi, and two hotels, but not much else.

Bear necessities: Black and grizzly bears inhabit the entire route. Carry a can of bear spray and always haul your food away from your tent at night. In campsites, use the bear-proof storage containers. If rough camping near a layby, you can stash your food in the back of the metal bins or hang it in a tree..

More info: Tourist information centres in Fairbanks have a free A4 sheet with the mileages and sites of interest/accommodation along the Haul Road. For more about the Dalton Highway, see http://wikitravel.org/en/Dalton_Highway

