

TRAVEL



ACTING EDITOR LINDA BATES 604-605-2371 / FAX 604-605-2521 / E-mail lbates@png.canwest.com

SATURDAY, MARCH 29, 2003 SECTION D

ARMCHAIR TRAVELLER

When she travels, chef Karen Barnaby keeps a record of — what else — food. D4

SWIMMING WITH MANATEES

The endangered animals are making a comeback, and in Florida you can join them in the water. D7

The temperature 'drops like a guillotine'

In Alaska bike pumps and cameras freeze — and a frozen Snickers bar splits into shards like glass

In the freezing cold February, 1900 a young man named Ed Jesson began an amazing cycling expedition that began in Yukon Territory and ended on the west coast of Alaska. When he rode his bicycle into Nome on March 29, he carried with him copies of newspapers that he had packed at the start of his trip, bringing what was then the latest news to the residents of the community. Kevin Vallely, Andy Sterns and Frank Wolf (left to right in picture) left Dawson City, Yukon, just over three weeks ago and began following the route Jesson blazed. In this dispatch Vallely reports on their travels from Eagle to Circle, Alaska, on their way toward Nome. As Kevin writes, Alaska's comparatively mild winter is over, and the frigid weather is back with a vengeance.

Kevin Vallely



ICEBIKERS

The Yukon River flows through the heart of Alaska and is a giant catchbasin for the cold Arctic air settling on this northern landscape. We're huddled in the Eagle general store

listening to the town patriarch, John Borg, matter-of-factly announce that the temperature recorded here last night was the coldest in all North America. The wind is howling down the valley, it's freezing outside and it's time to start moving down river. Is this what I was looking for?

We ride out of town into a ferocious headwind and are completely focused on keeping the cold at bay. Our struggle to move forward quickly brings warmth, and before long the large limestone bluff that dominates the town of Eagle slowly recedes behind us as we inch north towards Circle. The frigid weather that has been so noticeably absent in Alaska this winter is back. Cold, clear mornings grow into gloriously warm afternoons as the sun and snow work in unison to mask the daytime chill, and for a short time we forget where we are, but each

evening, as the final rays of light disappear, the temperature drops like a guillotine, sharp and lethal, and puts us at guard to what it might bring. The cold is our persistent companion and we treat it as both friend and as foe. Frigid air freezes the river solid and allows safe passage, but these same temperatures claw at us and suck the heat from our bodies.

Everything is affected. Bike tires tend to deflate overnight and two of our pumps have exploded while we tried to pump them up. We now carry our pumps in our jackets. Water bottles must be filled with hot water and placed in insulated sleeves for daily use and even then tend to freeze up by night fall. Trail snacks hold unexpected surprises as the Snickers bar I bit



Frank Wolf displays the icy beard he endured in Alaska's bitter cold.

See **ALMOST OUT** D2

LOWEST AIRFARES GUARANTEE

FLIGHT CENTRE guarantees to BEAT any genuine current quoted airfare!

<p>LAS VEGAS</p> <p>FROM \$99*</p>	<p>AMSTERDAM</p> <p>FROM \$499*</p>
<p>TORONTO</p> <p>FROM \$399*</p>	<p>LONDON</p> <p>FROM \$529*</p>
<p>P.VALLARTA</p> <p>FROM \$429*</p>	<p>SYDNEY</p> <p>FROM \$1399*</p>

COACH TOURS

<p>ONTARIO & FRENCH CANADA</p> <p>FROM \$1179*</p> <p>PER PERSON</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">SEE NIAGARA, TORONTO, OTTAWA, MONTREAL AND QUEBEC CITY. 9-DAY TOUR FROM JUST C\$131 PER DAY!</p>	<p>ROME TO LONDON</p> <p>FROM \$1569*</p> <p>PER PERSON</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">THE BEST OF ITALY, AUSTRIA, SWITZERLAND, FRANCE AND ENGLAND. 12-DAY TOUR FROM ONLY C\$131/DAY!</p>
---	--

COSMOS.
A Smart Way To Go.

FLIGHT CENTRE

CALL YOUR NEAREST STORE **1-888 WORLD 31**

1-888-967-5331

www.flightcentre.ca

LOWEST AIRFARES GUARANTEE

*CONDITIONS APPLY. EX VANCOUVER. AIR ONLY PRICES ARE RETURN PER PERSON. TOUR PRICES ARE LAND ONLY, BASED ON DOUBLE OCCUPANCY. PRICES EXCLUDE TAXES AND GOV'T SURCHARGES.

Almost out of food on the trail, we have a lucky break

From D1

into shattered in my mouth, cutting my gums with its shards of glass-like-toffee.

On our fourth day out we notice a change in the sky as wisps of cloud begin to creep across its surface. Within hours it is overcast and the temperature is comfortable and warm. Our camping this evening is relaxed as we kick back around our blazing campfire and look forward to the warmer travel ahead. As we turn in for the night, the snow begins to fall.

We awake to a blanket of white that covers our route and leaves us with little or no indication to its whereabouts. Our trail to this point has been poor but roughly rideable as we made our way along the remnants of the Yukon Quest trail, but now we are left marching along by feel, routinely post-holing to our knees as we slip off the hard pack

of the hidden path below. Our pace is slowed to a crawl, and with more than 160 km of travel still ahead to our next resupply, we're going to run out of food. Andy, who is much leaner than Frank and me, is eating at double our rate to keep warm and will be out of food by evening. We ration our daily snacks and hope that there will be food at the Biederman's cabin located some 40 km ahead. Our spirits improve as we discover that the Charley River wolf pack is using our route and has stamped out a narrow path atop the invisible trail below. We're one with them as we trace their prints for the rest of the day.

The wind is up again and the temperature is cold. I'm hungry from the food rationing and am finding it difficult to stay warm. It's been a long day and we're making our final push to the cabin. As I ride this last section of river the wind dies, and I notice that I can see my

shadow from the full moon that rose a couple of hours earlier. I turn off my headlamp and look up. Standing in the middle of the frozen Yukon River, seemingly a million miles away from anyone, with the moon piercing through the starry blackness of the evening sky and misty streaks of green aurora pulsating from horizon to horizon, I know why I'm here.

Sitting high on the south bank in a stand of birch, the empty Biederman cabin is a traditional rest stop for mushers during the Yukon Quest, and is our best chance at finding food. Our luck holds true as we discover a two-kilogram tub of JIF peanut butter, a half-full jar of coffee whitener and a couple packs of egg noodles left from the race three weeks earlier. At least we won't go hungry.

We arrived in Circle on Friday night, March 21, nine days after leaving Eagle, and are resting up in the local school. With a population of less than 100, the town is tiny and goes into hibernation in the winter.

Word has travelled quickly down river and the town folk have anticipated the arrival of the "crazy" cyclists. We're being forced off the river here in Circle and must head on inland trails to detour the Yukon Flats. No one has used this northern section of river in recent years, as the surface is too dangerous and unpredictable. Locals have told us poor ice, overflow and lots of open water make The Flats "suicidal" for winter travel. We don't see this as a negative turn of events but rather a reflection of global change during the last century. In Jesson's day this section of river was solid and safe, seeing thousands of travellers moving along its length, but no longer. We're researching a good alternate riding route around this part and hope to be back on the river in about four days.

We move undaunted toward Nome.

TRAVEL NETWORKING

Each week, Travel readers are invited to express their views on selected travel topics. Voting is by Internet.

Last week's question: How many of the seven continents (Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America and South America) have you been on?

One: 21 per cent

Two: 29 per cent

Three: 26 per cent

Four: 13 per cent

Five: 7 per cent

Six: 3 per cent

Seven: 1 per cent

(877 total votes)

This week's question: What annoys you the most about flying?

Cramped seats; bad inflight service; crying babies; flight delays; people hitting the back of your seat

Visit canada.com/travel to cast your vote or make general travel comments.