

Icefields Parkway between Banff and Jasper – even the name is majestic

TOURING CANADA

# 'It feels like a place only great explorers should reach'

Mountains, lakes, bears, forest fires and the greatest ride of your life – welcome to the unspoilt paradise of North America

By Andy Davidson  
STAFF WRITER

**T**he BMW R1200GS hums calmly, pottering on without a worry in the world. It has made the same journey before while I, on the other hand, am new and nervous. I haven't seen another person in hours. I'm riding slowly, on dusty gravel roads, in jeans and a shirt, somewhere in the Canadian Rockies with nothing more than a pathetic little stick for

protection and I can't keep my eyes on the road. I can't help it; they're darting frantically, scanning the thick forest for bears. The last 20 people I've met warned me about bears on this trail but offered no advice for when I come face to face with one. What happens if I turn a corner and find one in my path? It's too tight to perform a U-turn and I'm not about to play chicken with a grizzly. All I can do to preoccupy my mind is immerse myself in the sights and enjoy the most beautiful place I've ridden in my life.

Some 1000 miles south of where I am the world and its dog is flying in to the US to ride the same old, virtually worn out cliché that is Route 66. Every Harley rider both sides of the pond has been there and done that. This, however, is fresh beauty; this is where you need to be for the greatest riding week of your life and have a real adventure in the Rockies with a GS, on open roads, with epic backdrops and more wildlife than you can shake a broken twig at.  
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**'I ride for hours, chasing the rapids, glancing at the eagles flying overhead'**

Lost somewhere on a long trail, the map wasn't much help

Up on the pegs trail riding through the forest looking for waterfalls

Road signs Icefields Parkway-style. This is a true adventure

One of dozens of bridges which criss-cross over the Upper Arrow Lake, the route runs from Ainsworth Hot springs to Revelstoke

**500 miles from anywhere**

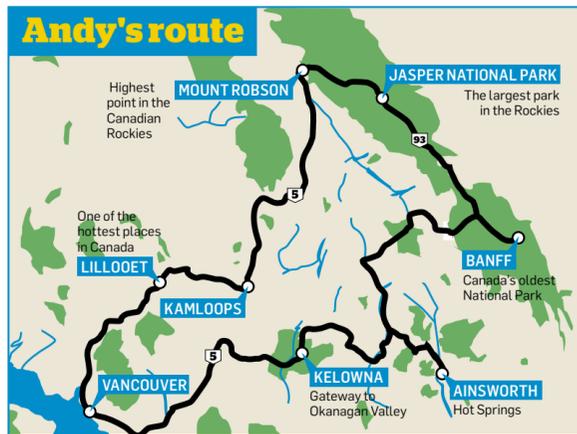
"You better watch it; there are bears where you're heading." I know, I know, so everyone keeps telling me. But I haven't seen any since leaving Vancouver and it's now day four. I'm so worked up about bears that anything I see moving instantly transforms itself into a grizzly. I've yanked the brakes for wild boar, deer and even a squirrel. But it doesn't matter; that raw, untainted nature is one of Canada's most mesmerising features. And there is no better way to experience it than on a motorcycle.

I swapped some money for a 2010 BMW R1200GS in Vancouver, stashed a map in my pocket, waterproof throw-overs, shorts, t-shirt, towel and a toothbrush in a pannier and set-off for Mount Robson, the highest mountain in the Rockies. Easy as that. Now here I am, at a truck stop in the middle of

nowhere, 500 miles from Vancouver, talking to a trucker about bears and cafés. "Café? You're in the boon dogs out here son," he chuckled. "Just keep on heading north!" he shouted from his truck as he rammed it into gear and chugged away, plumes of black smoke in tow. No lattes for me then. I've got enough sandwiches and fuel to last the day, so I double check my map one more time and hang a left onto the gravel pathway between the trees.

**Chasing the rapids**

The track carves through the forest and runs parallel with an endless river. I start to race alongside the water as it slaps the rocks and weaves its way through the woodland. I stand tall on the pegs, flick the GS to 'enduro' mode and pick up the pace. The big BMW makes light work of the trail as it purrs alongside the frothy blue water.



Frothy white foam bubbles over rocks and the surface sparkles like a thousand camera flashes. It's captivating and I ride alongside for hours, chasing the rapids, glancing at the eagles flying overhead.

It doesn't feel real. The road network cuts through places I shouldn't really be. It's too natural, too idyllic. It's a place only great explorers should be able to reach, but instead of lusting over their pictures in National Geographic, you can rent a bike and ride through an otherwise unreachable land for a few hundred quid. After a full day in the dust, the trail slowly returns to Tarmac and I sit back down, flick the riding mode back to 'comfort' and await a new, ever-changing backdrop.

**Riding into the sky**

Since I left Vancouver the road has been a continuous incline to the sky. I



Ferries are free and cross crystal waters



One of hundreds of lakes on the Icefields Parkway



Two cubs and one mamma, the mother was chewing on shrubs while the cubs bounced around



It looks bad, but forest fires are normal here



You can ride tracks like this for miles

**'You're an idiot for getting that close! a woman shrieks before speeding away. The bear looks at me as if to say 'she has a point'**

and helicopter blades thwack through the air as buckets of water are released from long pipes onto a raging forest fire.

**Into bear country**

The Icefields Parkway is where everyone says I'll see the bears. I've been looking forward to it since Gatwick and

**Trip in numbers**

1600 Miles		
08 Days	03 Reindeer	02 Moose
06 Bears	08 Deer	18 Horses
12 Goats	03 Pigs	11 Squirrels

I'm only 19 miles in, so I tuck behind the screen, twist the throttle wide open and ride hard until I can only see the smoke in my mirrors. An hour later the police closed the entrance so I was lucky to make it through.

I thought the bears would be hard to spot, but casually strolling just four metres from the highway is a black bear with two cubs in tow. I cut the engine, slowly get off the bike and gently follow the bear, not daring to step on the grass - as if the Tarmac will protect me. Four metres, three, two and I'm getting closer. The bears are chewing on shrubs and pretending I'm not there. I'm transfixed until I hear a car brake harshly. "You're an idiot for getting that close!" a woman shrieks before wheeling away. The bear looks at me as if to say "she has a point", so I retreat slowly and ride off with the biggest smile. Another 20 miles down

the road I see a brown grizzly crashing through the bushes. No way was I getting anywhere near that one.

**True biking paradise**

As I begin the ride back to Vancouver, the terrain changes every 100 miles as the road wriggles through the Rockies into monumental national parks, up and over snow-capped passes, into ranch towns, through 42°C deserts and through canyons and gorges. The Sea to Sky Highway from Whistler to Vancouver is a cleverly crafted ribbon of Tarmac that flows along the coast, wrapping around the mountains. Every section seems to be shaped especially for bikes as they run adjacent to crystal waterfalls, turquoise lakes and more natural beauty than you can imagine. Pack a rucksack, take a good camera and book a cheap last minute flight. This is where you need to be.

**EXPERT**

MIKE GAT, CYCLE BC



"Canada's best feature is the vast amount of nothingness. All of England is 130,000 km<sup>2</sup> while British Columbia alone is 944,000 km<sup>2</sup> with the population of 4.6 million, that's less than half of the population of London. British Columbia offers a true sense of adventure that's getting harder and harder to find these days, couple that with our renowned Canadian hospitality and that's what makes Canada the perfect riding destination."

■ Thanks to Cycle BC for the rental, [vancouver.cyclebc.ca](http://vancouver.cyclebc.ca)

**COSTS**

- Petrol is £0.81 per litre
- £600 for a week bike with discounts for longer rentals
- Return flights to Vancouver cost around £700 on average
- B&Bs are popular and cost around £45 a night
- Food and drink costs are similar to UK prices

**What you need**

Luggage systems, helmets and gloves are included for riders and pillows, so just pack a jacket, a toothbrush, sun cream and a camera. August guarantees warm, dry weather but there's less traffic in September and you can wear full kit without getting too hot.



Hire a GS and kit for £600 a week