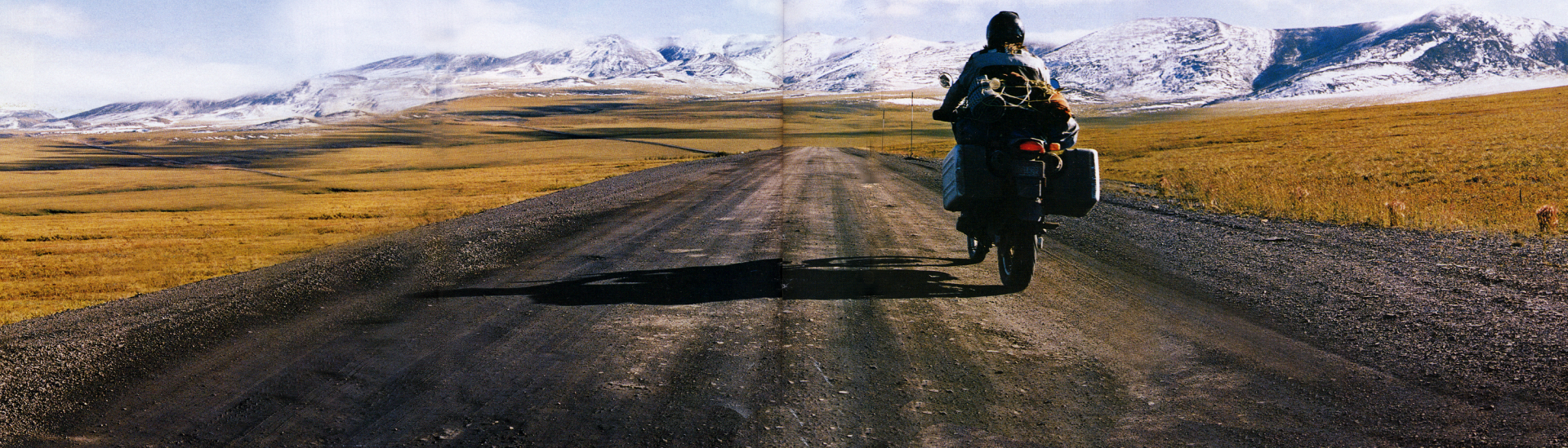


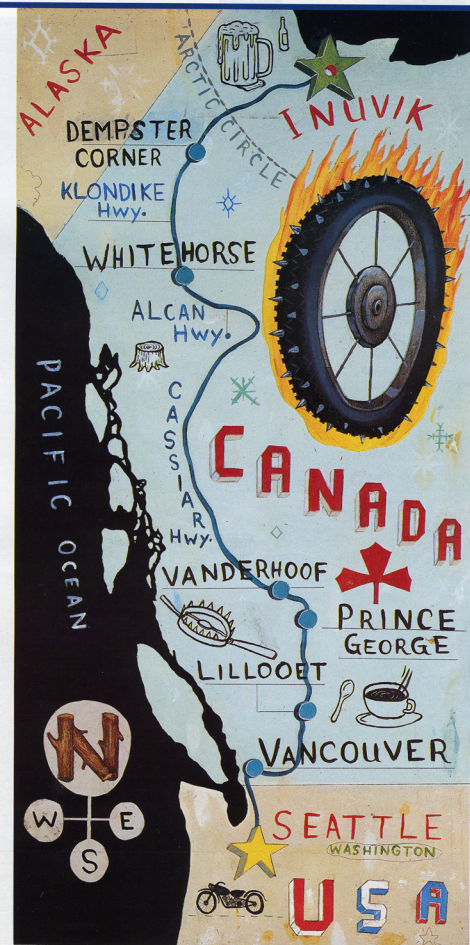
ARCTIC BLAST

EIGHT LONG DAYS, 2,500 RUGGED MILES, ONE NOBLE GOAL:

TO HOIST A BEER AT THE NORTHERNMOST BAR ON THE CONTINENT.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK JENKINSON





IT'S 11 P.M., BUT THERE'S A BEAUTIFUL LATE-AFTERNOON LIGHT making itself liquid on the hazy air of a bar in the tiny town of Inuvik, way up in Canada's Northwest Territories. A lousy country band is tuning up for the late set as Karl and I swig beers and watch an Inuit native play two of the bar's three pool tables at once—and run 'em both. We'll close this bar and walk back to the hotel at 1 A.M., just in time to watch the sun set, not only on the day but on the adventure of a lifetime.

Tonight's longnecks were the champagne toast capping an eight-day, 2,500-mile motorcycle trek high up into the Arctic Circle for the express purpose of having a beer at the northernmost bar on the continent. In the 13 years that Karl and I have worked and hung out together, we've crisscrossed the country photographing everything from IndyCar racing and extreme skiing to presidents and death-row inmates. But we've never had an adventure as remarkable as this one. Now that we've hit North America's ultimate dead end, we've got no place to go but home. But at least our thirst has been quenched—and we've got some stories to tell.

Day 1: Seattle to Lillooet, British Columbia (300 miles)

Karl and I pick up our bikes at Ride West, a BMW dealership in Seattle that's a nexus for motorcyclists who like to take the roads less traveled in the Pacific Northwest. Our rides are a BMW R 1150 GS, the fifth generation of the company's legendary line of adventure tourers, and the brand-new F650 GS Dakar, the 652cc single-cylinder machine that until recently was dubbed Funduro, a lame combination of "fun" and "enduro."

The 1150 GS is the motorcycling equivalent of a Humvee, a behemoth that we load up with more than 700 pounds of gear. But the "little 650" is tougher than you'd think. "Don't think of it as a little dirt bike," says a factory rep. "It's a BMW. It has long legs."

Soon we're on our way north—and stuck in the long lines of traffic waiting to cross the Canadian border. Once free of the suburban sprawl that spreads from Seattle to Vancouver, we open the bikes up for the first time on British Columbia's beautiful highways. Linked medium-radius turns flow into one another at 90 mph, each opening up onto astonishing scenery that gets even more breathtaking as the sun drops to the horizon. The 1150 GS is a willing dance partner, stable and fast.

When we reach Lillooet, a ramshackle gold-rush town, we decide to set up camp for the night. Dinner is a bag of potato chips and a six-pack.

Day 2: Lillooet to Vanderhoof (420 miles)

"I think she likes you," Karl whispers across the table inside the Oasis Pub in McLeese Lake, where we've stopped for lunch.

"Well, of course she does," I reply. "I'm completely irresistible."

The truth is I know exactly why Lori, our pretty truck-stop Shania Twain, has been flirting with me: I haven't got a chance with her. She saw us pull up on bikes loaded for a long haul, so she knows we're just passing through. Besides, I've practically got a neon sign on my forehead blinking MARRIED.

That combination gives Lori, a world-class sport flirt, the freedom to come on strong. Fortunately, I've played this game before. "Watch, at some point she's going to make sure I'm unavailable," I tell Karl.

As if on cue, Lori struts over to refill our coffee mugs. "So," she says, "what do your wives think about you riding big, fast motorcycles all over the Great White North?"

Sport flirting is one of the great joys of a road trip, a harmless give-and-take between men and women who'll never see each other again. Karl and I finish our burgers, and leave a Loonie (a \$1 Canadian coin) and a Toonie (a \$2 coin) on the table. As we sign the guest book, I ask Lori if I can take a photograph of her outside.

"You know, you're the third person this month that's wanted to take my picture," she says in mock protest. "Why do people want a picture of me?"

Gee, Lori, I have no idea.

Karl and I camp that night at the Camino Real campgrounds between an immense barley field and the Nechako River. We are now far enough north that sunlight shines through our tent until well after 11 P.M. But the late-night glare isn't the only thing that keeps me from falling asleep—beavers are hard

I TAKE SOLACE IN THE AWESOME BEAUTY THAT SURROUNDS US—AND THE INCREDIBLE HIGHWAY THAT SLICES THROUGH IT. THERE ARE 100-MILE STRETCHES WITHOUT A SINGLE SIGN OF CIVILIZATION.



BARLEY-DAVIDSON: Setting up camp in the beaver-infested barley field near the Nechako River.

at work in the river, their tails slapping the water with the force of cinder blocks. Also, as fate would have it, our tent is smack in the middle of the trail the beavers use to steal barley from the field. We can hear them sniffing around the tent and splashing in the river all night long.

Day 3: The Cassiar Highway, Vanderhoof to Dease Lake (540 miles)

An old-timer overhears our breakfast conversation anticipating our day on the Cassiar Highway, which I will soon discover is simply the most beautiful, remarkable road I've ever ridden. "That's thick bear country up there," he warns us, while slathering his pancakes with syrup. "Don't go into the woods without a weapon."

That's not exactly what I wanted to hear before hitting the road. I've been slightly obsessing about bears since we started preparing for this trip. My friends thought I was being overly dramatic but, sure enough, as soon as Karl and I turn right off Highway 16 onto the Cassiar (Highway 37), the first thing we see is a small black bear running across the road. A mile later, we spot a grizzly feeding on an adjacent hillside. My initial fears are well founded.

I take solace in the awesome beauty that surrounds us—and the incredible highway that slices through it. About a quarter of the Cassiar is unpaved, and there are 100-mile stretches without a single sign of civilization.

Roads like this and the multitude of logging trails that flow into it are

what adventure touring bikes are all about. They make up for our lack of off-road experience. The P650 GS Dakar dances on unpaved road like a Baja buggy, while the 1150 GS beats the ground into submission as if conjuring up a smooth trail of its own. The dual-purpose tires are fine on dry to slightly muddy roads, so traction isn't a problem.

While I am comfortable on either bike, the Dakar is more fun in the dirt. Karl likes the stability of the 1150 GS, so we quickly sort out who will ride what when the road gets rough. We roost along unpaved sections at an average speed of 80 mph feeling completely confident. When we hit paved, twisty stretches, both motorcycles do a fair imitation of a sport bike, allowing a knee to occasionally kiss the road.

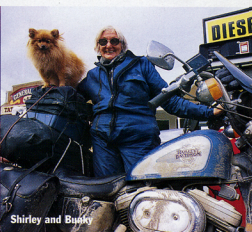
Our biggest obstacle, besides bears, proves to be Mother Nature. The Cassiar is famous for its volatile weather. We hit pockets of rain every 50 miles or so, but we can always see sunshine on the horizon. It's a local phenomenon

and a barometer for optimism when you're stuck on a motorcycle during a sudden downpour: It isn't raining everywhere, it's just raining "here." The solution is to get out of "here" and head "there," where the sun is bright and the road is dry. We roll on the throttle and hammer for blue sky.

Riding into Dease Lake at the end of the day, we see eight more bears as the sun hides behind the mountains. A mother bear and her two cubs stand on their hind legs at the side of the road with their paws in the air, as if waving. Discretion being the better part of valor, we check into a motel for the night.



Lori at the Oasis



Shirley and Bunky

Day 4: Dease Lake to Whitehorse, Yukon Territories (440 miles)

We ride to the end of the Cassiar Highway, then make a left onto the Alaska-Canada Highway. The Alcan is the supermodel of highways, lovely but remote. Like a spoiled babe, it bores me with its perfect beauty.

Stopping for lunch, I notice that the waitress looks Asian, and I reflect on the theory that North America was originally inhabited by Asians who had crossed the Bering Strait by island-hopping the Aleutians. Then I look down at the menu and realize we're in a Chinese restaurant. So much for historical perspective.

Day 5: Whitehorse to Dempster Corner (330 miles)

At our first gas stop on the North Klondike Highway, I watch another rider in full rain gear pull up to the pumps on a filthy Harley. Curious about how this guy managed to get so dirty, I ask where he's coming from—only to get a surprise. Pulling off the helmet, "he" turns out to be a sweet little old woman from Phoenix named Shirley. She pulls a Pomeranian puppy out of a travel case bunged to her rear seat and introduces us to Bunky.

"I just came down the Dempster Highway," Shirley tells us nonchalantly. "I went up to the Arctic Circle to celebrate my 65th birthday. Now I'm heading down to Tijuana to visit some friends. After that, I've got to get back up to South Dakota for a motorcycle rally."

Karl and I exchange glances. Our image as macho, Arctic adventurers is being torn to shreds by a Harley-riding grandmother and her lapdog.



ANOTHER RIDER PULLS UP TO THE GAS PUMPS ON A FILTHY HARLEY. I ASK WHERE HE'S FROM—ONLY TO GET A SURPRISE.

It is raining and growing dark by the time we reach Dempster Corner, which isn't really a town but a truck stop owned by the G'wich'in Nation at the foot of the Dempster Highway. I am tempted to push on—true, it's already 7 P.M., but at this latitude I figure we have at least three more hours of dusky daylight to guide us.

Karl, however, books us a room in the bunkhouse of a nearby hotel. It sounds kind of ranch-y, but turns out to be raunchy. The "bunkhouse" isn't

a house at all—it's actually three ancient semis that have been strung together, with windows and doors cut out of their sides to form cubicles. A prospector renting a room has set up a series of sorting benches outside that run the entire length of the building.

Our room is an absolute mess. There's garbage everywhere, including a bunch of take-out food containers that reek of leftovers—one is half-filled with rancid onion rings.

Someone's old clothes are hanging in the closet. I glare at Karl. He shrugs. "I think I'll probably roll my sleeping bag out on the bed," he says.

Good idea, buddy.

Day 6: Dempster Corner to Eagle Plains (240 miles)

Once we fill up in Dempster Corner, the nearest gas station is 240 miles away in Eagle Plains. The Dakar's gas tank has a range of just about 160 miles, so we rent a five-gallon gas can and strap it onto the back of the

DUAL PERSONALITIES

Thanks to the new breed of adventure touring motorcycles, your next big trip doesn't have to end when you run out of blacktop. Here are five great bikes that pack on- and off-road performance into every ride:

BMW F650 GS (\$8,100) BMW's least-expensive bike is still, well, a BMW. A noticeable improvement over its predecessor, the new F650 GS boasts a great 625cc liquid-cooled four-valve single engine, a sculpted aerodynamic body, and that most familiar BMW feature, a high-altitude price tag. That said, this is the most road-ready mount in the 650cc class. Among the neat new options are heated handgrips and stylish hard bags.



The F650 GS

KAWASAKI KLR650 (\$4,899) The KLR650 isn't the freshest face on the block, but maybe that's its strength. After several years of retooling, this Cow has evolved into a super dual-sport ride—and an absolute bargain. Off-road, the motocross-style frame and long-travel suspension soak up

bumps and ruts, while the large-displacement engine, hefty gas tank (6.1 gallons), and mini-fairing make long-range trips a breeze at highway speeds.

KTM 640 LCA ADVENTURE R (\$8,198) Given the company's off-road heritage, it's no surprise that KTM's big and stylish Adventure R becomes a bad boy when the road turns to rubble. The

rally-spec suspension and powerful liquid-cooled four-valve 625cc engine make the Adventure R the closest thing yet to a real Dakar off-road race bike. Yet the massive 7.4-gallon fuel tank and mini-fairing give it extended cruising capability. If your route features more dirt than driveway, you'll be glad you splurged on this uncommon, if pricey, ride.

TRIUMPH TIGER (\$10,499) With its eye-catching enduro styling, a powerful bigger-than-class engine, and exceptional sports-touring capability, the Tiger roars louder than any beast in this jungle. True, its \$10,000-plus price will take the biggest bite out of your wallet, but check out the heart of this wild ride: a fuel-injected 12-valve, three-cylinder 885cc powerplant that pumps through a six-speed transmission. The enduro look and long-travel suspension make the Tiger leap at off-road adventures, but the springing and damping have been designed with the highway in mind. The frame-mounted fairing keeps the weather out of your lap, while an optional luggage system can be integrated seamlessly into the bike's unique design. An all-around Triumph.



The Tiger

SUZUKI DR650SE (\$5,399) The most affordable answer to your on- and off-road cravings is probably Suzuki's largest-displacement dual-sport. Off-road riders will note that the compact air- and oil-cooled 644cc four-stroke engine and exhaust system have been tuned for emphatic low- and midrange power. Also, the rigid but lightweight chassis and long-travel forks help take the edge off bumps. On smoother surfaces the gear-driven counterbalancer keeps the single's variations to a minimum, while the roomy seat and frame-mounted rear rack make this bike suitable for long jaunts. And since the riding position and height are adjustable, this Suzuki can haul riders of all sizes.

—James K. Willcox

1150 GS. It's raining and miserably cold as we roll onto the Dempster Highway.

The evergreens that line this road have suddenly become stunted and weird, like something out of a horror movie. Everything looks barren and spooky in the morning fog. We travel for over an hour without seeing another vehicle.

The Dempster Highway's surface varies tremendously, from squirrelly gravel to hard-packed dirt to deepening mud. The bikes are certainly up to the task, but our riding skills and tires are not. Driving just 40 mph seems risky, so it's slow going today on the Dempster.

After 100 miles we pull into a cul-de-sac for a break. A minivan with a space-saver spare on the rear wheel pulls up next to us. The driver rolls down his window. "You guys want a cup of coffee?" he asks. "Come on in an' get warm."

We clamber into the van over two flat tires and meet Ray Kennedy, who appears to be in his early 60s. The rear seats of the van have been stripped away, replaced by a bed and a small cooking counter made out of two-by-fours.

"Nice," Karl says. "You've really got this set up to travel. How long have you been on the road?"

"Two years," Ray answers. "My wife's going through menopause. You just don't want to be around for that. I'll go back home when she's done."

When we get out of the van, Karl notices that Ray's donut tire has gone flat. We offer to fix it, or at least send back a tow truck from Eagle Plains. "Naw, don't bother," Ray says. "I'll probably just stay here a couple of days."

At 150 miles, the Dakar runs out of gas. As we refuel the bikes we laugh about our predicament. Things can't possibly get any worse, so we'll be fine. A moment later we are struck by the fact that the rain has stopped—it's now snowing. We decide to press on. It's only 80 miles to shelter. How bad can it be?

Bad. The wind is whipping at 35 mph. Visibility is maybe 50 feet. And we're sloshing through three inches of snow on a dirt road—with street tires. We struggle to keep the bikes upright the entire way. Then the Dakar's temperature light blinks. My bike is overheating in the middle of a blizzard.

I figure that a rock has probably punched a hole in the radiator so I check it, only to discover that the radiator is encrusted with mud. We use the last of our drinking water to wash it clean and soon we're under way again.

The ride is agonizing. My trapezoids feel like someone is stabbing me with an ice pick. My feet are so cold that I wedge my toes between the exhaust pipe and the engine cases, a stupid move since it ensures that I will break bones if I crash—and we're on the verge of crashing every second. My reflexes are shot from fear, tension, and the cold as we frantically search for traction. I've been scared on a bike before, but never for this length of time. Potholes offer the best surface, and they are visible even in the snow, so we find ourselves playing connect the dots with every pothole on the highway.

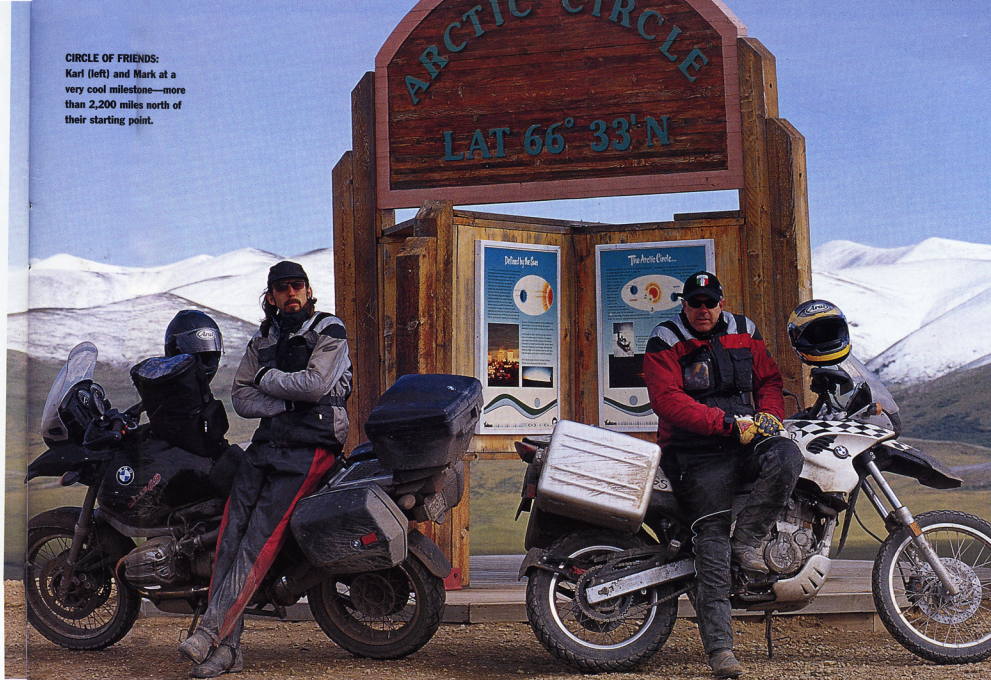
The 80-mile trip to Eagle Plains, a glorified rest station for truckers, takes nearly five hours. The hotel is surprisingly upscale for something affiliated with a gas station. The lobby is full of German tourists. Turns out that the entire Klondike region is such a popular destination for Germans that local guidebooks are published in German and the coffee shop carries German newspapers.

Karl flashes a smile. "Shall we take 10 minutes to make ourselves pretty before we head to the bar?"

Inside our room I take off my coat and realize that my BMW riding suit has done an amazing job of keeping me dry. It has also done a fine job of containing my three-days-without-a-shower stench. Hit men could dispose of bodies in these things.

That night in the bar, we check out a series of photographs that tell the story of the Mad Trapper. In 1932 two Canadian Mounties wanted to question a hermit trapper about a minor complaint. He responded to their knock by shooting through the door, wounding one of the Mounties. For the next 31 days he outran and outfought a posse of 30 Mounties and Indian trackers equipped with dogsleds and airplanes in the dark Arctic winter. The Mad Trapper crossed the tundra in 10-pound snowshoes carrying a 100-pound pack and a rifle, mingling with caribou herds to cover his tracks. The Mounties airlifted supplies, while the Trapper lived off the

CIRCLE OF FRIENDS: Karl (left) and Mark at a very cool milestone—more than 2,200 miles north of their starting point.



barren Arctic landscape in howling blizzards and temperatures that dropped as low as 50 degrees below zero.

Radio sales throughout North America skyrocketed as the press and public followed this 1932 equivalent of a white Bronco cruising slowly down a California freeway. Four separate firefights would lead the media to dub the event "The Arctic Circle Wars." Eventually the Mounties would "get their man"—but not before he got three of them. Through it all the Mad Trapper, later identified as Albert Johnson, never uttered a word of explanation.

Day 7: Eagle Plains to/from the Arctic Circle (80 miles)

We're bummed. The roads are plagued by stretches of sheer ice, the passage over the Continental Divide is snowed in, and the ferries that cross the Arctic Red and Reel rivers aren't running. The Germans are all flocking south.

Our dream of having a beer at the northernmost bar has apparently been dashed. We settle for a consolation prize, a short trek to the edge of the Arctic Circle for an obligatory photograph. In these conditions, we have no choice but to start heading back home tomorrow.

Day 8: Eagle Plains to Inuvik, Northwest Territories (260 miles)

At breakfast Karl and I are miserable. In all the years that we have known each other and worked together we have never failed at a mission. But as we shuffle outside to load the bikes for the trip back to Seattle, we discover... a cold, clear beautiful day.

Forget south. We pull out onto the dry, dusty Dempster Highway and ride

north. After 40 miles we stop at the Arctic Circle marker to trade bikes and we immediately spot Ray's maroon minivan.

"Want a cup of coffee?"

We warm up with Ray and look over a vast valley of unbroken tundra. "I've been here since last night," Ray says, "hoping to see a musk ox or some caribou. I figure if I were a caribou, this is where I'd want to be."

Karl and I have places to go and beers to drink so we get back on the bikes. We reach the border to the Northwest Territories and find that the road has turned into 30 miles of wet dirt, the equivalent of a freshly plowed field. The ice picks begin to probe my trapezoids again.

The border crossing is at the summit of the Richardson Mountains, marking

ROAD SCHOLAR

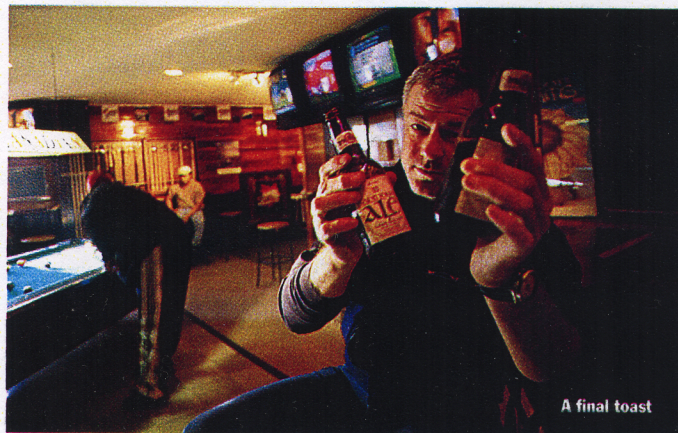
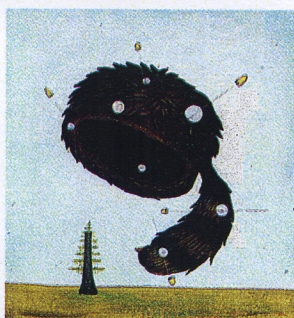
Asking for directions is suddenly cool—if you have a Global Positioning Satellite device. One of the more affordable units right now is Garmin's eMap GPS receiver (\$200), which features an integrated map that will instantly show you how far you are from food, fuel, or lodging. Roughly the size of a small flat calculator, the eMap is programmed with an internal base map of North and South America, including airports, towns, and highway exits. To get more detailed maps or specific points of interest, just plug the eMap into a PC and download the info from Garmin's line of CD-ROMs.





Sunset in Inuvik—at 11 P.M.

AT LAST, WE WALK INTO THE HAZY HONKY-TONK KNOWN AS THE MAD TRAPPER INN. PERFECT.



A final toast

WELCOME TO INUVIK

Okay, Inuvik has only one stoplight, and for some reason it still doesn't have its own symphony orchestra, but there's a lot more to do in town than just writing your name in the snow. Here's a brief guide to some of Inuvik's Arctic amusements.

GO TO THE DOGS Mackenzie Delta Mushing will have you driving your own team of sled dogs before you can say "How do I stop this thing?" From November to April, you can rent a team for two hours—or head out into the wilderness for an overnight camping trip. 867-777-3253.

MUSKRAT LOVE You won't want to miss the famed Muskrat Jamboree, a four-day festival of log-sawing, snowshoe races, snowmobile competitions, and general

our second crossing of the Continental Divide. This is precisely where the Mad Trapper crossed on snowshoes in the dead of winter, a feat no one thought possible. We're here in August and a 50-mph crosswind is so fierce that I have to lean the bike 10 to 15 degrees just to go straight. One gust blows me completely off the road, but just as my rear wheel rolls off the shoulder, I open up the throttle and wheelie back onto the highway.

Another 60 miles or so and we have descended the mountain enough for conditions to warm up. We are able to cruise at 80 mph. Then the Dakar's exhaust pipe melts through a bungee cord and the rear tire sucks a pack of camping gear into my wheel. The wheel locks up and I skid down the road for almost a quarter of a mile. When the bike finally spits me off I'm only going about 20 mph. Helmets, body armor, and a riding companion definitely come in handy when things go wrong. The Dakar is unscathed.

At the Arctic Red River crossing we meet Gerard McDonnell, a young Irish expatriate living in Alaska. Gerard is riding a beautifully set up KTM 640 LC4 Adventure R and has years of adventure touring experience. Our bikes have been terrific, but Gerard's has the look of a hard-core adventure motorcycle: a huge 7.5-gallon tank, aluminum Tour Tech saddlebags, extra running lights, and proper knobby tires. He offers to let me ride his bike for a while and I jump at the chance.

When we arrive in Inuvik, Gerard heads off to the campgrounds while Karl and I check in to the Mackenzie Hotel. I peek into the hotel bar to inspect the environment for our celebratory drink—and I am crestfallen. It looks like the lounge of a Holiday Inn. We haven't traveled through 2,500 miles of wilderness and bad weather to celebrate at a joint that looks like a million others across the country.

I approach the receptionist. "Excuse me," I interrupt, "how many bars are there in Inuvik?"

"There's just three now," she replies in a thick accent that is a mix of Scottish brogue with an Irish lilt at the end, as if each declarative sentence is really a question.

"Which one is the farthest north?"

"Uh, let's see, the farthest north?" She ponders the question as if it were a tricky riddle. "That would be about three blocks down the road, eh?"

Incredible. We walk through midtown Inuvik in our riding gear, our boots clomping along wooden sidewalks. Karl pulls open the door and we walk on into the hazy honky-tonk known as . . . The Mad Trapper Inn. Perfect.

After closing the place, Karl and I are walking back toward the hotel with a contented glow when we bump into Gerard, who's returning to his campsite on the edge of town. "You fellas had a good evening, didja?" he says.

"Excellent, mission accomplished," I boast. "We came to have a beer at the northernmost bar on the continent."

"Oh, was that what you were up to?" Gerard shakes his head. "I hate to disappoint you, but the northernmost bar I know of would be in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. Excellent little joint there."

Karl and I exchange a knowing look. Road trip!

spring-fever madness held the first weekend of April every year since 1957. Besides, the Jamboree draws a huge crowd to Inuvik. And that means—an all-too-rare sight around here—women! 867-777-4321.

FLY ME A RIVER Charter a floatplane at Beaufort Delta Adventure Tours and, for \$250, you can check out the Mackenzie River and stunning Richardson Mountain ridge by air. The flight also stops in Aklavik, so you can visit the grave of Albert "Mad Trapper" Johnson—Canada's notorious bad-guy legend. 867-777-3067.

OARS 'N' SWELLS For an up-close tour of Inuvik's majestic rivers, stop by Western Arctic Adventures and Equipment and rent a kayak or a canoe for \$35 an hour or \$200 a week. 867-777-2594.

CHEAP SKATE At the Midnight Sun Recreation Complex, you can hit the rink and sample the entire gamut of local sports—from hockey to curling (which is something like bowling, but it involves ice and brooms). 867-777-4851.