

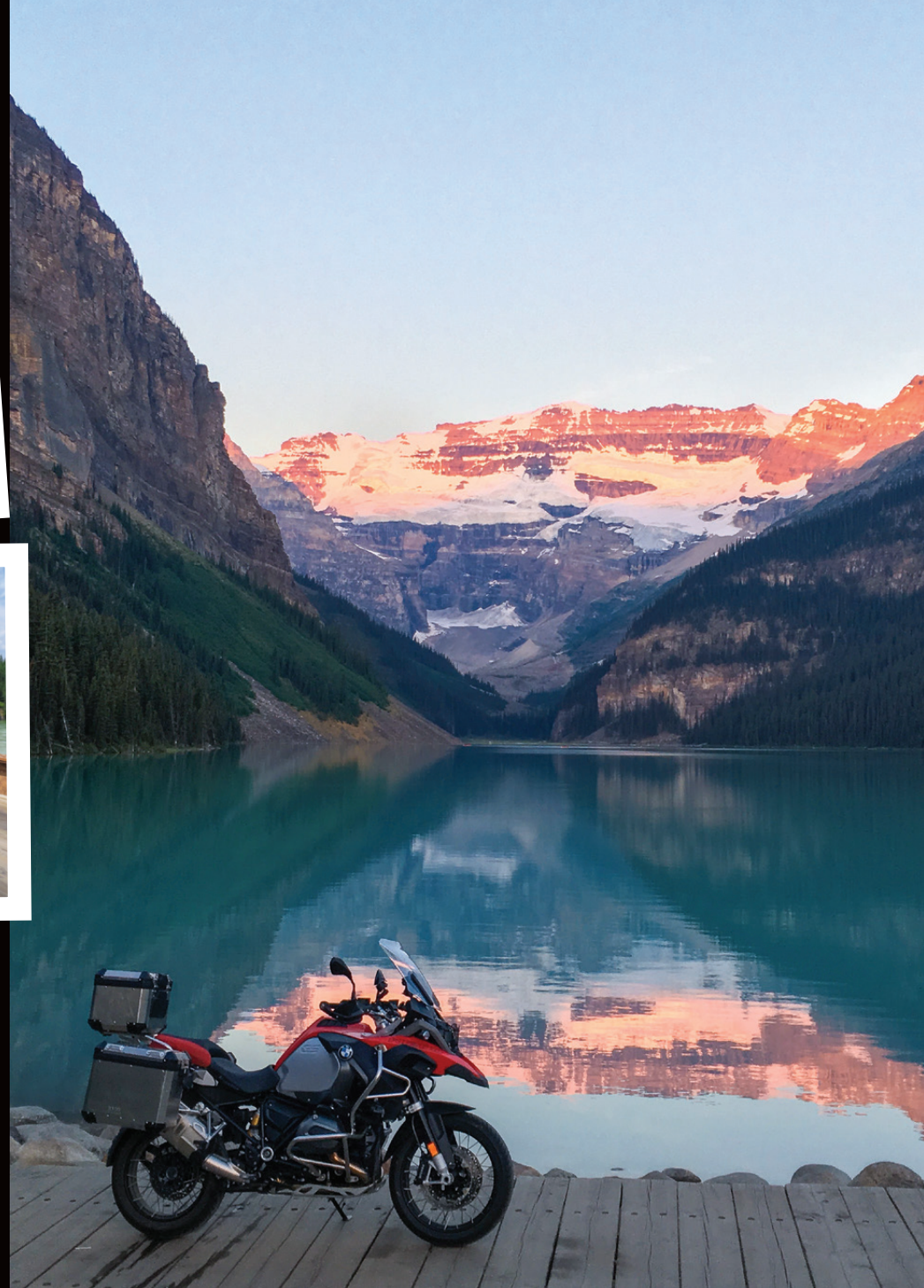
TOUR REVIEW

NORTH OF THE BORDER

EDELWEISS CANADA WEST TOUR

Dave and Mary, a couple from Australia, enjoy a smooth, winding descent on Meadows in the Sky Parkway in Mount Revelstoke National Park, with views of the jagged Monashee Mountains in the distance.

STORY & PHOTOS BY **GREG DREVENSTEDT**



Above, top: One of the First Nations totem poles in Vancouver's Stanley Park. Above, bottom: Fabio and Fatima, a couple from Brazil, lead the group across a wood-planked bridge over the Columbia River, near Golden. Right: You've got to get up pretty early to catch sunrise—and beat the crowds—at Lake Louise in Banff National Park.

Above: Our crew, after riding a gondola to the top of 7,700-foot Eagle's Eye, a popular jumping off point for downhill mountain bikers and skiers at Kicking Horse Resort in Golden. Right, top: Helmcken Falls in Wells Gray Provincial Park. Right, middle: Poutine is Canada's gift to the world. Right, bottom: Near Kamloops wildfire smoke stung our eyes and obscured scenic views.

When considering a motorcycle tour in another country, you may want to visit some place exotic, like Peru or Thailand, or ride legendary, bucket-list roads and passes in the Alps. The payoff is worth it, but those trips are bookended with long flights that go halfway around the globe and cross many time zones, adding expense, time and jet lag to an already demanding vacation. And then there are the unfamiliar languages, customs and foods, which may be a fascinating part of the experience for some but can be downright nerve-racking for others.

Sometimes you just want things to be easy, which is what makes Edelweiss Bike Travel's Canada West Tour an attractive option. Since it starts and ends in Vancouver, booking direct flights from major U.S. cities is simple and affordable, and the route goes through the English-speaking Canadian provinces of British

Columbia and Alberta. As fellow North Americans, we share a lot in common with our neighbors to the north, such as a love of beer, hamburgers and French fries (the latter are often smothered in gravy and cheese curds, an artery-clogging delight known as poutine).

Last August, my wife Carrie and I joined 10 others from Australia, Brazil, New Zealand, Switzerland and the U.S., along with two guides—Ramon from Germany and Milan from Colorado—on a version of the Canada West Tour that is no longer offered...and that's a good thing. Our tour began and ended in Seattle, which made flights a little shorter but added two border crossings and three days of riding

in Washington state that were not quite "tour worthy." Moving the tour's starting point to Vancouver for 2018 and beyond requires participants to go through customs at the airport (don't forget your passport!), but eliminates the on-bike border crossings and keeps the route entirely in western Canada. Canadian dollars are different from ours, so you need to swap greenbacks for some of the brightly colored polymer banknotes, or, for the best exchange rate, just withdraw some from an ATM.

Most of us rented motorcycles from EagleRider, and although the arrangements were made in advance by Edelweiss, we spent a couple of hours on the morning of



Top: Accessible only by boat, Spirit Island is an iconic islet surrounded by mountains and glaciers in the middle of 14-mile-long Maligne Lake, near Jasper. **Middle, left:** Visible from the Icefields Parkway, Athabasca Glacier is one of six big “toes” of the Columbia Icefield. In 1890 the glacier almost reached where the parkway now passes by, but in the past 127 years it has retreated nearly a mile and lost half its volume. **Middle, right:** Just off Yellowhead Highway, near the border between British Columbia and Alberta, is 12,972-foot Mount Robson, the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies. **Bottom:** On a clear day, nearly every one of the 170 miles along the Icefields Parkway offers postcard views like this one of Bow Lake and Bow Glacier.

the first riding day getting everyone processed and packed, and then a couple of hours at the end of the final day checking the bikes back in. There’s a wide selection of bikes to choose from, but most of us were on BMW R 1200 GS or Triumph Tiger 800 models, plus one Harley-Davidson Street Glide with a fancy metal-flake paintjob (which we nicknamed the Golden Comet). Or, if you’ve got the time and inclination, you can ride your own bike. One member of our group, a fellow named Jim who lives in California, rode his Honda Gold Wing up to Seattle, during the tour and then back home again, saving himself the cost of motorcycle rental that’s usually part of the tour price.

Although Canada is known as the Great White North, in late summer it’s mostly green, with wildflowers adding splashes of red, yellow, purple and blue. When we crossed the border in the northeastern corner of Washington, we left behind the parched Columbia River valley and entered the western foothills of the Canadian Rockies—a land of steep mountains that plunge into flooded river valleys, with dams creating long, fingerlike reservoirs reminiscent of the fjords in Norway. Most of the mountains are densely covered by evergreens, with occasional jagged peaks jutting skyward above the tree line, often with cornices of snow or small glaciers hiding in the shadows. This tour is at its best when it follows small, two-lane provincial routes, such as Highway 31 that’s carved into the cliffs along the shore of Kootenay Lake, Highway 31A that parallels a trout-rich stream as it winds through a picturesque valley and Highway 6 that wiggles its way down the narrow edge of Upper Arrow Lake, crosses it on a cable ferry and then climbs over isolated, rugged mountains on its way to Vernon. On two riding days, because there are no alternatives, the route follows the Trans-Canada Highway from Sicamous to Lake Louise, which passes through beautiful scenery in Glacier and Yoho national parks but is heavily trafficked by cars, RVs and semi-trucks, has few places to stop and, during the short summer season, is under construction in many places. The entire tour route is paved, with daily distances averaging 220 miles on roads that are usually more scenic than challenging.

Our tour included nine riding days and two rest days—one in Jasper and one in Vancouver—but starting in 2018 the tour will skip the Vancouver rest day since that will be the new start/end city, and the three riding days in Washington state will be replaced with two days of riding west-to-east through southern British Columbia, shortening the tour from 11 days to nine. Based on its 36 years of experience, Edelweiss runs this tour as it does others in Europe and around the world—like clockwork. Riding days start off with breakfast at the hotel, a rider meeting at 8:30 a.m. to review the route and kickstands up by 9:00. There’s usually a midmorning coffee break, a lunch stop, an afternoon coffee break, arrival at the hotel around



Kent from Tennessee, the easiest member of the group to spot from a distance thanks to his high-viz helmet and jacket, leads the group after a sightseeing stop at Moraine Lake in Banff National Park.

PHOTO BY MILAN HAASE

5:00 p.m. and dinner at the hotel or a nearby restaurant. Breakfast everyday and dinner on riding days are included in the cost of the tour, with lunches, alcohol with dinner, tips, gas and other incidentals paid out-of-pocket. We stayed in comfortable, mid-level hotels, the nicest of which was the Georgian Court in downtown Vancouver, where we spent two nights and a rest day. That will be the base hotel at the beginning and end of the tour in 2018, so plan to stay a couple extra days before or after the tour to explore and enjoy Vancouver, a lovely, cosmopolitan city similar to San Francisco.

On most organized tours people tend to stick with the group, but Edelweiss strongly encourages participants to go off on their own, preferably with a buddy for safety. Carrie and I opt to do so at least one day on most tours to enjoy some one-on-one time. We rode on our own during the most scenic riding day of the tour—the 170 miles from Lake Louise to Jasper on the Icefields Parkway, which parallels the Continental Divide through Banff and Jasper national parks. We notified one of the tour guides and left early, skipping breakfast so we could get on the road before the tourists showed up.

Highlights of the Canada West Tour are many, with the ride up the Icefields Parkway being at the top of the list. It was a bluebird day, and, with the freedom to stop when and where we wanted, we dropped the kickstand often to admire and photograph lakes, waterfalls, glaciers (hiking up to the edge of Athabasca Glacier is a must-do)

and the jagged mountains that rise steeply on both sides of the long valley. Other highlights include riding up and down the stunning Meadows in the Sky Parkway in Mount Revelstoke National Park, which climbs 4,500 feet in just 16 miles. Riding over Rogers Pass, Kicking Horse Pass and Yellowhead Pass. Standing at the foot of mist-shrouded, 12,972-foot Mount Robson, the highest point in the Canadian Rockies. Having 60 beautiful, twisting miles of the Sea-to-Sky Highway, from Lillooet to Pemberton, all to ourselves after a half-hour construction delay. Our boat ride on Maligne Lake to Spirit Island on our Jasper rest day (others went whitewater rafting, took a scenic ride or walked around town) and wandering around the historic areas of Gastown and Stanley Park on our Vancouver rest day.

Even though we struggled with a record-breaking heat wave during most of our tour and skies choked with wild-fire smoke on the last few days, our group was a hardy, enthusiastic, friendly bunch that took it all in stride, understanding that the weather isn’t under anyone’s control and the unexpected is what makes a journey especially memorable. And everyone appreciated that Edelweiss had done the heavy lifting—organizing the bike rentals, booking the hotels, planning the daily routes. All we had to do was show up and ride.

Edelweiss Bike Travel’s Canada West Tour will run twice a year, in July and September, in 2018 and 2019. For more info, visit edelweissbike.com. 44