

Spoiled and Loving it!
Great Riding all over Alberta

Story by R. Bruce Thomas

On July 25, 2012 my wife and I jumped onto our Honda ST1300 and headed west along Hwy 16 to Jasper. Even though this is a ride we'd done many times before we had no idea, as Edmonton receded in the mirrors, how transformative this weekend would be in the way we look at our home province.

We were meeting some friends from New Zealand who had shipped their bikes to Vancouver, ridden north to Prudhoe Bay on the Beaufort Sea, and were now on their way to Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America. That is one heck of an adventure if you've got six months. We didn't have that much time so we were just going to give them a quick tour around a couple of our favourite roads near Jasper and then ride down the Icefields Parkway with them.

We took them on the wonderful ride past schizophrenic Medicine Lake to stunning Maligne Lake and then on the even narrower and squigglier (if that isn't a word it should be) road to Miette Hot Springs. The next day we all saddled up and headed south on Hwy 93. We stopped at the Athabasca Falls and Glacier, Saskatchewan River Crossing, Peyto Lake, and Lake Louise. We pulled over at just about every lookout on the side of the road and, invariably, all we heard from the two couples were endless superlatives about the scenery, and the road, and the wildlife (something New Zealand is pleasantly short of).

Coming from New Zealanders this was indeed high praise and, while the Icefields Parkway is a breathtaking experience that we try to ride at least once a year, Mary and I rode home happy to have spent time with our friends again and thankful we'd had fantastic weather. Over the next few weeks we talked a lot about the reaction our Kiwi friends had to what has been billed as one of the top scenic drives in the world, and it is right here in our backyard. We also talked about many of the other roads we have ridden in Alberta ending up at the conclusion that we are extremely spoiled by the wide variety of options we have available. In the intervening years we've tried to spend as much time as possible away from the four-lane divided highways in search of other gems.

There is no way I can layout a 'Top 10' list of rides in Alberta; there are just too many roads and too many different types of riders and reasons to ride. What I can do is highlight some of our favourite roads - the ones that we keep going back to - starting in the southwest corner of the province.

Hwy 6 is a 48-km rollercoaster from Pincher Creek to Waterton Lakes National Park. With the Rocky Mountains on your right and the prairies on your left it's a challenge to concentrate on the road but you will want to; it's a terrific ride. The scenery at Waterton is unparalleled but make sure to also take the Akamina Parkway to Cameron Lake whose southern end, like Waterton Lake, is in the United States. Upon returning to Pincher Creek head west on Hwy 507 where wind turbines and rolling hills are highlights. Be prepared for gusty conditions as you make your way to The Cowboy Trail, Hwy 22. The 'double-deuce' runs north for 582 km from a little west of Lundbreck to just north of Mayerthorpe and, while it provides a scenic ride on its own, it also ties together so many other incredible roads. Hwy 533

branches east off 22 at Chain Lakes Provincial Park and is a great little route to Nanton and its famous candy store and the excellent Bomber Command Museum of Canada. Somewhere along 533 is supposed to be a gravel road that leads to Alberta's Magnetic Hill. I haven't found the road or the hill.

Longview is another location along Hwy 22 that you do not want to miss. After getting some beef (or elk, bison, pork, etc.) jerky at the Longview Jerky Shop, or the best steak you'll likely ever have at the Longview Steakhouse, head west on Hwy 541 which soon becomes Hwy 40 and takes you over Highwood Pass (2,206 m) in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park. Note that Canada's highest paved road doesn't open before the middle of June but the wait is worth it as the swirling rock formations are mesmerizing.

If you continue along Hwy 22 beyond Longview you'll find that the combination of Hwys 549 and 762 is a popular twisty route, and not just for bikes, between Millarville and Bragg Creek. On a hot day the short diversion west of Bragg Creek on Hwy 66 to Elbow Falls is worth the trip. Further along Hwy 22 at Cochrane, taking Hwy 1A west to Canmore is an awesome alternative to the Trans-Canada. A second spectacular section of Hwy 1A, running between Banff and Lake Louise, is called The Bow Valley Parkway and you're almost guaranteed to see wildlife.

The David Thompson Highway, aka Hwy 11, between Rocky Mountain House and Saskatchewan River Crossing on the Icefields Parkway, offers terrific scenery including Abraham Lake, the reservoir for the Bighorn Dam. Nordegg is a great place to stop and refuel yourself and your bike as The Crossing can be quite expensive. An alternative to Highway 22 between Rocky Mountain House and Drayton Valley is Sunchild Road/Highway 620 which, contrary to some maps, is fully paved from end to end. Hwy 620 crosses the earthen Brazeau Dam which powers TransAlta's largest hydroelectric plant in Alberta.

To the north of the intersection of Hwys 22 and 43 is Mayerthorpe, home of the Fallen Four Memorial Park. To the west of Mayerthorpe you will find Alberta's Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP), Hwy 658. While not as long or spectacular as the BRP that runs through North Carolina and Virginia, it is a whole lot closer to home. Either Hwy 32 or Hwy 33 are wonderful routes over the Swan Hills and on to Slave Lake where you'll find the mouth-wateringly unique menu at Alimo's Pizzeria.

While Hwy 22 and its offshoots provide a great look at the amazing quality of Alberta's highways and roadways there are other major roads and minor routes around the province that I include among my favourites.

The Big Horn Highway is billed as the 'Scenic Route to Alaska' and lives up to its name. From Hinton through Grande Cache, and on to Grande Prairie, this section of Hwy 40 is a wonderful ride with excellent views of the Rockies and amazing colours if you go in the fall. Carrying on northwards from Grande Prairie, Hwy 2 dips spectacularly into the valley and crosses the Peace River on the Dunvegan Suspension Bridge. Hwy 684 adds more beauty to any trip as it flows beside the Peace River to its namesake town.

I've always preferred Hwy 21 over the Queen Elizabeth II as a scenic north-south route. Along the way, take a detour and cross on the Bleriot Ferry on Hwy 838. Then follow the Red Deer River through

Drumheller to Hwy 10x and its 11 one-lane, wooden deck bridges over the Rosebud River as you enjoy the ride to Wayne and its historic Rosedeer Hotel. Hwy 851 through Delia is another nice diversion.

The 541 km length of Hwy 41 between Bonnyville and Medicine Hat crosses a variety of Alberta's scenic terrain and provides easy access to a great stretch of Hwy 646 between Elk Point and Lafond plus two wonderfully serpentine offshoot sections near Fabyan and Hardisty. Hwy 875 through Rolling Hills and Hays has also provided some good entertainment.

A wonderful day trip from Edmonton involves curvy Hwy 37 to Onoway, south on Hwy 43 and then west on Hwy 633 which dances west past Lac Ste. Anne and Isle Lake. Return to the city by turning south off the Yellowhead at Seba Beach and taking Sundance Road and Parkland Drive for even more enjoyable curves. Roads in close proximity to Maligne Lake, Pigeon Lake and Glennifer Lake (the reservoir behind the Dickson Dam) also provide excellent respite from major highways.

Not surprisingly, there are many more great roads in our province that I am not aware of. Luckily, you are in the right place. There are various groups and clubs here at The Motorcycle Show. Join one. You can also sign up for a charity ride and you will discover that most of them want to showcase great area roads. Ask at your favourite bike shop, they're riders too! Get online and join a forum for people who ride your style, brand or model of bike. You will meet people who live nearby. Check websites such as bestbikingroads.com which happens to list 56 roads in Alberta that have been ridden and rated by riders. Once you've found some great roads, share them with other riders. Ride them in both directions and in different seasons because those differences will change your riding experiences. And always remember that, no matter what you ride, the sheer volume and variety of outstanding roads we have here in Alberta is amazing. From the Rocky Mountains to the Badlands, from the southern Prairies to the Boreal Forest up north, there are breathtaking roads and scenery all around us. Don't get me wrong, if you get a chance to ride in a gorgeous faraway place like New Zealand, you will never regret it, but hopefully it won't take a return visit from friends to open your eyes to how spoiled we are right here.

Bruce Thomas is a motorcycle enthusiast and travel writer. His riding adventures have taken him throughout North America and beyond. In 2017 alone, Bruce put over 83,000 km on his 2010 Honda ST1300. When he is not on the road, Bruce calls Edmonton, AB home.

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