

written by Marcus | 4 October, 2016

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Hell's Canyon provides everything you'd expect from its name. The air is hot and dry with the sun beating off the sides of the red rock walls on either side of the road. We disturb some vultures who have been feeding off an unfortunate raccoon in the road. They then circle overhead while we roll past, no doubt eyeing us up as their next course. The Snake River glimmers blue and inviting and provides life to a narrow strip of greenery on its banks.



Approaching Hell's Canyon, OR

As we progress along the valley a shirtless cyclist approaches from the opposite direction. Justin is on his 5th crossing of the States and took part in the very first TransAm back in 1976 when 4000 riders blazed the way in its inaugural year. "You've got a long hot climb ahead" he warns. We duck into the river to cool off before crossing the state line into Idaho and taking on the hill up and over into Cambridge. We lose an hour in the process as we move to the Mountain time zone. On the way down the road is thick with dark locusts that seem intent on hopping under our wheels despite my best efforts to avoid them.



Justin, A TransAm veteran



Cooling off in the Snake River



State #3 – Idaho, The Potato State



Suicidal locust

Cambridge sprang to life in 1900 as a base for fur trappers and miners who arrived to claim the plots of land that were up for grabs on a first come first served basis. All these small towns seem to have their own museum and we get a tour of Cambridge's own collection of artifacts by Del Ray who offers to open up and gives us a private tour. It's a fine display of beaverskin hats and giant chainsaws and an interesting glimpse of how the pioneers set up their new lives in the wild west.



Only 700 years younger than Cambridge University in the UK



Cyclists camping is provided under the Cambridge water tower



Cambridge water tower by night

We're now gradually gaining altitude and as a result there's more forest and less desert in this part of Idaho. The gaps between towns is getting greater too with plenty of time to enjoy the unspoiled landscape as we rise and fall over the hills with glimpses of deer amongst the trees. That increase in height has only knocked a degree or two off the daytime temperatures but early mornings in the tent are now frigid. It seems ages since we had to layer up for bedtime but we're back to emptying the clothes bag to stay warm until it's time to get up again.



Crossing the 45th Parallel



The road south of New Meadows



No trespassing



Ace Saloon, Council, ID



Hot dogs

We drop down to The Little Salmon River where adventure seekers ride the rapids through Riggins and we meet some adventurous Canadian motorbikers who are riding from New Mexico to Banff offroad. We reclaim our lost hour by crossing back into the Pacific Time zone and need every minute of it when the massive White Bird pass looms up ahead with our road snaking it's way up and over it. Before we tackle it we decide to fuel up on huckleberry ice cream in White Bird Village, a tiny town of 150 residents that somehow requires 3 churches. The cafe owner advises we use the old road as, although it's longer it's less severe. This turns out to be sage advice as the shallow hair pins allow us to winch up the 800m climb in relative comfort compared to the more direct main road. Our only issue is staying upright against the gusting headwind that threatens to blow us all the way back down again. By the time we roll into Grangeville the effects of the ice cream have long worn off and only a large pizza (each) and a beer are capable of recharging our batteries.



Following the Little Salmon River towards White Bird



Climbing White Bird Hill



Evening sky on the approach to Grangeville



Shadow riding

Grangeville is a good place for a rest day, mostly because there's very little to do so there are no distractions that could take us away from the important task of doing very little. Even the swimming pool is shut as the summer season is over. Like all the towns in Idaho we've been to so far they also offer free camping for cyclists in the city park which is handy.



Resting in the Grangeville park with the locals



The Blue Fox cinema, Grangeville's only form of entertainment

With refreshed legs the next day we continue out through huge golden wheat fields and then drop steeply down to the town of Stites and the Clearwater River. This stretch of water will be our guide up towards the Bitterroot mountains for the next couple of days. We stock up in Kooskia knowing that there will be little by way of shops or services for a while now and begin spinning up the valley.

The Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness is a protected area covering 1.3 million acres of glacially carved hills without a single building or paved road and restrictions on any form of motorised transport. It's a popular place for hunters to track down bears, elk, moose, mountain lions and wolves. Hunting is an important way of life for most people round here and every town has a 'sporting goods' store where we could buy rifles, pistols, bows, knives and all the camouflaged paraphernalia that goes with it. It's such a far cry from the

British elite hunting scene of red coats, bugals, beagles and tweed.



Fields of gold



Approaching the Clearwater valley



Stites Grocery store has all the essentials



But how far to the next cake shop?

The valley is pristine with only our stretch of tarmac disturbing the natural wonder of the crystal clear river and thick forested hillsides. We stop for a swim in the river one day then for a dip in a natural hot spring the next bringing back memories of Hokkaido in Japan. (Only here they keep their clothes on.) The river gradually gets narrower which can only mean that the end of the valley must be getting closer. Sure enough, after a night on the lawn of the Lochsa Lodge we're faced with the Lola Pass up and over the granite ridge in front of us. The top sits at 1600m and marks our entry into the next state of Montana as well as losing that hour as we change time zones yet again.



Clearwater river



Clearwater River



Weir Creek hot spring



25 while we were there



State #4 – Montana, Big Sky Country

There was smoke in the air near the Lochsa Lodge and as we descend off the Lolo Pass we pass through large areas of burnt trees that have been engulfed in previous years, sometimes worryingly close to buildings. Our historical journey continues as we now follow the route of the Nez Perce Indian tribe who were chased from Oregon into Montana during the summer of 1877 by the US Military. In a bizarre and terrifying journey they were pursued for nearly 1900km and were within sight of the Canadian border and safety when they were captured and driven back into a reservation.



Burnt trees coming down off the Lolo Pass



Montana residents

Looking at the map it seems that we've come a long way north on a journey that is supposed to be taking us east. There are several reasons for this not least of which being that the route is designed to show us some of the best bits of the country but it's also making sure we pass by the Adventure Cycling Association's (ACA) head quarters in Missoula. These are the guys who set up the Transamerica trail in 1976 and have since become the country's expert in long distance cycle touring. When we arrive at their offices we're given a warm welcome and a complimentary cold ice cream. The ritual for TransAm riders includes having our photo taken and added to the wall of fame and a tour of the building. It's a surprisingly busy place with tours and holidays being organised in one room, a magazine being produced in another while several people sit at PCs pouring over Google Street view to make sure all their maps and guides are up to date. Not a bad job really planning the best cycling routes in the country for a living. The Association has come a long way since those early days and the founders must be proud of what has been achieved through the success of the TransAm and everything that has been born out of it.




Adventure Cycling Association HQ, Missoula, MT



A vintage touring tandem at the ACA HQ

to Yorktown

DATE: 8-15 2016



Nikki Ullug
Austin, TX
denver, CO → Seattle, WA

DATE: 8-19 2016




NAMES: Wendy Rose
HOMETOWN: Makawao, Hawaii
TRIP (From/To): Astoria, OR → Billings, MT

DATE: 8-22 2016



NAMES: WILL & RACHEL CARILE
HOMETOWN: SHEFFIELD
TRIP (From/To): YORKTOWN → ASTORIA

DATE: 8-22 2016



NAMES: DAVID MOBLEY
MARION MOBLEY
HOMETOWN: DENVER
TRIP (From/To): NYC → Florence, OR

DATE: 8/22 2016



NAMES: DAVE BUNGDON
HOMETOWN: MT BELVIEW TX
TRIP (From/To): ASTORIA TO TEXAS

DATE: 8/23 2016



NAMES: SARAH CUSHMAN
CEDAR + ROB LEVIN
HOMETOWN: BRIDGTON, MAINE
TRIP (From/To): CAPE HENLOPEN, DELAWARE
→ (HAPPY!) SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

DATE: 8-25 2016



NAMES: Jeff Battiste
HOMETOWN: Eugene, OR
TRIP (From/To): Glacier to Denver (??)

DATE: 8/26 2016



NAMES: DAVID WALTHALL
HOMETOWN: Chicago, IL
TRIP (From/To): Chicago → Astoria, OR
"Grand New Day"

DATE: 8/26 2016



NAMES: KIRSTY MCGAUL & MARCUS MUMFORD
HOMETOWN: BRISTOL, ENGLAND
TRIP (From/To): BRISTOL TO BRISTOL
VIA EUROPE, ASIA AND USA

The latest addition to the wall of fame (bottom right)



A new sticker for the bike



You don't have to be mad to be an adventure cyclist but...putting a sticker on your head definitely helps
Missoula is a quirky town and we're pleased to find they have a music festival taking place on the night we're there. While

jiving to the sounds of The Lil' Smokies and their funky bluegrass sounds the mayor interrupts the set by jumping up on the stage. Dressed in denim shorts and a Hawaiian shirt he rallies the crowd by declaring that Missoula must be "The best darn place the universe!" before flicking a peace sign and letting the band continue. Would the mayor of Bristol get away with that and still look cool? I doubt it. Even Bruce, our Warmshowers host is as laid back as they come with the door to his house always open to cyclists and musicians passing through the town.



The Lil' Smokies. Finger pickin' good

Did I ever mention how the wind has a grudge against us. I'm sure I must have. On the way into Missoula we had a headwind and now retracing back along the very same road the wind is in our faces again. How does it know? What have we done to offend it? We're now travelling down the other side of the Bitterroot mountains and that fire we'd seen hints of has grown in size with a haze of smoke now wafting across the road. We ride into Hamilton where we stop for the night exhausted from battling

the breeze. Our tent gets another nice wash from the auto sprinklers in the park and I get a refreshing bath when I hop out in the middle of the night to unsuccessfully stop them from working.



Red sky at night, wildfire in sight



A Pontiac TransAm AKA Kitt from Knightrider



Pontiac TransAm

Amongst wealthy ranches we pick our way along a gravel track to Darby but as the valley narrows it can only mean that things are about to head back towards the sky. We rejoin the nice smooth road and spend most of the afternoon winching up to the top of the Chief Joseph Pass, another nod to the Nez Perce tribe who were led over these hills by this determined chief. We're now at 2200m and at this point straddle the Continental Divide for the first time. Rain falling here will either run down one side to the Pacific or the other side to the Atlantic with this ridge splitting the country in two from Canada down to Mexico. It's not the last we'll be seeing of it either.



Climbing up to the Chief Joseph Pass

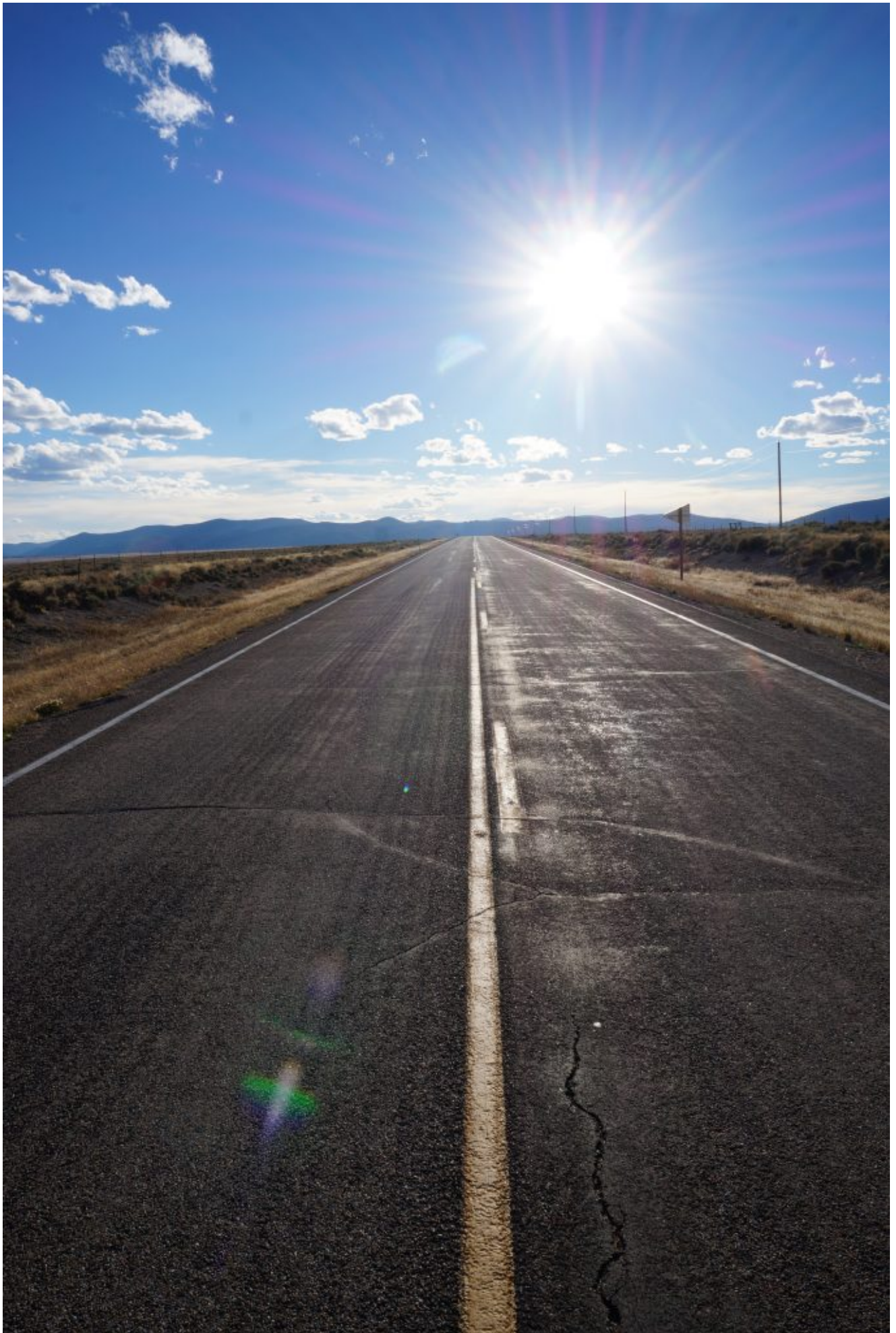


Relatives of the Nez Perce?



Our first visit to the Continental Divide

Woodland and wilderness pass by in a blur as we speed down past the Big Hole battlefield where Chief Joseph faced one of his fiercest and most bloody battles. We end up in Wisdom, a tiny remote town without neighbours, claimed to be one of the coldest places in the country recording freezing temperatures for an average of 277 days of the year. We shiver the night away in a hut provided in the memorial park just outside of town. Again a facility that welcomes cyclists in return for a donation.



Past Big Hole on the way to Wisdom



Cyclist's accommodation in Pioneer Park, Wisdom, MO



Evening view from Wisdom

There's not a lot out here. It's a barren, open plain surrounded by stark mountain ridges where cows, horses and hay are the only ways to make a living. That and hunting of course. People seem to be making a go of it and even nestled in an otherwise deserted valley next to the Pioneer Mountains there's another ranch all on its own with signs that someone is in residence and somehow surviving.



Enormous livestock trucks in Wisdom



Wide open space outside Wisdom



A silence seeker



Hunter's bar in Jackson



Hotel in Jackson



Jackson Main Street



Gateway to the Pioneer Mountains



Haystack making device and the cows it will feed

With Big Hole Pass (2255m) and Badger Pass (2042m) climbed we're made to work against the wind down into the town of Dillon which now feels like a city by comparison to the half deserted places we've just come through. Our search for a park to pitch our tent in is about to begin when we're approached by Mark. He's familiar with the look of a tired and hungry cyclist and guessing our next move he offers his front lawn for us to camp on. It's a real treat to be able to make use of their shower and in the morning we're invited in for breakfast. Mark and Tammie worked as missionaries in Brazil for many years before moving to Montana where Mark took up the post of Baptist pastor. He's now retired from helping people in a spiritual sense but still enjoys offering physical help like this. Being on the TransAm route gives him the chance to look after riders that are passing through so we're not the first to have occupied his lawn. Clean and full we leave with grateful souls and make our way onwards with only a brief stop

to load up the panniers and drain the credit card in the all too tempting Patagonia clothing outlet store.



Mark, our host in Dillon, MO



Camping on Mark and Tammie's lawn



Dillon Historic Downtown

Passing Beaverhead rock we're reminded that Lewis and Clarke witnessed these very same sights and used this distinctive feature as a waypoint as they pushed West. We also think about how many cyclists have enjoyed this road over the years. The Adventure Cycling Association estimates that up to 1200 people now take on the challenge each year and that amount of passing traffic can have a useful impact on some of the small towns along the route. Twin Bridges is one town that wanted to capitalise on this so they have set up a Bike Camp with a cozy hut, shower and work stand for bike fettling in their park. If it encourages more cyclists to stop here then that could really help the local restaurants and stores. It worked for us as we stock up with food and use the local library before retiring to the bike camp. In the grocery store there's a wall of pictures showing proud hunters with their trophies and in the library there's a stuffed lion from a former resident's more exotic game hunting trip. In the camp we also meet Jeff,

who is piecing together a unique route from the north down into Utah. Many of the Adventure Cycling Association routes intersect allowing people to be creative by combining and linking parts of various longer routes. In Jeff's case he's taken the Northern Tier, The TransAm, the Rocky Mountains 'Great Parks South' Loop and the Western Express and come up with what looks to be an amazing trip.



Beaverhead Rock



Proud trophy hunter



There's a lion in the library!



Bill White Bike Camp, Twin Bridges, MO



Bill White Bike Camp, Twin Bridges



Twin Bridges

Not all towns are as enterprising as Twin Bridges. This is an old gold mining area, an industry that is long past its boom times leaving behind deserted streets at Nevada City and a restored theme town in Virginia City. These 2 ghost towns that have retained a few breaths of life thanks to the tourists that come to visit them. Away from the main road other clumps of houses are left decaying and unloved, fading back into history.



Nevada City and Virginia City, MO



Nevada City. This town's becoming like a ghost town.



Nevada City Saloon

CHEAP CASH
STORE.



Cash Converters, Nevada City

We seem to be riding over endless ranges of hills, the land ruffled up by the colliding tectonic plates and getting larger as we get nearer to the main part of the Rocky Mountains. After another steady winch we arrive in the Madison Valley and speed down into Ennis following signs to Willie's Distillery. Could it be possible that there are two distillers of good whiskey in this country? Sadly not as Willie hasn't had the same education that Chuck had had the benefit of back in Washington and has ruined it with various sweet additives. We are surprised when the barmaid asks if we're the British couple of the tandem when we walk into the tasting room. Surely we're not that famous? No, Jeff had arrived 3 minutes before us and told her to expect us. We find him camped behind the distillery and although it's tempting to stop there too we make the decision that we should push on a bit further.



Looking down into Madison Valley



Willie's Distillery delivery truck

The wind has other ideas. Try as we might we can't get the bike moving much above 10kph and by the time we arrive at Cameron, the next tiny one horse town we're wiped out. We set up the tent in as sheltered a position as we can and eat like a horse that's been on the stage coach run before collapsing into bed. Again I may have mentioned this before but hills are hard work but rewarding so I don't mind them too much. A headwind on the other hand is hard work with no prospect of a view or a swooping descent. I hate it.



Fields near Cameron, MO



Prong horned antelope

There's no hiding from the now howling gusts the next day either and we continue to crawl along at maximal effort and minimal speed. We stop for a break at Windy Point boating area with no explanation needed as to how it was christened. Jeff catches us up and is glad he's not alone to be suffering today. "I've been shouting at the wind all morning!".



Big Sky Country

We ride together for a short while but his light load and young legs mean he's soon off up the road without us. His route takes him back down into Idaho anyway so we let him branch off while we head on to Earthquake Lake.

In 1959 this area experienced a huge natural disaster when a massive earthquake caused the side of the valley to collapse taking the lives of 28 people. The landslide dammed the Madison river forming Earthquake Lake while upstream, Hebgen Lake tilted causing flooding on the north shore and leaving boats high and dry on the south side. A lot of the results of

that fateful night are still visible as we ride through the valley past partly submerged trees and strewn boulders. It's a striking example of the power of earth and how little we can do about it.



Approaching Earthquake Lake, the landslide took out the road ahead



Drowned trees in Earthquake Lake

We camp next to Hebgen Lake and sleep restlessly on constant alert for any tremors. Then it's a short ride down into West Yellowstone, the town that forms a gateway into the world's first national park. At 2.2 million acres, the same size as the States of Rhode Island and Delaware combined this is a part of the journey that we've been really looking forward to. It'll also be the point that we cross into our next state and in Wyoming open space is due to take on a whole new dimension. The TransAmerica trail continues to carry us on its meandering journey east, but that's a story for another blog.



Nearing Yellowstone where the beasts will be big



Hebgen Lake

There are plenty more photos in the USA Gallery.