

# Stealth Camping: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly



By Frosty Wooldridge

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Many young world touring bicycle riders live their lives on a wing and a prayer. That's how I started out! Cheap tent, frazzled sleeping bag and a blow-up air mattress that gave me a headache from huffing and puffing for 10 minutes. Either that or the hard ground all night! Food? Oatmeal and raisins to start the day. Peanut butter and jam sandwich for lunch. Rice and beans, peanuts, apples, bananas and oranges for dinner.

(One of many waterfalls on the Road Going to the Sun, Glacier National Park, Montana)



My best dinners came on a Saturday night when night fell on a church social. I waltzed into the place...paid \$3.00 and ate my brains out on some of the finest home cooking known to humanity. Those church ladies loved to feature their finest efforts as to main courses, potato salads and pies...oh yes,

banana cream, lemon meringue, apple, chocolate cream, blue berry and raspberry...brownies...to name a few.

Walking out of those mouth-watering culinary adventures, I looked five months pregnant. There's something about bicycle touring that gives a person an insatiable hunger...thus, when we hit an all-you-can-eat joint, no rules! Thank you, Lord, for church socials and thank you ladies for putting me in 'food heaven'.

With that 'wing and a prayer' financial situation, forget going to a KOA with extravagant prices. I packed a shower bag and took a shower to keep my body from sweat rashes, fungus infections and B.O. that would knock down a buffalo out if it got too close.

### **The Good**

Camped at the top of Independence Pass, Colorado at 12,100 feet once. Starry night. No moon. Shooting stars. Cool air. We pitched our tents on the edge of the canyon to see thousands of feet below us and millions of miles above us. Orion, Big Dipper, Little Dipper, Saturn and all the rest shined into our camping spot.

My friend Doug said, "Glad you decided to camp at this elevation...it's almost like the entire universe awaits our grand entry...at least visually."

"Yup," I said. "It's like a dream and we're sitting in the middle of it."

### **The Bad**

Riding out of La Paz, Bolivia, on the El Camino all-rock highway, we reached 15,500 feet of elevation on the crest of the Andes. We portaged the bikes and gear on our backs across rivers with no bridges. If it rained, we waited a day for the raging waters to subside.

One evening, as we approached the crest, it happened that we watched a rain squall racing toward us. Lightning crackled all over the sky.

"Better get our butts as low as we can on this alti-Plano or we're going to eat some electricity," my buddy Bryan said. "That stuff is coming at us pretty fast."

"You don't have to say that twice," Doug said.

As a veteran rider of all seven continents, he had camped in places like Africa where he had a hippo walk out of the water...snorted as he approached...which got Doug out of his tent...and then, the hippo walked up to the flaps opening and blew snot all over the inside of the tent. Scared the living hell out of Doug and his buddy. Nothing like cleaning hippo snot from your nylon and gear.

We camped that evening reasonably safely as the storm ripped at our tents, rains drenched us, and the temps fell quickly. After it passed, the sky filled with a magical silver haze that I remember to this day. And of course, as the sunset created a stunning rainbow over the valley...all was good in the world.

But the next day, as we reached the border of Chile at 15,500 feet, a snowstorm raged toward us. The temps dropped into the 20's. The rocky road started to get slippery with snowflakes.

"We better pitch tents if we want to stop from freezing," Doug said.

"I second that," I said.

"Third," said Bryan.

We pitched tents fast. Cooked up dinner. Ate our fill and then, curled into our sleeping bags. Next morning, we had to clear 10 inches of snow from our tents. With our mountain expedition touring bikes, after breakfast, we plowed through

the freshly fallen snow. Several trucks passed by us to create tire tracks for us to follow. Still, a bitch to ride that high-elevation highway.

## The Ugly

Where should I start? I've experienced some really "ugly" camping spots. Sometimes touring on the cheap costs more than money. It can cost you your life. I've been face to face with a grizzly bear right outside my tent. (That's another story to be told) I've ridden with an Emu in the Outback of Australia. (Yet another story) I've camped in a junk yard.

One evening on the Lewis & Clark Trail in eastern Washington State, we ran into twilight without finding a reasonable spit of land to camp. Fences, pastures and cows pretty much wouldn't let up. At one point, it was either find camp or ride in the dark. I hate riding in the dark. So, we found a dirt road about 100 feet indented into a pasture with a gate at the end.

"Looks like home," I said to Sandi.

"I'm too tired to eat," she said. "Let's do it."



In that slot, we pitched the tent. We pulled our gear and quickly dove into our bags. But not before a Guernsey cow came over to inspect us. We saw another 50 cows out in the field. Quickly, we heard all sorts of racket from cows

milling about, bawling, peeing, farting and plopping.

“Good grief,” I said after sticking my head out of the tent. “We’ve got at least 50 cows looking at us.”

“Just dig your ear plugs in deeper,” Sandi said.

All night long, those cows subjected us to endless mini-Niagara Falls raining down right next to our tent. Cows can pee up to six gallons in a day. They can poop 14 gallons in a day. Then, they cut loose with their version of “plop-plop-plop-fizz-fizz-fizz” that splattered in all directions. Then, long bellowing farts that lifted into the air like faulty jet engines. Later, they got into hoof-wrestling matches where their hooves clacked together minute after minute. Have you ever heard a cow sing? Well, they sang love songs all night...that curled our ears inwards.

Around 3 a.m., Sandi woke nudged me, “Tell me why we love this stealth camping so much,” she said.

We woke with the sun, and cleared camp while the 50 cows spread out across the pasture in search of grass on their breakfast runs.

We pedaled down the highway half awake, half asleep, headache, irritable, ornery, sleep-deprived, hungry and dazed. THAT was an UGLY night of stealth camping.

Frosty Wooldridge, on the road to adventure...or mis-adventures depending on the day. Summer, 2023

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