

Always up for an adventure, KR man Racing Dave and mate Dave Jackson flew to Canada recently to ride British Columbia's 14 remaining fresh-water ferries.



WORDS & PICS: Racing Dave

AWAY WITH THE FERRIES

Benjamin Franklin summed it up: Three may keep a secret, he said, if two of them are dead. Confidentiality requested, normally my lips would be sealed, but not in this case.

With my mate Dave Jackson, I was on an adventure ride in British Columbia, Canada, and we'd arrived at the Big Bar reaction ferry on the Fraser River. The vehicle ferry wasn't sailing, due to flooding, but there's an aerial ferry there too – a small cage on a wire – and we'd hoped to ride that.

In the rain and fog, the 65km clay and sand road was awful. My KLR650 was on Metzeler Tourance tyres and I found it treacherous. We slithered our way to the remote crossing, where we found a fellow adventurer had arrived at the opposite bank by such an obscure route that he hadn't

seen the "closed" ferry signs.

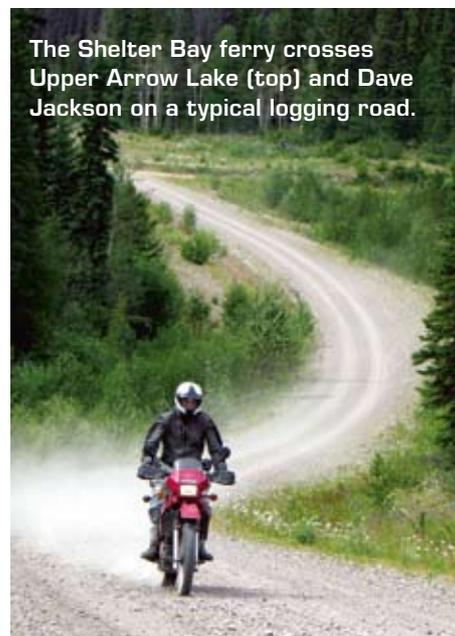
The ferry captain had taken pity on the rider and agreed to transport him and his KTM 690 in the normally passenger-only cage. On arriving at our side of the river, the bike could not be wheeled from the platform, and the pair was in the process of using a block and tackle to lower it to the ground. With our assistance, the bike was soon safely rescued.

THE PLAN

The reason we were there at all was simple – a lap record was to be established. Dave had been brought up in British Columbia, and he has a 2006 model Kawasaki KLR650 stored near Vancouver.

He had devised a plan to take in all the inland fresh water ferries that make up part of the roading system. Canada's west is

The Shelter Bay ferry crosses Upper Arrow Lake (top) and Dave Jackson on a typical logging road.





The route the two Daves took. Dave Jackson leaving the McLure Ferry (below left) and RD riding in drizzle on the clay road to Big Bar.

very rugged, with towering snow-topped tree-covered mountains, deep valleys, and mighty rivers.

In their heyday, there were 140 ferries crossing the various lakes and rivers, but due to improvements with roading and the construction of bridges, only 14 remain.

THE BIKE

Those 14 are free and well scattered, so Dave planned a route, including gravel and forestry roads, to link them up. When I heard of this adventure, I quickly invited myself to accompany him, and made enquiries to rent a bike in Vancouver. This led me to contact Cycle BC, whose rental policy doesn't generally allow off-road use of their fleet. However, after discussion and some negotiating, we reached a mutually satisfactory position, and the record attempt was on.

The fresh water ferries are of three types; reaction ferries that are propelled by the river's current; cable ferries that winch themselves, and free-running vessels. The scale of our undertaking became clear when we realised it would take us three days' riding and four salt-water ferries just

to reach the start, and we allowed a further 10 days to complete our circuit back to Vancouver.

A 15-HOUR TRIP

One of these ocean-capable ferries is used for the 15-hour scenic trip from Port Hardy at the top of Vancouver Island through the Inland Passage to the frontier town of Prince Rupert, near the southern border of Alaska.

This ship contrasts positively with the miserable conditions that Kiwi motorcyclists are forced to tolerate on our Cook Strait ferries – surly deck staff, the dirty and wet bike tying down areas, their inability to run on time, and the exposed waiting areas.

Compare this with BC Ferries: pleasant staff, a proper waiting room for riders at the point of embarking, and spotless decks. Best of all, priority boarding – motorcyclists load and unload first, and are signalled through to the front of all queues.

READY, STEADY, GO!

The reaction ferry at Usk was first. Five minutes on the ferry, a half-hour



Signs warn that not all locals are friendly...



exploration of this isolated town (an interesting mix of derelict houses, rusting vehicles, and new construction), a re-crossing of the swift Skeena River and we were back on the road to the next ferry, hundreds of kilometres away at Francois Lake.

We overnighted at Smithers (hilariously, the town of Burns Lake is nearby!), and then chose a 'back roads' way to Southbank. This logging road through the forest was wide, but for nearly 50km was of bare clay with dust kept down





Lighthouse Station viewed from the Inland Passage ferry (top). KTM 690 being unloaded from the Big Bar aerial ferry (middle). Meet one of these coming the other way and you better be on the 'correct' side of the road.

by a coating of oil. This was slippery enough, but the ruts left by the trucks in wet weather made the bikes constantly wander, giving a very nervous ride. The next 30km were on shingle, and very dusty from the many overloaded trucks we met head on.

Then we rode a perfect adventure bike twin-track, mostly third and fourth gear, winding and rising and falling for an hour, and with nothing oncoming. Just great. The Francois Lake ferry, a conventional vessel, took 15 minutes to cross and this was followed by an hour on another perfect shingle road.

The third day was ferry-less, as we closed in on the tightly clustered group in BC's southeast. This night was spent in 100 Mile House, to which we arrived in a thunderstorm, with the temperature falling from 32°C to 18°C in just 10 minutes.

FOUR X FOUR

On the fourth day, we travelled on four ferries and used remote gravel roads to link them. The first, at Little Fort, is

another reaction ferry, with the sealed road leading to it ending in a 1000m descent in just 10 km, and a consequent increase in temperature and humidity.

The 4WD twin-track from the ferry led us in second and third gear through a very pretty forest. We picked up a more open logging road for an hour that was dry and fast, and that brought us to yet another reaction ferry, this time at McLure. Initially sealed, the road from this ferry 'improved' into another hard and open gravel logging road to the Adams Lake cable ferry.

There's no way out from the far side, so after our exploring the available two kms of road, and smiling at the irony of million-dollar homes having a view over the lake to a dilapidated wood mill, we continued on main roads to Shelter Bay, and the 20-minute conventional ferry across Upper Arrow Lake to Galena Bay.

CHARMING

Our day ended in Nakusp, the most charming town we found. Small and old-fashioned (no malls or fast food outlets!), it

was spotlessly clean and tidy, had a lovely landscaped lakeside garden walk, and a sandy beach on which teenagers were carrying out teenage activity – throwing Frisbees, playing volleyball, digging sand castles – and all at nine at night in the warm sunshine.

Another long day loomed; not in distance, but in time, as most of the next few ferries led to isolated towns, so return trips had to be taken. Not a problem on the Harrop, Glade, or Arrow Park cable ferries, as each trip was only a few minutes and the ferry operates on demand, but the 35-minute (each way) crossing of Kootenay Lake from Balfour on the large conventional ferry runs to a timetable, and was full on each sailing.

The sealed roads joining these ferries were some of the quietest we rode, and some of the most winding and scenic. The local deer must have thought so, too, as we encountered several grazing alongside the road, only to bound away into the forest on our approach.

The next day was the one with which





RACING DAVE'S BIKE DEAL

I rented a Kawasaki KLR650 from Cycle BC (catch the underground from the airport, then a 15-minute walk).

The 22-litre tank, with which I averaged 22 km/litre ('regular' petrol, 87 Octane, is \$NZ1.60/litre), gave an excellent touring range of more than 450km. Even in the appallingly congested city traffic in Vancouver this didn't change, although to be fair I did once have the engine off for five minutes while I debated with two of British Columbia's finest Harley-ridin', gun-totin' Royal Canadian Mounted Police the merits of riding a motorcycle in a motorway bus-only lane.

LUGGAGE OPTION

Bikes from Cycle BC have the option of fitted pannier luggage and a top box, but I chose neither as I travel very lightly loaded. Although heavy and not especially powerful, the KLR's performance perfectly suited our trip, with a reasonably comfortable seat, soft but compliant suspension, great lights and mirrors, and the all-day practicality of the adventure bike riding position.

Cycle BC has a range of sizes of bikes, and a large fleet of scooters and bicycles, all of which are rented on summer weekends. You don't necessarily need to bring your riding gear, as they rent clothing and helmets, and will securely store suitcases while you're away riding.

The bikes are covered by insurance for both Canada and the USA. Full details from www.cyclebc.ca.

RIDING GEAR

I decided to wear my Triumph adventure riding gear and Shoei adventure helmet. This proved versatile; fully vented for the 30+ degrees we had on 13 of our 14 days, and fully waterproof and warm for the one wet day. The Shoei's pinlock visor insert remained fog free, even during a thunderstorm and in the drizzle.

Navigation was easy. We used a large format map of BC to overview each day and then my Strike Genius GPS for the actual riding. For \$US40 I added Canada to the already loaded Australia and NZ maps, and I wouldn't be without it.



The Kawasaki KLR650 RD hired from Cycle BC.

The Big Bar Ferry (top) was closed due to high water levels. Racing Dave (left) has fun on one of the many forestry trails he and Dave Jackson discovered en route.

I opened this story – cold and windy, with occasional showers. Even the early sealed riding was nothing special, but it was the wet, muddy and slippery road to the Big Bar ferry that sticks in my memory.

ONLY TWO TO GO

Two ferries to go. The reaction ferry across the Fraser River at Lytton was first up, and had only just resumed sailing after being closed by high water levels. Melting snow in a big catchment brings danger in the spring.

We crossed paths with a black bear on the run north to Lillooet and were then back into the picture-postcard scenery as we wound our way along the Lillooet River, heading ever west and south towards Vancouver. Through the famous Olympic ski town of Whistler, we followed the never straight, never level, road along the waterside to be back in the burly of mid-week traffic in a very big city.

The final ferry to Barnston Island is an odd one – a small tug is roped to the side of a conventional barge which quickly took it across the Fraser River to the Island. One minute we were bombing along the frantic motorway, the next down a quiet lane to the sanctuary that an island brings.

SUCCESS!

Success! Seven days and four hours after our first fresh-water crossing at Usk, we had our last at Barnston. For lack of any evidence to the contrary, we claim that to be the record time. There is much to see and do in British Columbia, but it was Dave's dream to ride all the ferries, and we accomplished that goal. **KR**