



ABOVE: Robin and Arlene Karpan rode their bikes along the trail in Banff National Park. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

LEFT: The group pauses at the trailhead during a trip to Sundance Lodge.

# Banff provides opportunities for fun winter biking

## TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

An important part of travel is trying new things that are beyond your normal comfort zone. That was the case for us earlier this year when we tried e-fat biking in the Rocky Mountains - in the middle of winter. We see a lot more winter cyclists these days, not just urban commuters who do it for practical reasons, but folks

hitting snowy trails just for fun. Maybe they know something that we've been missing.

We were in Banff and about to head off on an overnight bike trip to Sundance Lodge, about 10 kilometres away in the backcountry wilderness along a hilly, winding, snowy trail. While we had ridden bikes occasionally over the

years, we certainly aren't avid cyclists. We have never tried biking in winter, and weren't familiar with the type of bikes we'd be using.

Fortunately, we had a great teacher to prepare and guide us along the trip. Clare McCann runs Bikescape, a Banff company that offers a variety of year-round bike trips for both experienced cyclists and novices. She started with an orientation at the trailhead parking lot to introduce us to our e-fat bikes.

Fat bikes are driving the popularity of winter biking for recreation. They are so-named because of their oversized "fat" tires, which could be as much as four to five inches wide. At first glance, they look rather odd on a bicycle, but that's what makes them so suited to off-road travel. Low air pressure, usually well under 12 psi, provides a cushioned ride over obstacles and greater traction in snow. Clare had added studs to the tires, so it looked as if we would be ready for anything.

Fat bikes are heavier, with our models weighing about 65 pounds. The weight plus huge soft tires requires more effort to pedal. Fortunately, these bikes also have a secret weapon - electric motors. Hence the term e-fat bike. More specifically, they are pedal assist e-bikes, meaning that you still have to pedal though not nearly as hard as with traditional bikes.

"Once you try an e-bike, it will completely spoil you for any other type of biking," said McCann.

It was almost like magic when the electric motor kicked in. The first couple of kilometres were mostly level and straight as we followed the hard-packed snow trail along Healy Creek. Pedaling seemed almost effortless. That was soon to change as we left the creek and headed into the mountains.

Our route had an elevation gain of around 300 metres through a series of ups, downs, and curves. Despite being helped by the electric motor, some hills still required quite a bit of pedaling to reach the top. We had to get used to finding the right com-

bination of gears and the five power settings.

We rode mostly through forest, along with open stretches with sweeping mountain views and across scenic Brewster Creek. A bonus was being in the wilderness with no one else around, other than our small group. Though we had not come far, the busyness of Banff seemed a world away.

Sundance Lodge sits in an idyllic spot next to Brewster Creek, surrounded by soaring peaks. The two-storey log building is off-grid with no electricity or phone service. Power is supplied by large solar panels and heating with a wood-burning stove.

Following an excellent baked ham supper, we sat around the fire to plan the ride back to Banff in the morning. It had taken awhile to get the hang of biking in the snow, especially uphill and with equipment that was new to us. But it's mostly downhill from here and it should be a simple fun run. Or so we thought.

Next morning we awoke to fresh snowfall, the landscape looking even more stunning with Christmas card views everywhere. The only glitch was that the packed trail was also covered with new fluffy snow, not the best for cycling. The weather was unseasonably warm, so that snow would soon get mushy.

Things started off fine on the mostly level trail near the lodge, but the hilly curves were another matter. It was easy to catch one wheel in the deeper snow that was starting to get soft, lose control, and end up in the snow bank. Fortunately, we weren't travelling fast and the snow banks were soft.

A few spills were just part of the adventure of trying new things. Cycling in the snow came with some challenges but it introduced us to another way to embrace winter and to experience a spectacular part of the Banff wilderness.

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