

# THE CARBON CYCLE

*Crossing the Great Divide*

"Kate Rawles sets out to discover about  
global warming the hard way..."

—Michael Palin

Kate Rawles

*Shortlisted for the Banff Mountain Festival  
'Adventure Travel' Book Award, 2012*

# THE CARBON CYCLE

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## Crossing the Great Divide

Kate Rawles



RMB

*For Chris:*

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*Partner and fellow carbon-cyclist.*

*Definitely a keeper.*

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*by Jonathon Porritt*

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# FOREWORD

by Jonathon Porritt

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‘It’s like pedalling a bike. Values are the downstroke, actions are the upstroke. And it’s the downstroke that moves things along.’

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge* 1

Even at the best of times, America is a pretty baffling country for most Europeans. And these really aren’t the best of times. A \$4 trillion bill for the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a continuing refusal on the part of the US to show any kind of leadership in addressing climate change, and an unnerving amalgam of religious fundamentalism and bizarre Tea Party politics, all make for an instinctive ‘out of kilter’ feeling with our allies across the pond.

So when my good friend Kate Rawles declared her intention back in 2006 of undertaking a cycle ride of some 4,500 miles from El Paso in the South to Anchorage in Alaska, some of us wondered if she’d gone just a little bit bonkers! She is, after all, the UK’s first and best-known ‘outdoor philosopher’, and prone therefore to bouts of excessive enthusiasm at the prospect of being out there in the wild. But there’s out there and there’s ‘out there’!

Kate’s not like most philosophers I know. For one thing I can understand what she’s talking about and her work-a-day belief that the principal purpose of philosophy is ‘to question the assumptions of our age’ keeps even her most abstract reflections grounded in an admirable way.

Not that there’s any problem here about staying grounded. Grinding out the daily miles does that in spades! I’m an enthusiastic cyclist, with nearly forty years experience of survival cycling in London, but this kind of cycling adventure is so far beyond my imagination as to leave me literally awe-struck at the doing of it.

Like most cyclists, I’m familiar with headwinds that never, ever, turn into tailwinds – but not for 10 hours a day, sometimes in temperatures in excess of 100°F – so hot that even the cacti give up and die! I’m familiar with punctures, troublesome gears and the endless running repairs – but not day after day with a frequency that would induce despair even in a cycling angel. And I’m familiar with heavy legs and inescapable fatigue – but not the spirit-crushing fatigue that Kate so eloquently describes.

We are truly into ‘agony and ecstasy’ territory here. The agony resides primarily with Kate herself ‘doing battle with her head’. The ecstasy comes with her immersion in the natural world, as much in the stark, unforgiving landscapes she is riding through, as in staggeringly beautiful scenery. As much in the daily contact with the mundane (including the mosquitoes!) as in moments of startling intimacy with bald eagles, wolves, beavers, and even a lynx appearing out of nowhere on the final run into Anchorage.

So much for the adventure – and the weather. Then there’s the equally serious business of the climate.

In the spirit of inclusive, open-ended enquiry, Kate asks everyone she meets what they think about climate change (or ‘global warming’, as she finds herself having to call it), and what causes it. The whole gamut of responses is revealed, from involvement in full-on climate activism (underpinned by touching belief that the US could still become a leader in addressing climate change), to equally full-on denial. With much more of the latter than the former.

Unfortunately, there are still so many reasons for Americans to remain sceptical, not least the ubiquitous and malign influence of Fox News – a ‘highly effective, right-wing echo chamber’, as Kate describes it.

It's an extraordinarily revealing portrait, or rather a revealing series of vignettes. And who knows the degree to which they are representative of where America stands today. I took away a powerful sense of a nation no longer at ease with itself, in which 'the American Dream' has for so many turned into a nightmarish rat race, with more and more people working more and living less.

Long gone are those simple, heady days where it was seen as 'America's manifest destiny' to get out there and conquer the wild. And then conquer the world. Redefining the remnants of this 'manifest destiny' is what makes the climate change story so emblematic of contemporary America, obstinately hanging on to what once made them great (as George Bush Snr once put it, 'The American way of life is not up for negotiation') whilst sensing that their future may look very different.

For some, the first response is to turn to technology to dig them out of the hole, to innovate like crazy to provide the energy they need from renewables rather than from coal, oil and gas. And there is indeed great hope to be had here. The latest technology assessments are boldly claiming that technologies such as solar power (generated from photovoltaic cells) will soon be providing energy at the same price as coal, gas or nuclear.

Philosophically, that sits a little uneasily with Kate. Techno-fixing may be necessary, but it certainly isn't sufficient. The words of Aldo Leopold are a constant reminder to Kate and Chris (her heroic partner and companion for the second half of the journey) that 'to see things properly' we have to dig down a bit deeper than swapping out one technology for another:

'We abuse the land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.' [2](#)

In this regard, the contrast between the town of Aspen ('a monument to consumerism') and their encounters with various First Nations people, both in the US and in Canada, brings it all right back to a question of values. Values embodied in new stories, in a re-dreaming of what it is that makes America so special, in the extraordinary 'kindness of strangers' that they encounter all the way along the route, in the deep connectedness of people and communities to the natural world that still sustains them.

All of which provides a wonderfully rich and insightful narrative. We should all be very grateful that Kate managed to overcome her own carbon-sensitive scruples in order to put herself and her beloved Rocky on a plane to El Paso – first to do the 4,500 miles, and then, eventually, to overcome the even greater barrier of getting it all down on paper!

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of course to Chris, unfailingly loving, patient, tolerant and calm ... who has supported the book, the Carbon Cycle, and me in so very many ways.

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Needless to say, there are bound to be omissions – for which I apologise. Please don't take it personally! Any and all of the other shortcomings are, of course, my own.

# INTRODUCTION

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## *Ordinary Adventures*

The body, stronger. The mind, sharper.  
The air, cleaner. The grass, greener.  
The pretzels, crisper. The beer, colder.  
The weekday, shorter. The weekend, longer.  
The sun, brighter. The sky, bluer.  
LIFE IS BETTER WHEN YOU  
RIDE BIKES!

*Gary Fisher*

Adventures. I grew up fantasizing about having them, and reading a great many books by Wilfred Thesiger. *Adventurers*, though, always seemed like other beings: strong, tough, talented, somehow free of normal life and not at all like me. I was a weedy child, a bit of a swot, rubbish at school sports – though I loved being outdoors – and what’s more, I was a girl. Later I discovered the Crane cousins who cycled up Kilimanjaro before mountain bikes had even been invented and ran the length of the Himalaya in running shoes, carrying little more than a sawn-off toothbrush and overtaking fully kitted-out international expeditions on the way. These guys, with their low-tech high-humour approach – very different from the more conventional adventuring type – were inspirational to me. But they still felt utterly out of my league. The Cranes – and even Thesiger – never, I’m sure, set out to present ‘adventurers’ as a different order from the rest of us. But the sheer fact of what they’d achieved made them seem like another species. If I ever became adventurous myself, I thought, I’d want to try to inspire other ‘ordinary’ people to think they could do the same.

I started cycling as a way of getting to a gap-year job at a riding stable. Horses were my passion at that point, not bikes. The bike was just a means to an end. I spent months struggling to master the prescribed British Horse Society riding style, the finer details of therapeutic horse-shoeing, and how to make a decent bran mash. It wasn’t until I failed my BHS final exam, gave up thoughts of being a riding instructor, and went off to Sweden to work as a lowly groom instead that my wanderlust was re-ignited. Southern Sweden was so close and yet so different. The immense flat landscapes, vivid with primary colour. Blue sky, green grass, red poppies, yellow fields of rape seed. The language. The price of alcohol. The names of things on the shop shelves. The taste of their chocolate. Close and yet different; the ordinary world no longer taken for granted in the background but suddenly full of intrigue and sharply in focus simply for being ‘foreign’.

Back in Scotland as a student I joined the university riding club, but the horse thing – or at least, that kind of horse thing – was on the wane for me. I wanted to get out of the city and explore. And that’s when I began to realise that a bike could offer a whole lot more than a cheap way of commuting. Not only could an athletically challenged person like myself quite quickly develop the ability to cycle for ten, twenty, thirty, forty miles with minimal training – and not that much pain – but, in the process, familiar landscapes were brought back to life. On a bike, you are really *in* the landscape. You can smell it and hear it. Hills you don’t even notice in a car are suddenly all too real. You feel more alive. And people respond to you differently. Turn up in a small town outside Aberdeen or Glasgow in a car and nothing much happens. Turn up on a bike – especially by yourself on a bike – and, more often than not, all sorts of people stroll over and chat. ‘Where have you come from? How far have you been? Don’t you own a car?’ The bike is a magician, transforming the ordinary world into something

of endless interest. Making adventures possible for normal, non-adventurers, like me.

Over the years I got bolder. I meandered around the outskirts of town in all directions and gradually rode further away. I cycled to youth hostels and stayed a night or two. Then a boyfriend talked me into cycling across Scotland, east to west. We took two (badly) home-made panniers between us and bungied our sleeping bags and tent direct to the bikes, stuffed into bin-liners. He was not keen on spending money and suggested we do the trip while living entirely off road-kill. For me the mileage was challenge enough; I put my foot down and insisted on pub lunches. I was not very fit and I struggled with the distances, with riding every day, with the Scottish weather, with midges and above all with wet sleeping bags when the bin-liners disintegrated. But there was something absolutely magical about putting everything we needed on the back of our bikes and simply cycling away. I was hooked.

Venturing on to the far shores of France, a friend and I followed the Rhone from its mouth near Marseille to its source in the Alps. Taking a leaf out of the Cranes' book we used the Rhone ride to raise money for charity. Primarily, though, that trip was about the sheer joy of being on the road with mountains all around and a growing love of physical challenge that initially took me by surprise. I found I was tougher than I knew; that even when I thought I was totally done in I usually had another twenty or thirty miles in my legs; that I actually enjoyed the harder rides and totally relished the feeling of getting stronger and fitter as the trip progressed. I was not fast but I did seem to have an endurance mentality. Forget that I was only in the athletics B team because my school was too small to have a C team: that formerly weedy child could now ride a bike a long way. It made me feel *good*. Cycling in consistent warm sunshine was a revelation. And there was the point about being ordinary. 'If I can do a trip like this,' I said after writing an exultant 'Made It!' on a postcard of the Rhone Glacier, 'then pretty much anyone else could, too.' We'd inched onto the glacier in slippery cycling shoes after climbing the spectacular hairpins of the Furka Pass – as in the fabulous car chase in the James Bond movie 'Goldfinger' – and then swooped gleefully down the other side into Switzerland and a celebratory double-fondue. It was biking at its best.

And so cycling in mountains – hot, sunny mountains for preference – became my thing. In my free time and between jobs I cycled in the Picos de Europa in Northern Spain; I cycled in the Rockies; I cycled in Israel and Jordan and eventually, many years after bin-liner man and I had gone our separate ways, a girlfriend and I cycled for 2000 miles in the Northern Andes, from Venezuela through Colombia and on into Ecuador. Our families thought we were crazy. Our friends thought we were crazy. Even Venezuelans thought we were crazy, warning of various dire outcomes should we venture across the border into Colombia and advising us in the strongest possible terms to transfer from Venezuela directly to Ecuador by plane.

The only time our proposed route hadn't received the 'you're insane and will surely die' response was at the Royal Geographical Society. Entering that travellers' Mecca for the first time, I was simultaneously awestruck and liberated. There, amongst the preserved wooden kayaks and portraits of real adventurers, our trip was rendered utterly unexceptional. No longer a life-threatening deed of sheer madness but an enjoyable amble, barely of note. 'Colombia gets awfully bad press in the west,' the founder of a well-known travel guide told me. 'Most people, most places are friendly and helpful. Keep your wits about you but start from a position of trust. You'll have a fantastic time.' I was deeply grateful for this sole piece of encouragement amongst the dire warnings. And what's more, she was right. Cycling across Colombia, overwhelmingly friendly and spectacularly beautiful, was the highlight of the whole journey. On the one occasion we did come upon minor drug barons – readily identifiable by their extremely large, shiny new 4x4s in an area of prevailing poverty – our evident

femaleness unexpectedly made us safer. Two (distinctly grimy) women on bikes with large panniers, in the middle of Colombia, claiming to have biked there from Caracas, Venezuela, simply did not fit any of their stereotypes. We could not be construed as a threat to their empire (in the way male cyclists might conceivably have been) and we certainly couldn't be considered a catch, either. They insisted we left our bikes with their trucks and join them for coca-colas in a café. They interrogated us in a bemused way. They paid for the cokes. And then they waved us away. If the trip wasn't an adventure by RGS standards, it certainly was by ours.



Part of loving the outdoors as a kid was, for me, that that's where most of the animals were. I loved animals, all animals: from the snails I used to collect and keep as pets to the large dogs I'd invariably toddle towards from a very young age. I was sure I'd be a vet when I grew up – a horse vet ideally – but, bad at physics, worse at chemistry and good at English, neither my teachers nor the vet I spent a summer shadowing were exactly encouraging. 'You'll never be a horse vet,' said Dick. 'A horse vet is the top job and they're almost always men. You'll be a hamster vet. You'll spend your time castrating overweight labradors and dealing with their ignorant owners.' I went to university to study English and randomly chose philosophy as my extra subject. I loved it and hated it in almost equal measure.

On good days, philosophy, like cycling, also transforms the ordinary. It questions all sorts of things typically taken for granted, bringing normal life sharply back into focus – albeit through a strange lens. 'How do you know you exist?' 'What counts as 'knowing' anything?' 'What makes something right or wrong?' On bad days these questions seemed stupid, irrelevant and utterly exasperating. It wasn't until my final year, when I read a book called *Animal Liberation* [3](#), that I suddenly saw how philosophy could be more than an intellectual game – intriguing, infuriating or otherwise. 'Philosophy should question the assumptions of its age', wrote Peter Singer, the author. 'One of the assumptions of our age,' he continued, 'is that we are superior to other animals and entitled to treat them any way we see fit.' Or words to that effect. Singer argued that modern society systematically mistreats its animals – especially those in agriculture and in research. It was the description of how intensively farmed animals live out their lives as much as the argument that really got to me. Chickens in tiny cages so tightly packed together they could not stretch their wings. Pigs living their whole lives in barren, concrete pens in which they couldn't turn around.

I was disbelieving. Surely it couldn't be that bad. Then, learning more, I was outraged. I was in my twenties, I'd been either in school or at university more or less my whole life, I was an 'animal lover' and yet I didn't even know how the animals I was eating had been treated. How could my good Scottish education have omitted to inform me of such a thing? What *else* might be going on that I didn't know about? I gave up eating meat and I started to read around. It was a trail that led to one disturbing discovery after another, profoundly disorienting my vague sense of things being basically okay with the world, and my naïve belief that I had a pretty good grasp of what was what out there. To be fair, I did know at least something about world poverty, courtesy of the Cranes' books; though the figures (about one billion people in a 'normal' non-famine situation are malnourished and without clean drinking water) never lost their capacity to shock. But I knew virtually nothing of the impacts of affluence.

Human activities – and particularly the activities that support rich, industrialised lifestyles – are having an astonishing impact on the other thirty million or so species we share the planet with, wiping out species at a rate somewhere between a hundred and a thousand times faster than the normal rate. The side effects of our ever-increasing consumption of resources keep relentlessly emerging, from

decimated forests and other massively degraded habitats to polluted, over-fished oceans. We've knocked a hole in the ozone layer and scattered the world with a cocktail of pollutants. DDT has been found in the fat of Antarctic penguins, even though it has never been used on that continent. And yet, in terms of earth history, we've only just arrived. If you think of the time our planet has been in existence as equivalent to the distance of your outstretched arms, a single swipe of a nail-file would wipe out the whole of human history. Not to deny our extraordinary achievements, in this very short period as earth inhabitants we've managed to create one hell of a mess. And, despite all this mayhem we aren't even meeting the basic needs of our own species!

The more I found out, the greater my sense of outrage and disbelief. That these things were happening, and that the whole world wasn't up in arms clamouring for them to stop. My focus widened from poverty amongst people and appalling living conditions amongst animals, to the environment and sustainability in general. I wanted to *do* something, but exactly what was never quite clear. Somehow, without ever really intending to, I became a lecturer. I taught environmental ethics, and did my best to be a mini-Singer. It wasn't going to save the world, but it was a start. In a small way I could raise awareness of the issues and, more importantly, ask questions; it was a chance to uncover and grapple, however safely and from a position of undeniable privilege, with the deeply disturbing dark side of our 'normal' Western lives. To question the assumptions of our age.

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Towards the end of the nineties a 'new' environmental problem was becoming more and more prominent. Climate change. Scientists had actually been drawing attention to the likelihood that burning fossil fuels in enormous quantities would affect the earth's atmosphere for decades, but it took a while for this alarming news to filter down to essay-swamped ethics lecturers. As information about climate change unfolded and became more certain, I embarked on a familiar process of denial and disbelief. The implications for people – for our agricultural systems, our economics, our ability to meet our needs, our security and basic well-being – all seemed hard to exaggerate. The implications for other species, worse. Surely it couldn't be that bad. Surely if it were that bad we'd be doing something about it. Heck, it *is* that bad. Heck we're *not* doing (that much) about it! I went through a phase of wanting to stride through the land shouting, 'Wake up! This really matters and we need to do something! WAKE UP!' A friend told me she'd actually done just that, wearing pyjamas and carrying an alarm clock. I thought this a stroke of sheer brilliance but she said the reaction of colleagues in a car she'd walked over to had been typical: they'd wound up the window and driven away.

This of course *was* typical, in wider ways too. While the international scientific community was reaching an unprecedented and downright alarming degree of consensus that climate change was a real and urgent challenge, people all around were carrying on as normal. And normal, in the industrialised world, means a high carbon footprint. The nature of 'normal' is a large part of the problem. Which perhaps at least partly explains why, despite the deluge of information, poll after poll showed that significant proportions of UK and European populations simply didn't believe it was happening – or, if it was, that it was being caused by human activity – or, even if it was, that there was anything much they could do about it. The truth about climate change is, in Al Gore's masterful understatement, *inconvenient*. It requires us to change. Very much easier to deny it.

I brought climate change into all my lectures. But it didn't feel like anywhere near enough. And I was becoming increasingly frustrated at the constraints of working in an academic context. The world was facing a real threat, demanding urgent responses, but starting from the position that climate change was a problem and focusing on what to do about it was often considered a) biased and b) a bit

too practical. It was not, I learned, my role as an academic to make climate change real, to explain its relevance, to debate solutions. It was not my role to inspire people to actually do anything about it.

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Meanwhile, ‘almost anyone can have adventures in their lives if they want to’ had become a mantra I uttered but didn’t apply. The world of work was, inexorably, becoming more demanding – and more time-consuming. One day I realised I hadn’t been on an extended trip for over a decade. It was time to get back on a bike. To cycle a long way, in mountains.

Not that it was quite that simple. I still had a job and a mortgage. And, while I was definitely in favour of a radical adjustment of my work/life balance, that didn’t seem enough. I wanted to conjure up a trip that could also engage with climate change; a journey that would play some role in addition to being an adventurous holiday and a personal challenge. Using bike rides to raise money had worked reasonably well in the past but there’s a limit to how many times you can ask friends and relatives to part with their cash for your latest good cause. Was there a way of using a bike ride to raise awareness instead? If I could pull off a trip that was long enough and challenging enough to give me some small amount of credibility in the world of ‘real’ adventurers – or at least those who enjoy hearing their tales – then perhaps I could use it to reach audiences beyond the university. I could use the journey as the basis of talks and slide shows. The bike ride could become a sort of Trojan horse, smuggling a climate change tale inside an adventure cycling tale.

Where? It had to have mountains. Ideally hot and sunny ones, at least for some of the trip. It had to have an adventurous ring to it. And now I was after some sort of climate change logic as well.

‘Go back to basics,’ a friend advised. ‘What’s at the root of climate change? What’s really driving it? Go where the worst of that is.’

‘Well, oil, I guess, in a word,’ I said.

It was not a word that readily summoned a cycling route to mind. Nevertheless, the use of fossil fuels, especially oil, coal and gas, is undoubtedly one of the main causes of climate change. The other main cause is deforestation, together adding up to an appalling double-whammy. Basically, we’ve taken carbon that has been stored under the earth for millions of years and burnt it, thus releasing vast amounts of additional carbon into the atmosphere. There, in the form of carbon dioxide, it acts as a ‘greenhouse’ gas, trapping additional heat from the sun in the earth’s atmosphere, in much the same way as a greenhouse does. The temperature of the earth’s atmosphere is, as a result, slowly but surely increasing, causing changes in climates around the world. At the same time, in our relentless search for growth, we’re cutting down forests and degrading other ecosystems that would otherwise absorb carbon and act as natural carbon off-setters. Hence the double-whammy. On an immense scale.

Energy-hungry, high-consumption lifestyles have the highest carbon footprints by far. And suddenly, there it was, emerging from the overused atlas. The United States. It had it all. One of the most oil-intensive countries on earth, proudly featuring the vastly energy expensive ‘American Way of Life’. The USA has only five per cent of the world’s human population but produces nearly twenty five percent of the entire world’s greenhouse gas emissions. And of course, the USA in 2006 had President George Bush. Readily characterised as the arch-villain of the global climate change drama, Bush constantly questioned the reality of climate change and the role of human activity in causing it. He had steadfastly refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol and, under his administration, the US played a uniquely consistent role in derailing international climate change talks. The American way of life might be contributing disproportionately to climate change, but that was too bad. ‘The American way of life [was] not up for negotiation’ – at least, according to Bush.

But Bush had become deeply unpopular; and Bush was not the American people. To what extent, wondered, would that most elusive of beings – the ‘ordinary citizen’ – agree with his views? What would they think about whether climate change was happening and what was causing it and what it meant and what needed to be done? Already aware of how easy it is to get into conversations if you arrive somewhere – anywhere – on a bike with large panniers, I imagined that, once started, conversations could readily be nudged in a climate change direction. Cycling in the USA offered fantastic opportunities for a random sampling of what citizens of one of the most oil-hungry, oil-dependent countries on earth thought about the climate consequences of this particular addiction – and the implications of trying to give it up.

And of course, the United States also had mountains. Hundreds and hundreds of miles of them. The Rocky mountains, stretching all the way up into Alaska. What if I tried to follow the spine of the Rockies, as closely as possible, from the Mexican border in, say, Texas, to Alaska? Texas to Alaska. had a certain ring. The adventure logic was becoming clearer. And mountains had a climate change logic too. In a warming climate, one thing that many species can do is move – upwards or northwards. But species who live on mountains are effectively trapped. They have nowhere else to go. Mountain ecosystems have been called ‘the canaries of climate change’, with ecologists predicting earlier and more drastic impacts there than elsewhere. I hated the thought that the mountains I’d been cycling through with such profound enjoyment all these years had, along with the animals who lived on them quietly been suffering the early impacts of climate change all along. Was it true that mountain ecosystems now faced much more drastic impacts? If so, what did this mean?

Above all, I wanted to engage with what could be done. I didn’t just want to record the negative impacts on places I loved. Given that climate change was happening, how should we respond? What were the solutions? What should we *do*? The American way of life was being fiercely defended, not least because it was profoundly threatened. And that, surely, would also mean that the USA had one of the strongest incentives to come up with answers. It offered the worst, but perhaps also the best. I knew enough about the problem. It was time to focus on solutions.

Slowly but surely, and with the help of occasional intake of a particularly inspirational Scottish liquid, a plan evolved. I would cycle through the States and into Canada, then on to Alaska. I would cycle from El Paso to Anchorage, following the spine of the Rockies as far as possible and talking to as many people as I could along the way. Since there is no obvious way of ‘following’ the Rockies on tarmac, my route would often take me across the Great Divide – the high mountain line that divides the fate of raindrops. Chris, a relatively recent (and hitherto largely non-cycling) partner, would join me about halfway. The first half I would ride alone. ‘What are the solutions? How can we make ourselves and our ways of life climate friendly?’ would be my guiding questions. With an atlas and a piece of string, we estimated the distance to be 4527 miles. At well over twice as far as I’d ever cycled before, and with numerous high mountain passes, it definitely qualified as a personal challenge. At an average of seventy-five miles a day, it would be two months of solid cycling. Then, to my astonishment and despite a cringe-making interview – in which I drew a complete blank when asked what I might tell people about Winston Churchill – I secured a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travelling Fellowship. [4](#) The Fellowship transformed the financial feasibility of the whole enterprise and the kudos did no harm either. Armed with both, I negotiated a chunk of unpaid leave from work and managed to carve out a blissful three months of time. Two months cycling, a month for interviews, diversions and rest days. It was, I thought, going to be a long but leisurely ride.



‘It is almost impossible to imagine how the world will avoid disastrous climate change impacts without a fundamental, and prompt, change in US policy.’

*Elizabeth Kolbert* 5

‘Climate change? Oh no, you won’t have a problem with that until you go further north.’

*US citizen in an airport queue, discussing New Mexico*

I left El Paso on the 19th June 2006, at high noon. It was like riding into an oven. I was gleaming white and Rocky, fully loaded for the first time, was unnervingly heavy. Wobbling erratically around the hotel car park as a practice run, I wondered whether I could actually ride *anywhere* with this much weight. Not to mention the damage sustained to the bike on the flight over. For the first time, I suddenly had real doubts about the viability of this trip. Too far, too hot, too heavy, TOO MUCH! whimpered an internal voice. Don’t be daft, I told it, it’ll be fine. Then, mustering my courage, I headed out into the lunchtime traffic. The road out of town was uphill and infested with traffic lights inflicting the maximum number of shaky hill starts. I wasn’t convinced I could make it the two miles to the bike shop, let alone another fifty or so that day. And I didn’t even want to think about Alaska. Drenched with sweat, I arrived at the Crazy Cat bike shop thinking I already deserved a hero’s welcome. Instead of which a polite but not all that interested young man loaned me a high-pressure foot pump, told me he didn’t think that cycling any kind of distance with four teeth missing from the front gear ring was feasible, and didn’t ask where I was going. I skulked about in the cool interior pretending I might buy something – unlikely, given an unfortunate temporary separation between me and my credit card – until the air-conditioning got my temperature down to something functional. And then I headed off for real.

It felt amazing to be underway at all. ‘Normal life’ can be incredibly sticky when you try to leave it. On this occasion, it had required an immense effort to break free. Clearing the ground had somehow taken priority over training, and I hadn’t been on a bike in at least a month. Weeks had flown past with no exercise more strenuous than lifting a computer mouse. On top of this less-than-ideal preparation for an endurance ride, mild asthma had turned into a stubborn, long-term cough. And, while I was undoubtedly a touch out of shape, the bike almost didn’t make it at all. For many years I’d harboured the extravagant fantasy of having a bike hand-built by the exuberant Scottish bike builder, Charlie Ralph. Charlie specialises in custom-made machines for people who are, for example, very tall or, in my case, rather on the short side. My much-loved but undeniably elderly road-bike had recently been the source of considerable teasing from a group of friends on holiday in the Alps. This trip – further, harder, higher and altogether more ambitious – provided the ideal excuse.

Rocky, named for the Rockies we aimed to ride along, and painted a distinguished dark grey in keeping with the carbon-oriented nature of the mission, was due to arrive in March, for my birthday. This was postponed until April, just in time to get to know him before the Fred Whitton, a local challenge ride in May. Finally, on a windy day in June two days before I was due to leave for the States, Charlie arrived at my door in the Lake District with Rocky in the back of his car. ‘There’s just one small problem,’ he said. ‘It concerns the front wheel ...’ He’d put the bike in the boot of his car ready to leave when his phone rang. Running in to answer it, he’d startled the cat, who jumped on the

car, slamming the boot down on the front wheel – which promptly curled into an intriguing shape, a bit like a pretzel. In view of the time constraints, Charlie had brought the bike down anyway, and had then spent hours on the phone in the kitchen, ringing around every bike shop in Cumbria to see if a wheel of the right specs could be found. In the end he had to drive to Glasgow and back to get one. So much for bikes as a low-carbon commodity.

Rocky and I, then, were not all that well acquainted by the time we came to be navigating our way through Gatwick airport towards the departure lounge. Nevertheless, I felt a huge pang as I left him in his cardboard box in a cage marked ‘oversize luggage’. Would we ever be reunited? A gentleman from San Antonio with silver hair, a yellow shirt and a large stomach, asked me what on earth I was thinking of, taking a bike to El Paso. He told me that it would be 115 degrees. He told me about ‘retail kidnapping’ in Mexico. (You get kidnapped; the kidnappers phone your family and ask for a DVD player/microwave/towel heater; the family take the DVD player/microwave/towel heater to the kidnappers, and receive you in exchange.) He told me under no circumstances to cross the border south into Mexico, and that, even heading north, while I might not be kidnapped, I would find little shade and should expect huge distances between the places where I could get water. Seizing the opening, I asked him whether climate change was a big concern in a place already so hot. This was not, he reassured me, a problem faced by southerners. ‘Though it does,’ he conceded, ‘get cool in the evenings.’ By the time I’d unscrambled my brain we’d been called to our separate check-in desks and I never saw him again. I decided the moral was probably to give up asking questions about climate change and use the more self-explanatory term ‘global warming’ instead.

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Many hours later, I was reading my way through a stack of climate change articles, 35,000 feet above the north-eastern edge of Canada. Nothing I read was remotely reassuring, except perhaps that the ‘greenhouse effect’ at the heart of the issue is in itself a beneficial natural phenomenon. The average temperature of the earth would be about minus eighteen degrees and pretty uninhabitable without it. The problem, rather, is the vast quantity of extra greenhouse gases added to the atmosphere by human actions. I was fast learning that, when it comes to climate change, there are areas of rock-solid certainty, and areas of intense debate. The trick is to tell which is which – and not to fall for the age-old ploy of using the existence of the latter to cast doubt on the former. One of the certainties is that carbon dioxide molecules retain heat. We have released more of them into the atmosphere. Therefore the atmosphere is retaining more heat. If you can dispute any of those claims you should, as George Monbiot puts it in his book, *Heat* [6](#), put yourself forward for a Nobel Prize in science. What exactly this warming atmosphere will mean for particular climates around the world is one of the uncertainties. Some are getting hotter, some drier, some wetter, some may even get colder. Overall, though, atmospheric warming – aka global warming – has been likened to turning the heat up under a saucepan of water. The extra energy has to go somewhere. So as well as changing climates, it’s expected to increase incidents of ‘severe weather’. Storms, floods, droughts, hurricanes ...

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I arrived in El Paso, via Houston, at one in the morning western United States time – or eight in the morning British time – walking down the long corridor to the baggage claim with the accompaniment of the oddly incongruous sound of Vivaldi’s ‘The Four Seasons’. With a touch of bleary self-pity, I calculated that I’d been travelling for twenty-four hours and, apart from a snooze over Greenland, hadn’t slept for – well, several days. Rocky didn’t show up until after the last suitcase was wending its

way soulfully round and round the baggage carousel and I was in the queue for lost luggage. A man walked through a hidden doorway carrying the battered bike box and everything else seemed suddenly irrelevant. We were here! Here in El Paso, Texas at one in the morning with the airport barometer reading eighty-five degrees! The friendly driver who squeezed the box into the back seat of his taxi asked me what I was up to and then told me I was crazy.

I woke to brilliant sunshine. The Holiday Inn Express, El Paso, is a tower block in a car park just off the interstate. My room looked across to a traffic junction and a vast advertisement for 'Amigos Bail Bonds' (available twenty-four hours). I'd decided to indulge in a hotel base camp for a day or so to sort things out before I set off. This proved to be a smart move, as there was a fair amount of sorting to do. All those articles to post back, for starters. And the fact that my wallet, complete with credit cards and driver's licence (ubiquitously required for identification in the States) had somehow stayed on the plane. Never believe those claims that replacement credit cards can be 'immediately expedited' to wherever you are in the world. It was going to take weeks. By great good fortune I'd bought \$1000 at Gatwick Airport and this money had never made it into my wallet but was stuffed into a back pocket. I could survive for a good while on cash. Meanwhile, Chris, already proving his worth back in Britain, arranged for new credit cards to be sent to friends in Colorado. I would pick them up en route, less than a thousand miles away ...

Finally, all that remained to sort out was Rocky. I rescued the large cardboard box from the hotel office and took it up to my room in the elevator. The moment of truth! Would he be in one piece? A couple of deep chunks out of the sleek grey paintwork, despite the padding. Oh well. But wait, OH NO! Four teeth completely missing from the largest cog of the triple front chain wheel. Given how much foam and padding I'd crammed around the bike I could only imagine that the 'Fragile, do not drop' signs on the box had inspired the baggage handlers to hurl it with great force across the airport floor. Tool kit spread out across the eiderdown, I put the rest of the bike together and figured I could go past a bike shop on the way out of town. Though without a credit card I wouldn't be replacing large bits of kit. I would probably just have to cope until Colorado. At least it was the large ring – high gears – definitely easier to manage without than low gears. Later, to my astonishment, adjusting the saddle and handlebars in the hotel car park, all the gears seemed to work anyway. I spent the rest of the evening trying to fit all my stuff into panniers and writing a card to Chris while drinking his parting gift of a half bottle of champagne. Rocky, propped up against the bed, looked sleek and beautiful and ready to go.



I'd just crossed the Interstate not long after the Crazy Cat bike shop and was stopped at the side of the road figuring out my next move, when a man pulled up alongside in a large black truck. 'I'm a cyclist,' he said (from which I understood, 'I'm not dangerous') 'and you are looking at a map ...' I grinned, recalled the travel guide author's advice, and told him where I was going. 'Take this road,' he said, pointing on the map. 'It's only slightly out of your way but much prettier.' So I headed north out of Texas and into New Mexico on Highway 28.

The outskirts of El Paso turn into heavily irrigated farmland. Pecan orchards, a polo pitch (yes, a polo pitch), a field of alpacas, clipped out like bizarre, long-legged poodles. Beautiful horses: quarter horses, thoroughbreds and a few Arabs. Chattering sparrow sounds and lots of birds I didn't know the names of. Tiny, delicate doves; birds like wagtails only with fatter tails; a vivid white egret, and later three humming birds in a row, hovering right above the road. The heat stayed intense. I have cycled in heat before and relished it, but either this was hotter (it was about 110 degrees when I left El Paso) or

was losing my tolerance. (Getting older? Nothing to do with it!) Occasionally I crossed the road to stand in the shadow of a tree or a stationary truck for a couple of minutes. When I stopped I could really hear the bird song. A couple of squirrels watched me from a hole in a house wall. The water in my bottles was hot in minutes. And more or less gone by the time I reached the tiny town of La Mesa twenty-something miles later.

La Mesa did not have the cool café I'd been fantasizing about. But at least it was there. Previous towns marked on the map had barely existed beyond a couple of houses. And it did have a store. I bought tortillas, Monterey Jack cheese and an unripe tomato and stood outside in a strip of shadow pouring water down my throat and occasionally over my head. Various folk coming and going said hello. One asked me if I was married and why I was travelling by bike. I was beginning to wonder this myself. Despite occasional godsend – I never thought I'd be so happy to see a cloud go across the sun – I was struggling by the time I reached Las Cruces, and seriously tempted by the Comfort Inn and the thought of air-conditioning. Unfortunately I'd recently seen the figures for carbon offsetting motel rooms – much higher than I'd imagined. Motel rooms needed to be seriously rationed. And I had still only done about forty miles on a day when I needed to do at least sixty. On the far side of Las Cruces my reward for carrying on was several miles of pecan plantations, tall enough to throw shade across the whole road. As the day wore on it became slightly, almost imperceptibly, cooler. Then a road sign told me that Radium Springs, my goal for that night, was closer than I'd thought. Only ten miles left! I celebrated with a rest on a bridge over the Rio Grande, sitting on the railings watching hundreds and hundreds of swallows hunting above the coffee-coloured water. A sweet tailwind swept me along the last few miles.

Radium Springs seemed to consist pretty much entirely of the Blue Moon Restaurant and Bar. There was one truck outside. I went in. A lone man and woman sat at the bar. The woman took one look at me and stood up. 'Heck, sweetheart, y'all okay? What can we do for you?'

The friendliness soaked like water into my dry, tired self. I wanted to stay and soak up some more – and a beer or two – but she said the campsite was a few miles back down the road, so I figured I'd better go and find it first. Heading back, the tailwind was now a headwind, and the campsite was extremely elusive. I finally tracked it down beyond signs for the Leasburg Dam State Park. Two women with chihuahuas on leads assured me that yes, this was it, and yes, there were showers. I cycled in a squiggly sort of way along gravelled roads looking for somewhere I might be able to pitch a tent rather than park an RV. Finally, finding a sandy spot beyond the main camping area, I was struggling to keep hold of the unfurled tent in the rising wind when a woman approached bearing a large pile of leaflets. Elaine, the campsite host, tucked a leaflet detailing the campsite facilities under my arm and shooed me off to an official spot complete with shelter, bench and electric hook-up. It was even harder to pitch the tent there due to the rocklike ground which was interspersed with concrete. But Elaine was insistent. Maybe she had human male-related concerns in mind rather than the wind. Either way, I was too tired to argue.

Elaine chatted while I pecked at the ground with my tent pegs. She and her husband lived in the park all summer, she said, pointing to an enormous RV. (Not that theirs was larger than any of the other immense houses-on-wheels that squatted in clusters on the concrete landing pads.) Then they drove to Arizona for the winter. She said the park was famous for its cacti, but that the cacti were dying. 110 degrees was unusual even here, and it hadn't rained for nearly a year. So hot and dry that *cacti* were dying? No wonder I was feeling it.

'Do you think it's global warming?' I asked.

'Probably ...' Elaine shrugged, and changed the subject before I had a chance to continue.

Finally, the tent more or less up, I headed for the shower. Bliss! In years of cycling I'd never reacted like this. My whole body felt overheated and yearning for water. Usually sun-proof, I now had blotches of vibrant red sunburn on the back of my left leg, ankle and both shoulders. My entire skin was dried up and my lips were cracked. After a single day. Back at the tent, I struggled to eat another tortilla, sent Chris a text message and crawled into the windy, flapping, hot tent. Lying naked on top of my Karrimat, I woke in the night and had to put some clothes on. What bliss to feel cool! Through the open tent door I could see hundreds and hundreds of hazy stars in the huge, dark sky.

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We don't know for sure whether particular hot spells – like the one I'd inadvertently arranged to be cycling through – are due to global warming. But they are completely in line with the predictions. As these hot spells become more common, it seems increasingly likely that they are related to climate change. Twenty of the twenty-one hottest years since records began in 1860 occurred in the last twenty-five years. And hot places, in general, are predicted to get hotter. Deserts are predicted to spread. Not great news for New Mexico. Nor for those who depend on neighbouring 'bread-basket' states for wheat and other essential crops. Not great news for large parts of the African continent, either. In what's been described as a horrible accident of geography, the worst-hit parts of the world in terms of desertification, and all that means for failing agriculture, water supplies and conflict, will be (initially at least) places that already have disproportionate poverty. And which have done least to cause the problem.

We *do* know for certain that the average temperature on earth has increased by over half a degree. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – an extraordinary body that represents the consensus and expertise of over two thousand scientists from across the international scientific community – predicts rises of between 1.8 and 6.4 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. To put this in perspective, the difference in average global temperature between now and the last ice age, when vast tracts of Europe and North America were buried under ice about a mile thick, was at most about five degrees. Five degrees colder and we're covered in ice. Five degrees *hotter* would alter our climates almost beyond recognition. Even changes at the lower end of the spectrum will dramatically alter current weather patterns.

But – and here's the good news – catastrophic climate change may not yet be inevitable. Where we end up on that spectrum almost certainly still depends on us and on what we do. It especially depends on what we do over the next ten to fifteen years. The changes required are immense and urgent – we definitely need to get a move on. But we surely have to try. If we assume it is too late and simply do nothing (and no-one can know this for certain) then it's game over, guaranteed.

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I woke just after six. For me, this was almost inconceivably early. It was beautiful. Rabbits, birds, wide landscape, distant dun-coloured hills, scattered with almost-green scrub. And cacti everywhere, in amazing, twisted, fingery shapes. A text from Chris. We had been together a little over a year. He had been unwaveringly supportive of this trip. Had helped research it. Had accepted the separation without question. Had joined in on my terms. It felt good to know he was out there. And it also felt good to be here alone, coping, enjoying the solitude, reconnecting with my old, independent self.

Back onto the Radium Springs road, the temperature was initially much gentler. Chris had asked, What does the desert *feel* like? I was just thinking, well, here it feels calm, peaceful ... when I passed a sign saying 'Peaceful Valley.' The Rio Grande flowed steadily alongside for a while, wide, almost

khaki-coloured, a narrow strip of green on each side soon fading into the huge, scrubby spaces beyond. More beautiful horses. Fewer pecan orchards. Wilder ... A drugs control checkpoint. I was waved on. Scattered houses. A large sign reading, *You got rocks?* followed by a phone number. After a while the road opened out into desert proper. Huge vistas of sandy, gravelly moguls. Immense flats, dried creeks, distant hills, everywhere dotted with khaki-coloured scrub.

The next few days fell into a pattern of sorts. I would get up uncharacteristically early. The mornings were beautiful: sometimes hazy, sometimes brilliant-blue-clear, always cool, and alive with wonderful birds. I'd get on the road as soon as I could but it was never long before the heat returned. After day two I realised I'd had it easy when the heat was joined by headwinds. Strong, hot headwinds. My speed would drop lower and lower until I'd be straining along at seven miles an hour, inwardly wincing when I failed to prevent my head from calculating how long it was going to take to get to that night's campsite.

Back in 1989 I'd spent two years as a postgraduate student in Colorado, and one summer had ridden south a thousand miles or so along the Rockies, ending just north of where I was now. That trip had been tight on time and I'd constructed it around a ninety miles a day average. After the Rhone ride, and some years before the Andes, it was one of the first big rides I'd done. It had been utterly exhilarating to be out there alone and I'd revelled in the heat and the mountains. It was also exhausting. It had taken me all day and well into the evenings to keep the miles up and I was distinctly flattened at the end of it. For this trip, with a smug sense of learning from past over-exuberance, I'd revised my daily mileage ambitions down to a mere seventy-five. Seventy-five miles, I'd figured, would take me about three quarters of the day. I could then spend the rest of the day talking to people, doing some research and taking it easy. That first week, I'd planned to emphasise the taking it easy bit. I'd envisaged finishing my miles by mid-afternoon, setting up camp and spending leisurely evenings reading novels and recovering from the pre-departure frenzy.

But things were not going entirely as intended. Each day, something conspired to keep me cycling well into the evening. Sometimes it was the headwinds; sometimes my distance estimates would randomly revise themselves upwards. Sometimes it was punctures. One afternoon, fixing a tiny sidewall puncture by the side of the road in the blasting heat with absolutely no shade, a vivid memory returned of an evening in New Mexico all those years before. It must have been a few days north of where I was now, the only time on that previous trip I'd ever felt really vulnerable – fixing a back wheel puncture on a long, isolated road, vulnerability magnified a thousand times by having the bike upside down by the roadside. I remembered tensing as a solitary car approached. It drove on by. Absolutely nothing happened. The only danger was in my head and I'd never worked out why that long patch of fear had suddenly disrupted my peace.

Now I just couldn't seem to keep a decent pace up. It was exasperating, and a little mysterious. A partial explanation was simple – fitness. But this didn't seem to fully account for it. Distance cycling is as much about stubbornness as strength and I didn't think my stubbornness had waned. That I'd been eighteen years younger on the previous Rockies ride hadn't even crossed my mind when Chris and I sat with the atlas in the comfort of our sitting room planning this trip. On the road in those first long, slow hot days, the thought that my age – surely not! – might have something to do with my slowness sneaked into my head and niggled away at my confidence.

My head was one of the two main things I daily did battle with during that long first week. It kept informing me it was time to stop when most of that day's seventy-five miles lay ahead. My body hadn't settled into distance mode yet either. I couldn't quite get comfortable on the handlebars and, for some weird reason, the sole of my left foot really ached. And I was still coughing. I did, however,

have one powerful weapon. Fourteen songs on a tiny recorder heroically copied there very late the night before I left by my wonderful, gadget-literate friend Jacqui. I would make myself wait until I was slowing almost to standstill in the mid-afternoon heat and then take out my precious black credit-card-sized gadget, put in the minute ear-plugs, and switch on. I'd pull away to the unmistakable opening upbeat rhythm of Gnarl Barkley's 'Crazy' – fast becoming the trip's theme tune – gaze at the desert to the beautiful, wistful sound of Shooglenifty's 'Carboni's Farewell', and pound the pedals to KT Tunstall's wonderful lyrics. *You're or, or, or, or, orrrrrr, the other side of the worrrrrrrrrld ...* Somewhere in the middle of the sequence Jacqui had inserted the James Bond theme tune, which infallibly lent an aura of adventure to the most mundane stretch of road, instantly converting a hot, tedious slog into an urgent and thrilling mission – and restoring my sense of humour. I'd end with a rerun of 'Crazy' – *I remember when, when I lost my mind ... I must be crAAAAAAzy ...* and then make myself put the little machine away so I didn't weary of the songs too soon. They always added several miles per hour to my speed.

It was typically around seven or eight o'clock by the time I crawled into a campsite, dead beat. One evening, on a day that had included vast straight stretches of road past the tiny town of Truth and Consequences, the last five miles to Elephant Butte (where do these names come from?) nearly reduced me to tears. It was the longest five miles I could remember. I could see nowhere to wild camp without dragging the loaded bike miles across rough ground, so I just kept going. The campsite, when it finally appeared, overlooked a huge, dammed lake glistening grey in the desert and buzzing with speedboats and jet-skis. I flopped for a few minutes and then steeled myself for the day's second main battle – with my tent. This time I managed to get it more or less erected near a tree, away from the official camping area, where the ground was fractionally less concrete. The light was fading by the time I hit the shower. Afterwards I sat by the tent eating an apple, and watching distant lightening race across the slate-grey sky. I left the core for a rabbit foraging nearby. A huge pickup truck towing a jet ski pulled up in one of the camping areas. Its all-male occupants were there to roar about on the water and I was trying to feed a rabbit! In my tired state I had an odd sense of different worlds colliding, and also a touch of hostility, almost certainly imagined. Their world was the one in which massively carbon-polluting forms of recreation were simply the norm – and critics were killjoys or tree-hugging environmental lunatics. And mine? Mine was the world of a person at odds with this 'normality'; appalled by its consequences; deeply critical and yet inevitably part of it too.

In bed by nine, I recalled the words of a friend who works in an outdoor shop. Dave is something of a camping-gear specialist. 'The Lazer,' he'd said carefully, when I told him what I'd just bought, 'is wonderfully light. But a little hard to put up single-handed in wind. And not ideal if the wind is high ...' Just as I was drifting off, a high wind put in an appearance. You could hear it roaring in from the distance. It arrived with sudden ferocity, slamming into the tent. The tail-end collapsed onto my feet. At the same time, a posse of trucks roared up, their drivers yelling across the wind as they slammed doors and went to use the toilets. Getting out in my underpants to fix the tent seemed like a good way to attract the wrong kind of help. I lay still until the last set of truck lights arched across the canvas and revved off into the dark. Then I crawled out, tethered the tent to Rocky at one end (it was already tied to a tree at the other), pinned down the rest with rocks, and settled in for a windy night.

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The good thing about low spots is that they make the high spots higher, and on bike trips the high spots are frequent. All sorts of ordinary events which are normally taken for granted soon begin to cause disproportionate joy. Like *not* cycling, even for a few minutes. Or drinking water. Or eating.

Definitely eating. The tortillas and cheese I'd bought on day one were my main food all week, bungied on top of the panniers for ease of access. The cheese constantly melted and re-solidified, becoming puddle-shaped. I supplemented it where possible with a daily café stop, combining a bit of a rest, temperature restoration, water replenishment and food with an erratic injection of random extracts from United States' culture. In the Pepper Pot café, a long room with ceiling fans and all the blinds down, I had a huge plate of huevos rancheros. The café walls were covered in ornate silver crosses, LPs, photographs of tractors, and a 1963 newspaper headlining 'Johnson Sworn in as President'. The toilet walls specialised in pictures of lighthouses, carefully painted on pieces of wood. By the door stood a Christmas tree, covered in red, white and blue stars – all alight. The Buckhorn Bar, by comparison, featured benches with inset metal moose designs, reindeer antlers festooned with baseball caps, a piano with a stuffed mountain lion crouched on top of it, and a television playing continuous country and western videos. On each table, a photocopied GQ magazine front page inserted into the menu stand read, '20 hamburgers to eat before you die. Buckhorn burger voted #7 in America ...' Huevos rancheros was my mainstay in cafés throughout New Mexico. It has to be up there with the best vegetarian biking meals ever. Beans, potatoes, eggs, tortillas, cheese and chilli (green or red). Vast portions, of course; I would begin the meal with great relish and then about halfway through a feeling close to despair would creep in as I realised there was no way I could eat it all. Usually I'd get a doggy bag and keep it for later, strapped on my panniers on top of the cheese.

Drinking was also a major source of good feeling, perhaps even more than eating. In 110 degrees, this was not exactly an indulgence. Charlie had made space on the bike to fit three water bottles and I usually carried an additional couple of litres in old plastic bottles. It wasn't always enough. One morning when the hot headwinds were particularly relentless my minor road petered out. I'd heard bicycles weren't allowed on the interstate highways, and anyway they didn't sound too enticing. Now I didn't have a choice. I wheeled down towards Interstate 25, figuring that if it really were illegal to cycle there I'd be picked up by the police and with luck deposited a bit further north. But the sign at the junction, while banning pedestrians and motorbikes, declared bicycles to be legal so long as they kept to the hard shoulder. Happy to oblige, I crept cautiously onto the vast stretch of tarmac. Revelation! Not only was there little traffic, but the interstate ironed out most of the minor ups and downs, a benefit lost on its motorised constituents but of immense significance to tired cyclists. (I learned later that the interstates were built in this way so that fighter planes could land on them during the Cold War.) And by some logic that was beyond my grasp the headwind was much less fierce on the interstate than it was on the minor road, even though both roads went in exactly the same direction.

Miles later my glee at these discoveries began to fade as I realised I was not going to make it to the next town without more water. It wasn't exactly life-threatening; I could always flag down a truck. But the thought of doing that brought out an emphatic British reserve I didn't know I had. I became fixated with two large 'R's' on the map. Even in a semi-dehydrated state, I couldn't make 'R' stand for 'service station'. What else could it stand for that might have water? The last drip in the last bottle had gone miles back, and then I arrived at the best Rest Stop in the world. Pulling off the road, I was greeted by two men and a woman travelling to Las Vegas. With typical, if slightly scatty generosity, they handed me a bag of ice (first), then water and a doughnut. The Rest Stop had a water tap, toilets, vending machine and a shaded area with tables. It even had a barbeque grill. A sign at one end read 'Dog Toilet', though various dogs came and went as they chose, and at the other, 'Beware of Rattlesnakes'. I settled at a table and made a cheese tortilla. The recent relief of my own immediate personal water shortage gave particularly vivid meaning to the predicated impacts of climate change.

on fresh water. About a third of the entire population of China, for example, depends on glacial meltwater for their drinking water. And if that source simply disappears? What will people do when water, something we literally cannot live without, is threatened? Perhaps luckily for my peace of mind, a truck driver wearing a white cowboy hat, immaculate white sleeveless vest, ironed cream jeans and cowboy boots climbed down from his cavernous cab and joined me. We chatted about the heat. I felt shyder than I'd anticipated, trying to bring up the subject of climate change in these brief exchanges. But when I did, I was quickly finding the weather to be the fastest route in. Like most people I'd talked to so far, the immaculate trucker said it was hotter than normal. And drier. And windier. He said there were big fires in Arizona, where the air was acrid with smoke.

'Do you think it's global warming?' I asked.

'Heck honey,' he said, 'I sure think it's Mother Nature.'

Mother Nature, natural cycles, sunspots ... I'd already encountered numerous people who held roughly this view. Presumably, the consequences remain just as threatening whether global warming is caused by us or whether Mother Nature carries the can. But the Mother Nature view has one great advantage. If global warming is a natural phenomenon then we probably don't need to take on the responsibility of trying to prevent it. It's often held alongside the view that we're too small to make a difference anyway. Looking around at the vast gasoline guzzling trucks I could see how such a position might have an appeal. And at least the Mother Nature advocates had some conception of what global warming *was*.

I was just leaving when my mobile rang. Only two people had the number – Chris and the Office of the Mayor of Albuquerque. It was the latter.

'Dr Rawles!' said a strongly accented (to my ears) female voice, introducing herself as Rene. 'We are so glad you are well.' Thank goodness for phones that are not video-enabled, I thought, having just seen my blotched face and staring, still-dehydrated eyes in the rest-room mirror. 'The Mayor will be delighted to meet you at nine am on Friday as arranged. Does that still work for you? He has no other slot.' My date with the Mayor was the reason I'd been straining to keep up the mileage all week. Getting to Albuquerque by Thursday evening in order to be in a fit state to meet the Mayor on Friday morning was still going to be, well, a challenge.

'Of course,' I heard myself say, 'no problem at all. Is there anywhere to stay near the Mayor's office?'

'Oh yes,' said Rene, 'the Hyatt is very close. And there's also a Hilton.'

I collected Rocky, who was resting against the rattlesnake sign, and prepared to set off. 'HmMMMM,' I said to Rocky and the hot blue sky, 'the Hyatt with no credit card. That should be interesting.' Clearly the Mayor's office was not in Motel Six belt. And I knew there were no campsites within miles.

As I left, a vast RV towing a Hummer pulled into the rest area, returning my attention to higher things and reminding me why I was cycling through this minor inferno in the first place. RVs do about five miles per gallon and the Hummer, basically a civilian tank, does about three miles per gallon – on a good day. 'Haven't you heard of global warming?' I wanted to shout at the short bearded man strolling towards the barbeque area. 'Wake up, you oil-addicted fool!' Fortunately my British reserve kicked in again and I cycled silently away. The drivers of oversized vehicles were perhaps not best placed to see the issue with clarity. But one thing really did surprise me. An awful lot of people genuinely didn't seem to know there was an issue at all. How could it be, I wondered, that so many folk seemed barely to have heard of something that might fundamentally alter human society, if not remove us from the planet altogether – and that had been plastered for months if not years all over the

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