

REAL LIFE OUTSIDE

FRESH AIR • GEAR • RECREATION • OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

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ADVENTURE

How I spent my summer... cycling through Argentina

Four Calgary students take the trip of a lifetime with a local charity

TRENT EDWARDS
CALGARY HERALD

Every September, students stream back to school with tales of their summer vacations.

The more standard stories of "how I spent my summer vacation" — camp, road trips, hanging with friends — will be blown out of the water by Simon Beaumont and a few of his new friends.

Beaumont, 15, and three other Calgary teens bicycled through northern Argentina from late July to early August. They,

along with four other youths from Canada and the U.S., were sponsored by Two Wheel View, a new Calgary-based charity that offers cycling excursions to exotic places around the world.

"There's no words to describe how fun it was," says Beaumont, a Grade 11 student at Bowness High School.

Leading the two-week trip to the South American country was the charity's founder, Rick McFerrin, a 39-year-old who moved from Minneapolis to Calgary two years ago to found a local arm of the charity he started in Minnesota in 2000.

As a young man, McFerrin



Photos: Courtesy, Two Wheel View
Taylor Johnstone, left, of Calgary, and Makayla Gottwald of Paynesville, Minn., take a brief pit stop in Salta, Argentina.

cycled around the world with his wife Tanya. Upon returning, he realized seeing the world from a bike seat opened his eyes to new cultures and expanded his horizons.

"I wanted to make that experience possible for other young people," McFerrin says.

On his first student trip to include Calgarians, he and two other volunteer adult leaders took eight youths ranging in age from 14 to 17 to cycle through the Argentine provinces of Salta and Tucuman.

Their 400-kilometre tour took them from the salt pans and parched red earth of the plains over a high pass in the Andes and down into lush rainforest.

But it was the students who had to step outside their comfort zones in joining this adventure of a lifetime. For two

weeks, they were immersed in a culture they knew little about before flying to South America.

None of the students had much experience cycling before the trip. Ahead lay challenging hills, rough roads and fast traffic. Sore bottoms and aching legs characterized the first few days, but all of the students pedalled themselves into shape and none had to drop out.

"It was more mentally tiring than physically tiring," Beaumont says.

During the day, they cycled an average of 50 kilometres. Just staying clean was a major challenge on hot days, when each sweaty cyclist became a dust magnet. At night they usually set up camp by the roadside and shared chores, making dinner together and preparing for the next day's ride.

They also stopped in storied colonial cities to learn about

Pedal charity

Two Wheel View's next adult cycle tour will be to Argentina in the spring of 2008. The next trips Calgary students can join are to Norway in June 2008, or Argentina in July 2008.

To donate money, bikes, or bike parts to Two Wheel View or to inquire about its trips or programs, call 698-9418 or visit twowheelview.org.

Spanish traditions and customs, stayed in rural villages and met locals who entertained them with songs in Spanish around the campfire.

Few of the students knew each other before the trip, but they overcame their shyness as they shared challenges to become fast friends.

Getting along while learning to cycle tour was just part of their mission. Bigger goals were to mingle with people from a distant place and culture while exposing themselves to the natural wonders of our world.

Their goals were to challenge themselves both physically and mentally. They tried local foods like *lomito* (a steak sandwich topped with a fried egg), learned some Spanish and practiced minimal-impact camping.

"It was a major culture shock," Beaumont says with a grin.

SEE CYCLING, PAGE E7

Calgary students cycled through the Quebrada de Cafayate valley in Salta, Argentina, as part of a two-week tour.

FROM E6 CYCLING

Each year, Two Wheel View runs educational cycling trips to far-flung destinations around the world: places like Norway, Spain and the Dominican Republic. McFerrin limits group sizes to eight youths aged 14 to 18 and three adults on each of the charity's three annual student trips. Two Wheel View's annual adult trip is limited to 10 adults.

Each person that joins an adult trip must raise enough money for a student to join a future trip. Other student spaces are paid for through fundraising by Two Wheel View or by the students themselves.

Calgary students on the Argentina trip were chosen from local schools, each earning a full "scholarship" on the basis of their letter of interest, financial need and recommendations from adults who know them (See Pedal charity sidebar on E6).

Beaumont's application touted his camping experience and hinted to McFerrin that the youth has leadership potential. But Beaumont had to hit bottom on the trip before realizing how to help others without exhausting himself. For the first three days of cycling, he helped other students

set up tents, organized dinner and dishes and made sure everyone was ready for the next day's cycling.

When he realized he was so work-focused he wasn't having any fun, he told the group he wasn't going to help anyone anymore.

After talking it over with an adult leader, he decided to scale back his self-imposed duties to a sustainable level. By the end of the trip, Beaumont was bursting with self-confidence.

"I never quit," Beaumont beamed.

Now that school has started, Beaumont and his Calgary trip-mates are keen to tell their classmates about all they learned on their Two Wheel View trip. Beaumont plans to make a slideshow for family and friends, then present it to classmates at school this fall. He hopes his photos will convince his audiences that spending a few weeks cycling through a foreign country with strangers can change your mind-set.

"This trip is just opening more doors for my future," he says.

Argentina is still recovering from the collapse of its economy in 2001 to 2002. Stray dogs are common. Homes, schools and other public buildings are often run-down. Cars from the 1950s fill the streets. Fruit and vegetable vendors peddle their produce from horse-drawn carts.

But most astounding for the students was how people with so little wealth can be so happy. Taylor Johnstone, a 14-year-old student from Calgary, wanted to stay in Argentina for a year. She says the people there are like one big family.

"I was a bit jealous," she says. "They have time to talk, they have siestas from 1 to 4 (p.m.)."

Calgary students were also surprised by the generosity of the Argentines.

Exhausted after climbing much of a 60-kilometre road up a mountain pass, McFerrin asked a rural family if they could have some water and sleep in their yard. After satiating their guests' thirst, the family invited them to stay inside their partially-built home.

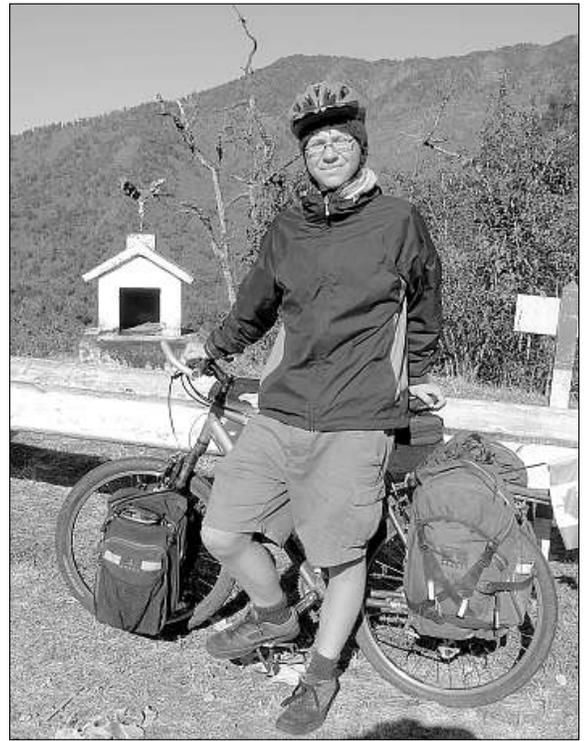
Such behaviour was typical in Argentina, where motorists tooted their horns not in anger at the cyclists, but as encouragement. Locals often invited the tourists to their homes for dinner — all in a place where clean water is a far more precious resource than it is in Canada.

"Everyone was so nice, encouraging, fun," Johnstone remembers.

McFerrin hopes that the Calgary youths on the trip will reflect on how Argentines live and use their new perspective to initiate community projects such as bike commuting and water conservation.

"Our trips try to instill those values," McFerrin says.

Two Wheel View also runs a



Courtesy, Two Wheel View
Simon Beaumont of Calgary takes a break in Salta, Argentina.

free program of weekly field trips until mid-October for local youth groups. The charity provides under-privileged youth with mountain bikes and snacks for guided rides through parks and pathways in northeast Calgary. The rides are used to introduce kids to

mountain biking and environmental education.

But Beaumont says Two Wheel View's international trips are what really capture a young person's imagination. "It was unbelievable."

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