

# In Over My Head?

## Organizing the VanIsle 1200

Steve Mahovlic with David Gillanders

“NO POINT IN PUTTING ON YOUR GEAR IF YOU’RE NOT going to ride at least 40K,” my wife Melissa quipped. It would be years before I would complete my first 200K, much less think of organizing the VanIsle 1200. Still, Melissa’s challenge moved me to getting serious about cycling. I do not have a great volunteer record either; since joining the BC Randonneurs in 2009, you could count on one hand the number of times I have volunteered for events. Despite my limited experience, the BC Randonneurs are willingly supporting me as organizer of the 2014 VanIsle 1200.

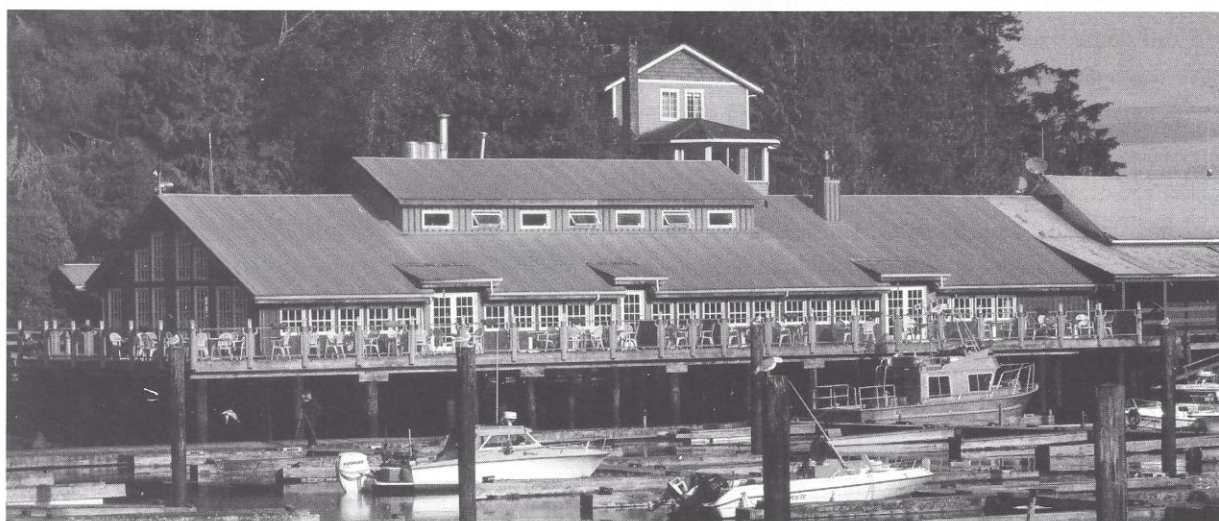
My desire to resurrect the VanIsle was first revealed during the Pacific Shoreline 200K, in July, 2012. I was riding in the lead trio with Ken and Rob until we had covered about 60K at which point Rob dropped back. After 70K I was falling off as well, so I started talking to Ken about organizing the 2014 VanIsle 1200. It worked.

Our pace slowed as we began to discuss this idea that I had only shared with Melissa up to this point. Now the idea was public and I was committed.

The VanIsle 1200 follows a route designed by Ken Bonner in 2006. He organized the event again in 2010. His description of the ride on the 2010 Website is understated; “The VanIsle 1200...is a low-key 1200K randonnee featuring scenic seaside vistas and west coast wilderness. Starting and finishing in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, the route travels along the Strait of Georgia, across Vancouver Island to the former mill town of Gold River before returning to the drop-bag control at Campbell River and onwards to the northern turnaround at the logging & fishing town of Port Hardy.”

The organizing challenge of the VanIsle is how to prepare participants to travel 656K of isolated highways on

Telegraph Cove—maybe next time.



Northwest Vancouver Island. There is reasonable support available on the first 293k along the east coast from Victoria to Campbell River, but for the next 656k participants must be disciplined in their riding and able to ride 40k to 90k at a time without the opportunity for replenishing supplies. While there are small towns along the way, accommodations are scarce, except in Port Hardy. Also, due to the number of large carnivores, riders are cautioned against roadside 'camping.' For the last 260k, randonneurs will once again be on the populated east coast.

For more details, and to confirm the accuracy of my description, you can read riders' reports on the BC Randonneurs' website. For example, Bob Koen's "The Art of Finishing Last; As Executed to Perfection on the 2010 VanIsle 1200k Brevet" appears there. In his account, Bob describes his effort, along with his unwitting accomplice Dave Gillanders, to secure a bottle of Red Bicycle wine. You should really read the whole story.

Dave Gillanders' VanIsle story is also worth hearing because he completed his first 1200 (the VanIsle) at the age of 79. As the story below makes clear, Dave had previously made several 1200k attempts, but not until the VanIsle was he able to complete the distance. Here is his story:

Dave's first attempt at a 1200k was the PBP in 2003 at age 72. On the third night, with only 4 hours of sleep, he had cycled about 1040k. About 10k out of Mortagne au Perche, Dave's riding companions decided he was going too slow and was finished. They tucked him into a survival bag on the side of the road, extracting a promise



North Island Preparedness

that Dave would not try and go any further. They let the air out of Dave's tires to make sure that he would go no further and promised to send a rescue vehicle for him when they got to Mortagne au Perche.

Dave fell asleep in the bag, woke up in the dark, and noted all the bikes coming by. He heard riders talking, their white lights approaching on the left, and their red lights disappearing on the right. Dave got the bright idea of turning on the SOS signal on his helmet. He lay on the side of the road with his SOS blinking for quite some time as numerous bikes passed. At one point, two English-speaking riders had a conversation as they rode by, "Isn't that the universal distress signal?" said one. The rider's companion replied in the affirmative as they passed Dave, not slowing one iota.

Finally, a French rider stopped and asked if he was okay. He responded, "Not really." Assessing the situation, the rider decided to call an ambulance. As the rider was the first person to stop after what seemed like an endless number of cyclists had passed by, Dave asked if

he had completed the PBP before. When the rider said “No,” Dave tried to insist that he carry on and finish the ride. The response again was, “No, I will stay with you until the ambulance arrives! ANY MAN WOULD DO THAT.” Every time Dave thinks of those words he gets choked up.

In 2004, Dave tried the Rocky Mountain 1200. The heat beat him in Jasper. The next year he tried the BMB and had to quit after 400k because of boils on his backside. He tried the Vanisle in 2006 and developed a strained Achilles tendon at 759k. Dave made two more attempts at PBP in 2007 (he completed 750k), and 2011 (he completed 400k).

During the 2010 VanIsle with Bob Koen, after about 750k, Dave was ready to quit. And left to his own devices, he might have. However, Bob realized that Dave was spent and suggested they have a sleep for a few hours and then see how they felt. THAT WAS THE BREAKTHROUGH. He woke up after that sleep and felt like a new man. They carried on, stopping for an occasional sleep, and finished the ride, finally!

The VanIsle route has been tweaked very little since its inception. In 2014, starting at 3am on July 14<sup>th</sup>, in Victoria, BC, randonneurs will follow the highway north. Within 15k, riders will drop into Goldstream Park for their first taste of true darkness. The reward comes at the 30k mark. They will summit the Malahat with the breaking sun. This year the route stays on the highway through the city of Duncan, the farmlands of North Cowichan and then along the waterfront past Ladysmith. The first checkpoint will be at a local randonneur’s home in Yellowpoint for a continental breakfast.

After finding their way through the Cedar farmlands, riders will traverse the waterfront of the hub city of Nanaimo. Around the 155k mark riders will find themselves on the scenic old island highway. This quieter waterfront route will take them through Parksville, Qualicum Beach, Courtenay, and this year, Comox. The route is timed to get all riders through Nanaimo in the morning hours and to Campbell River (293k—drop bag central) in daylight to enjoy the spectacular beauty



of the Island's east coast. If the tailwinds prevail, Gold River (382κ—drop bags) may be where many riders take their first night's rest. Faster riders could make it back to Campbell River (472κ).

North of Campbell River will be a challenge for all riders. Although the road is good, and traffic lighter, amenities are scarce. Even in summer there is little in the way of replenishment (check out the advisories on the VanIsle website). It will be the well-prepared, disciplined randonneurs who will enjoy the next 656κ. The remote scenery reminds me of the Arrogant Worms song, Rocks and Trees (Google it). Participants are advised to pre-plan and pre-book their stops along the way. A guide to the points of interest is being prepared for distribution. Once riders reach Port Hardy (709κ), they will have cycled Vancouver Island end to end. The task then is to simply return safely to Victoria along much of the same route, now with a different perspective.

My concern about being in over my head was for naught as a team of eager, seasoned volunteers has stepped up and our plans are rapidly coming together. Melissa and I drove the North Island in August 2013 to connect with local support. At our 2013 fall and winter meetings, the VanIsle 1200 volunteers helped sort out the details. Their enthusiasm and initiative has simplified the delegation of duties.

As we wrap up the loose ends and prepare to welcome 50 randonneurs from as far away as Japan, the Unite Kingdom, and South America, I am glad I stepped up to the task. Ideas are already swirling about for 2018. Perhaps a VanIsle Triple Cross 1200 that would showcase the Island's west coast of Port Renfrew, Tofino, and Gold River....I am getting ahead of myself. See you in July. 🚲

