

Stash

WHERE YOU FIND SPECIAL THINGS

IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT. Radiating perfection across the road from my Glacier, Washington, cabin sat my dream van, the Mitsubishi Delica, with high clearance, four-wheel drive and a diesel engine. In the past, searching for a backlot camper had ended in either compromise or disappointment, but Miss Delica was different with her sporty confidence and British Columbia plates. We could run biodiesel — I fantasized — as we'd roll from powder days to shuttle runs to lakeside campsites. She could be the one. Caught off guard by my reverie, I left my cabin in a flustered rush to make first chair.

Fate would bring us together again in places such as Nakusp's laundromat, outside a North Van bike shop and in the Rogers Pass Discovery Centre parking lot. But the more I learned about her, the more it became clear my American citizenship was an insurmountable obstacle standing forever in our way. Immigration and import laws conspire to keep us apart, but back on that misty Washington morning, I felt we could be happy together for at least 300,000 clicks.

MY CRUSH on Delica still smoulders, and I am not alone in my lust. Since 2004, some of BC's keenest have developed a love for imported Japanese Domestic Market (JDM) vehicles. Visibly distinguished by a steering wheel on the right-hand side, these imported used vehicles were never sold new in North America but are now auctioned off and then shipped offshore because of stringent Japanese biannual inspections — known as *Shaken* — that discourage ownership of aging vehicles in that country.

Transport Canada permits entry for right-hand-drive vehicles 15 years past their manufacture date, with a customs clearance and a provincial safety inspection that require modifications to lighting, tires and glass. Gaining full legal status in British Columbia for these mail-order vehicles also requires a road-worthiness inspection, registration with stacks of documentation and an insurance evaluation. In the United States we aren't as fortunate, since the legal age of import is fixed at 25 years old, a 10-year age difference that makes JDM vans much less desirable.

Driving Miss Delica

An American anguishes over his unrequited long-distance love affair with BC's sexy imported right-hand drive vans

BY DAN KOSTRZEWSKI

Even with the cross-cultural obstacles, this export-import synergy matches Canadians with lightly used vehicles for bargain prices — with shipping, taxes, broker fees and modifications included — as well as access to attractive models, such as the Toyota Hiace, that satisfy an unmet provincial urge for burly mountain vans. Estimates from Transport Canada now place the number of landed right-hand-drive vehicles at more than 70,000, with a burgeoning industry of JDM brokers, dealers, shops and parts suppliers, as well as an online forum — *Delica.ca* — that includes matchmaking sites for vans and their slightly obsessed owners.

drive, and by the time I tracked down Nelson, British Columbia, Whitewater Winter Resort ski patroller Daniel Leslie, I felt unchecked jealousy toward Canadians driving my dream van.

"I first saw this Delica parked on the street in Vancouver," he relayed nostalgically, recounting the trips they'd taken together, including missions up to Duncan Lake, out to the coast and into the Jumbo Glacier cabin for a 16-person Thanksgiving dinner. "Somewhere in my own subconscious, I decided I was going to own one."

The Delica sounded perfect, but, like any vehicle with a past, digging deeper revealed that she came with quirks and drawbacks, such as initial upkeep on neglected maintenance, finding parts in remote locations, deciphering Japanese-only manuals or labelling and, of course, learning to drive from the right-hand side.

In addition to her endearing hassles, a 2007 Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC) study raised more serious concerns by finding right-hand-drive vehicles are 44 per cent more likely to be involved in a collision. Quebec has since enacted a 2009 moratorium on their registration, Transport Canada has restarted a review of the 15-year exemption that permits JDM vehicle entry, and ICBC is requiring self-identification of right-hand drive as a likely precursor to a spike in insurance rates. For now, however, the vans remain street legal out west and up north.

Although I know her issues, I still pine for her. Through my own stalking — or what writers call "research" — I finally scored a blind date with a Delica in the Lower Mainland.

For now she remains on a pedestal, preserving this story as an ode to the unrequited or impossible. But a rare Japanese beauty is waiting for me on the Number 3 Road in Richmond, and I can't wait to take her out. If sparks fly and this match is truly meant to be, I may do something drastic, like move north to make her mine.

When he's not drooling over Delicas, writer Dan Kostrzewski explores Washington's North Cascades from Mount Baker. His stories have appeared in Powder, Frequency, Skiing, Backcountry and Snowboard Canada.



Yet, as the profile of right-hand drives soared, I began hearing nasty rumours about Delica vans as high maintenance, top heavy and dangerous, so I spoke with Butch Inducil, a renowned Delica specialist who owns CVI Automotive in Richmond, British Columbia. He gushed about Mitsubishi's tall, classic Starwagon and young, curvy Space Gear.

"This vehicle will take you to places that not all cars or vans can go; with the four-wheel-drive feature and the way it is balanced, it's awesome in snow," Inducil said. "The engine is right in the middle and all the weight is centered, so your traction is super, and it can take whatever hills or mountains you go up, in gravel or whatever type of terrain."

To be honest, he had me at four-wheel

Right-side drive doesn't fly right for some. Photos: Steve Ogle

Girls Gone Buri



A lock of ladies heads into the wooly woods of the unknown

BY BOBBI BARBARICH

“I’M SURE THERE’S a singletrack in here somewhere!” shouts Natasha Lockey, a brown-eyed Kiwi with ripped calves. A branch whips past her shoulder and slashes my face. I never saw it coming.

Lockey, Chloe Holgate, Joanne Brett and I are dragging our bikes, trudging through green willows along the abandoned, overgrown reaches of Redding Creek Forest Service Road, on the eastern side of Grey Creek Pass, searching for the Baker Lake trailhead. If we find it, the trail is supposed to lead to a 2,100-metre ridgeline on the eastern edge of Lockhart Creek Provincial Park. From the summit, it’s a 15-kilometre descent that will spit us onto the Kootenay Lake shoreline.

Lockhart Creek is a singletrack vaguely described in the odd mountain bike online forum. It’s a little known trail, the type acknowledged with a nod by a friend of a friend who heard someone else had done it. “Epic,” said the guy sipping an espresso outside Nelson’s Oso Negro, sunglasses glinting in the sun as he watched us scrambling to get our bikes into Lockey’s truck in time to meet the ferry. None of the four women in our group have ever been on the trail, but Lockey, who’s the owner and operator of Betty Go Hard, a

women’s progressive action sport community, is unperturbed. Based in Rossland, Lockey takes groups of girls who’d like to huck and, by having them commit to weekly rides in increasingly tough terrain, makes them rip.

Since the 30-minute bushwhack at the beginning of the trail, we’ve hiked continuously upward over rock steps for an hour. At a 100-metre wide avalanche swath, Lockey heaves her bike onto her shoulder and picks a path through the rocks. I’m a novice mountain biker on my best days, at least by Kootenay standards. My memories of Prairie cross-country races and river valley singletrack whimper before talus slopes and convex rock slabs. I’m now thinking perhaps I was overenthusiastic when I had asked Lockey — who’s now gliding over scree on a hefty gradient and grinning over her shoulder at the three women standing agape behind her — to take me on Lockhart Trail. I swallow my objection to following her through the steep shale and ignore the idea it might be easier to backtrack to the truck, drink a sun-warmed beer and call it a day.

It’s 4:21 p.m. when we lug our bikes onto the ridge. No one is convinced this is where the descent begins, but we’ve been hiking up creek beds and fighting devil’s club for hell

knows how long. The one reasonably detailed trail description Lockey was able to find says it’s a two-hour hike to the descent’s start and we’re closing in on the three-hour mark. I’m convinced we’ve finally reached the hike’s end because there’s nowhere else to go. Jagged rock outcroppings frame the small saddle where we stand. Decrepit trees sweep into the valley behind us. Craggy grey slabs fall along a narrow trail clinging to the slope below us.

Lockey shrugs and jumps on her steed, adding nonchalantly, “Looks like this is where it starts.”

I have no choice but to follow. The ground consistently drops, broken only by regular uphill grunts through stubborn brambles. Our conversation is minimal and is initiated based on our differences in grit, patience and skill. Subalpine gnarl grows into tall trees and finally the track smooths out. We whip through towering hemlock and squeeze shoulders between trunks, hugging the winding mossy slopeside.

Lockey hoots out loud. We’ve been quiet for some time, conscious of the sun oozing through iridescent leaves above us. It’s waning and we’re tiring. Brett kicks her bike when she slips off the trail. I endo into moss — again. Lockey waits, calmly chatting with Holgate.

“You good?” she asks as I approach. I’m surprised I nod. “Let’s go,” Lockey quips.

Though we can hear Lockhart Creek, I want to see it so I know we’re going the right way. Certainty has eluded us for hours. My directional doubt wanes when Lockey deftly rides through the creek and pauses to fill her hydration pack. “I think we’re almost there, ladies,” she smiles.

Two more devil’s club fights, one more shale-covered switchback and I pass a one-kilometre sign. The final stretch feels like a cross-country ride, beaten by feet from the nearby campground. Far beyond my front tire, grey light breaks through blackening trees. Lockey stands at the edge of the highway, waiting for me. After nearly six hours, I’m happy to see pavement. “It was a bit like childbirth, I think,” Lockey summarizes, adding that we should do it again. “We’ll probably forget the painful parts.”

Freelance writer and photographer Bobbi Barbarich now lives in Nelson, British Columbia, after her years in the Prairies proved too flat.

Rail Trail Tremors

When the trek to the put-in is burlier than the paddle, you know you're in for one helluva ride

BY RAYMOND SCHMIDT



Don't drop that kayak! Writer Raymond Schmidt navigates the burly drop-in above the class IV Elk River. Photo: Mark Gallup

SINCE I HADN'T QUITE SHAKEN the kayaking willies from the winter, I was worried about paddling the Elk River near Elko, situated about 30 kilometres south of Fernie, British Columbia. I figured reading the guidebook description would comfort my early-season insecurities. The description was brief and to the point: "This is a short, but very intense, big-volume run in a tight canyon. No place for wannabes or even mightbes. Make sure you are the real thing."

I was pretty damn sure I wasn't the real thing, but here I was getting geared up for my first real kayak run of the year. Local Fernie paddler Lija Lasmanis, who met our group at the put-in, didn't help my confidence much either. "The hardest and scariest part is getting to the river," she said. Huh? When is that ever the hardest part?

Parked next to a flat meadow, the cured grass did little to hide a set of railway tracks. The tracks, said Lija, were our trail to the river. Most railway tracks don't exceed a two per cent grade, so this was going to be a simple case of one-foot-in-front-of-the-other. But these weren't your average Kettle Valley variety rail grades.

As quickly as they started, the narrow gauge tracks curled like al dente spaghetti noodles over a convex bulge of bedrock, plunging 500

vertical feet into a damp, dark canyon. Meant to guide power station staff on a cabled cart to the control station below, these "tracks" were worse than a rotting painter's ladder. Instead of riding down in the cart, which is locked at the top of the descent, Lija and I had to scale down. I tentatively shouldered my boat while Lija snapped a locking carabiner between her tethered kayak and a climbing harness. If she slipped, the kayak would drag her to the riverbed like an anchor. "It's easier like that," she pleaded, as I tried to talk her out of it.

The ties exfoliated a slippery film of creosote, and the scree ball-bearings lying between rungs threatened to speed our descent. Trying to comfort my obvious trepidation as we hobbled down, Lija told me a story about a group of young locals that is rumoured to have once released the cable cart from the top of the tracks. It ran, as the tale goes, unbridled down the rails, hurtling towards terminal velocity. At the bottom, it launched free of the rails and cleared the 100-foot wide river. It smashed into a million little pieces against the far wall. Just one slip and both Lija and I — I was above her, you see — could become the stuff of urban legend too.

On the climb down, my legs were scrambled, as much from nerves as from concentrated

muscle contractions. At the river's edge, it was time to do what we came here for: paddle a tough whitewater canyon that wasn't meant for mightbes or wannabes. Down in the canyon, the walls were close. There's no way out but the rapids below. Climbing back up this Jacob's ladder was not an option.

I was a little more comfortable in my kayak than I was on land, even though my legs were still twittering like a sewing machine. The splash of cold spring meltwater helped focus me to the task at hand: I steered my kayak through a thick morass of whitewater that funnelled into a narrow sluice. In the end, Lija was right about this section of the Elk River; the class IV run was intense like the guidebook said, but it was nothing compared to what it took to get there. The other half of our group opted for the easy way down: a spectacular 50-foot launch over the "Leap of Faith" waterfall that spreads its white froth like a prom dress. Their legs were fine.

Freelance writer-photographer Raymond Schmidt is a regular KMC contributor based in Canmore, Alberta.

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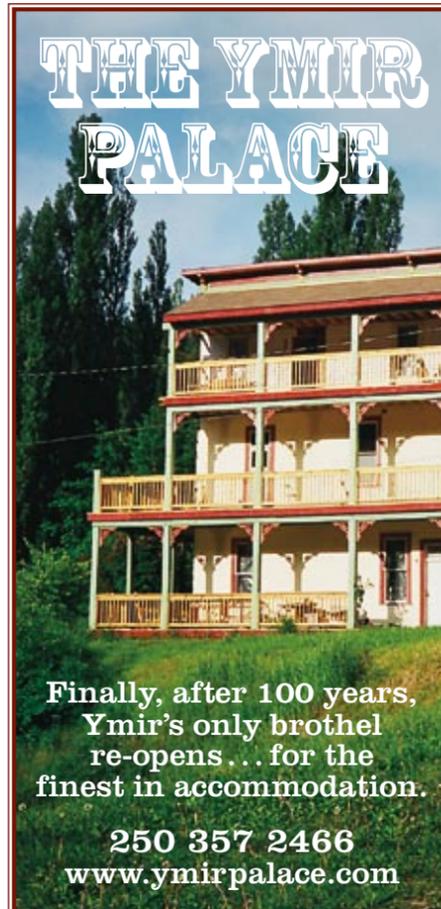
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