

Rita & Ian's Newsletter (Issue 4)

March 2, 2009

So, it's about three weeks since our last newsletter, mostly because we've been too busy collecting material for the newsletter to write it! Today though, one of us (Ian) is somewhat immobilised due to excess mountain biking enthusiasm, so I have a bit of time to write. (Rita has gone out to play, getting a well-deserved break from nursing me all day!)

Before I start, I should tell you that, apart from all the stuff we're going to tell you about here, we've also been working pretty hard. It's not all peaches and cream over here, so there's no need to be *quite* so jealous. (Well, yes there is, really, but we are working hard too!)

The last thing we told you about was our trip to Tofino, which was the weekend of the 7th and 8th of February. A couple of days after that, it was Ian's birthday, so we went out for a drink to the graduate club on the UVic campus with Nathan, someone I used to know in Oxford who now works at the Canadian Centre for Climate Modelling and Analysis, which is based in the same building as Rita. We had a beer or two and some nachos and had a bit of a chat about life in Victoria. Nathan has a young daughter, so he doesn't get to go out and play so much any more, but it's still a great place to live.

The following evening was the annual general meeting of the local Organic Athlete chapter, which is a group we've joined that's a way for sporty vegans to get together with like-minded people, talk about training, swap recipes and eat nice food together. Only about six of us turned up to the meeting — lots of people were away, and quite a few other members of the group only joined to get discounts on some of the food and other items the group gets. We ended up being drafted as directors of the group, and Rita is now the treasurer of OA Victoria! She's trustworthy. It'll be fine. No problems. She won't spend all the funds on bikes and cakes. One thing that the group does which is very convenient for us, is to get reduced price sports gear (mostly cycling stuff) via sponsorship from local vegan-friendly businesses. This is really great, as I run out of clean cycling clothes by about half-way through the week at the moment, which makes everything a little bit smelly. We've ordered a bunch of stuff (in the OA colours: bright green and orange, very stylish) as we've been out on our bikes a lot.

The next day, the UVic Vegan Association (UVA, which unfortunately makes me think of the Ulster Volunteer Association, which probably isn't the sort of association they really wanted!) had a showing of the film "Peacable Kingdom", about a farm sanctuary in the U.S. I initially thought that this might be a bit schmaltzy — people rescuing chickens from farms, etc., etc., but it turned out to be very interesting indeed. A lot of the people who were interviewed in the film were former farmers, and it was very touching to see these

tough guys (one a former Montana cattle farmer) talking about the realisation they'd come to that everything they were doing was wrong, everything they and their families had grown up with was wrong, and that they had to do something to change it. The film was made more effective by the film-makers' decision not to go for shock value: there were some fairly disturbing sequences showing animal mistreatment on farms and at animal auctions, but nothing very graphic. Hearing the people speak who'd been involved in all this stuff was much more effective than some blood-spattered footage of cattle slaughter. There was some interesting discussion afterwards as well, since the farm sanctuary featured in the film has attracted a bit of controversy, primarily because there is a sort of petting zoo aspect to it. It's difficult to decide what to think about this, as it really does seem to allow some people to connect with the idea of farm animals as individuals and agents with a life of their own, rather than things you find packaged on a supermarket shelf, but there is still an aspect of exploitation to the situation, and there is a question over whether these animals would choose to live this way if they were given a choice. Some of the pigs definitely seemed to enjoy the attention, but it's not clear that some of the animals who had been rescued from more traumatic situations could ever be happy interacting with humans, even in this very non-threatening environment. So, that was interesting, and a worthwhile evening. Neither of us have spent much time thinking in detail about animal rights, and it's good to talk to people about these issues. I've read quite a lot of Peter Singer's writing, but he's the only animal rights philosopher (or indeed moral philosopher of any kind) I'm at all familiar with.

So, from animal rights and the farming industry, we smoothly segue into: Valentine's Day. Not my choice! It's just the way the calendar works!

Anyway, on Valentine's Day, we had a couple of entertaining things we did. First, in lieu of a nice lie-in, we went to a 7:30 a.m. hot yoga class at the place that Rita has been attending for the last few weeks. They had a special Valentine's Day deal where members could bring a friend for free. So, Ian got to sample the delights of Bikram Hot Yoga. This is done in a hot room (what a surprise, eh?) so you sweat a LOT, and is really pretty demanding. Fortunately, the instructor for the day made it an easy class (according to Rita), so it wasn't as tough as it might have been. Rita was pretty surprised that I agreed to go along. I think she initially suggested it more as a joke than anything else and was a bit shocked when I agreed to give it a go. It turned out to be quite interesting, and I decided that I'd start doing it regularly as well. That surprised Rita even more! It seems like a really good way of working out some of the kinks and aches and pains that come from swimming and sitting on the bike for long periods of time, and I've since found, at some of the other sessions with some of the other instructors, that it can be *really* challenging. It's good stuff, although the weekday classes we go to are at 6:00 a.m., which necessitates 5:30 starts most mornings!

In the evening, we went to a vegan pot luck party at Kelly's. Kelly is a friend of Dave Shishkoff's who now has her dream job as a letter carrier (Canadian for "postie") for Canada Post, after spending about eight years as a fisheries biologist, which is not the most ideal of jobs for a vegan... We had a lot of good food (baba ghanoush, lasagne and garlic bread, chocolate pudding pie) and were entertained by Kelly's cat Mylo, who is a real character. He has his own channel on Youtube, called Mylovision, and is a bit of a star. One of his videos recently had over 100,000 hits after being featured on Cute Overload. So we already know a Victoria celebrity! Mylo showed off his laser pointer chasing skills, his jumping into

a cereal box skills, and his running around after fluffy toy skills until he and the rest of us had enough. We'd cycled down to Kelly's place, so had a half hour ride back to our place, but that wasn't too bad. It was the first time we'd cycled from our place downtown for an evening out, and it's really pretty doable.

The next day, we both went cycling, although separately. I went out on my road bike for a longish (for me at the moment: 54 km) and very hilly ride, while Rita went for a shorter and flatter (very sensible!) ride along the Lochside Trail, a multi-use trail that runs quite close to our house. My ride went through a district called "Highlands", which tells you more or less all you need to know about how enjoyable it was. I headed north from our place, then west to where the road starts to climb up into the hills. The first bit of climbing went pretty well, and I was feeling quite pleased with myself, heading up these steep hills on my road bike with its rather unforgiving gears. Every time a big hill came along, I clicked down and down through the gears, until there were no more left — that's your lot! — and then had to puff and pant up the hill like that, even though I might have been happier with one or two or three more gears to click on down through! Anyway, I reached the top of the first bit, and had some very very fun whizzy downhill riding along narrow twisty roads through the forest, with hardly any cars to be seen. I was up high enough that it was pretty cold, there was still snow on the ground, and the small lakes up there were all still frozen. After a bit, I turned off onto the infamous Munns Road, where there was more hilliness to be had. This went pretty well until I reached the crux climb, which went up and up and up until I thought I must be near the top and it would flatten off just around the next corner. But no! Around the next corner, it just got *steeper*! I managed about half-way then had to get off and push for 50 metres or so. After a little break for water and some energy bar, I tried to get back on my bike, and the trees and little forest animals were treated to the ignominious sight of me falling off in the middle of the road as I tried desperately to clip into my pedals while getting started on this stupidly steep hill. I managed to get going properly second time around and headed up over the crest of the hill, which was fortunately the last proper climb of the day. The final 15 km or so were all "downhill". I say "downhill" because nothing is just downhill round here. All the roads are very uppy-downy, with lots of rolling small hills to stop you from ever getting into a good settled cadence. Makes you fit though, I suppose, even if it's not the most comfortable. Anyway, it was a good ride, and the longest I've done for some time.

I don't know exactly where Rita went on her ride, but she seemed quite happy when she came back!

The next few days were spent working (really!) and exercising (but you probably guessed that). Early morning yoga and (for me) swimming have now become a bit of a habit, and we've been doing a bit of running as well. We went out for one run with Emily, someone we've met through Organic Athlete, who is a super-tough swimmer and waterpolo player. She swims with a club that trains at the pool I go to, and their workouts look pretty scary. Anyway, we had a nice run down through Mystic Vale to the beach at Cadboro Bay, then ran back up the hill through the trees. It's a really lovely route, and it was very nice indeed down on the beach. That evening, we went to one of the student bars on campus to celebrate the birthday of someone in Rita's department. We bumped into Emily there again, still in her running gear: she'd run around the campus a bit more after leaving us, then ran straight to the bar and a cold beer! We chatted with her and some other people a bit about life in

Victoria, the university and so on, before heading home for dinner.

The next weekend was also packed with activity. First, on Saturday, we jumped in the car with Kevin and Cindy, our landlords, to go to a tree nursery north of Victoria along the Saanich Peninsula. Our place has a very big back garden, and Kevin and Cindy wanted to plant it out with fruit trees, raspberry and blueberry bushes and grapes. How cool is that? They'd moved here from a place further west where they had a *really* big garden where they'd grown a lot of their own food, and they wanted to try to replicate at least some of that here. The nursery we went to is called Le Coteau Farms, and has been run by the Le Coteau family since 1957. We got to talk to Jacques Le Coteau, who's the current owner, and he told us all about different types of fruit trees, pollination and planting strategies, what sort of grapes to use for what purposes and how to train them, and so on and so on. This guy (probably in his mid-60s, I'd guess) is an absolute genius about this stuff. I had *never* heard anyone talking about this kind of thing with such assurance and such deep knowledge. It was a real privilege to talk to him and pick up a bit of advice. Kevin decided on some apple trees, some peach trees, quince trees (YES!) and a whole bunch of other stuff. We bought a huckleberry and plan to get some low-bush blueberries to plant outside our flat when they come in in a month or so. On the way back, we stopped for a snack and a bit of shopping at a local farmer's market run by Mr. Le Coteau's son, where we bought a big bag of locally grown kiwi fruit for \$2.50, among other things.

In the evening, we had a birthday party to go to. Dave was 33 (well, on Monday really, but some people have jobs and everything!) and wanted to celebrate. We spent the afternoon making some treats, as he'd announced a "Choc-Luck", which is like a pot luck, but everything is made from chocolate. So we made kiwi and kumquats on little sticks to be dipped in chocolate, and Organic Athlete chocolate pudding pies, with slices of kiwi and orange papaya spirals on top for decoration (the OA logo). The party was a Jen's house, because Dave's place is too full of bikes and boxes of energy bars to entertain! Plus Jen has a nice living room, and the temporary loan of a Wii games system from her parents which provided some additional entertainment. (The best game involved two players racing cows along a road trying to knock down scarecrows and jump over fences. No, really. You probably had to be there...)

One weird thing we saw as we walked to Jen's was the big red old-fashioned fire truck parked just over the road from her place. Not my choice for handy city runabout, but it looked pretty cool.

The evening's festivities involved eating lots of chocolate things, including a big chocolate cake that Jen made that we decorated with a bicycle made from bits of orange and banana, the aforementioned Wii-ing, the discovery that North American root beer tastes exactly like the mouthwash we use, a plank competition won by Niilo¹ (over five minutes, which is pretty superhuman, although he says he was sore the day after, and the day after that!), and Texas Hold 'Em poker, which was a lot of fun. We got a lift home from Alyssa (once she'd figured out where she left her car — is it left out the front door or right?), who's a semi-professional cyclist who's spending a bit of time here in Victoria to do some riding in a place where you're less likely to die of hypothermia on the bike than in her native Saskatoon.

¹Rita says I have to say that she came third with a stunning time of just over four minutes! I was very impressed. Four minutes is longer than I've ever managed.

The next day, we went mountain biking. For the first time ever, for both of us! Dave had arranged for us to borrow demo bikes from Oak Bay Bikes, which we've decided is the best bike shop in Victoria. We'd picked them up the day before, since we had a longish ride out to the local landfill site. Yes, the local mountain biking area is at the town dump, and is affectionately known to all local cyclists as "The Dump". You don't actually ride in the dump, but in a big forested area next to it. It's a pretty amazing facility to have. Only downside is that it's at the top of a bugger of a hill. From our place it took us about an hour and a quarter to get to the car park at the dump, the last fifteen minutes of which involved huffing and puffing up a super-steep hill (tiny tiny MTB chainring required!) called Hartland Avenue. Once we got to the dump, we headed off along some trails we'd been recommended. First major obstacle: the "bunny slope" called Pooh Corner. Neither of us made it up this in one attempt, although Rita did best. It was really steep and slippy and gravelly, and we weren't used to the bikes. Things got better after that though, and we rode some entertaining things through the woods, some bigger wider trails you could just swoop down, some more technical things that involved quite a lot of pushing of bikes, squinting and muttering "Do you really think we can ride that?". It was a lot of fun, and we rode for a couple of hours before heading home. This time, we got to go **down** Hartland Avenue, which was *much* more fun! After dropping in at our place to collect cookies for the people at the bike store (we'd got the demo bikes for free, so we thought we should give them something to say thanks), we rolled downhill to Oak Bay Bikes. While chatting with the people in the shop, I happened to ask how much a bike like the one I'd been riding would cost to buy. "About \$2500", was the answer. "But we're selling that one off cheaper, because we've got new demo bikes coming in soon." Ho hum. Five minutes later, I'd agreed to buy the thing. It had only been ridden about five times before I had it because it had come in late in the season. So, I'd been in Victoria for something like five and a half weeks, and I'd bought two bikes. Don't think I can sustain that pace, but we'll see!

We got the bus home, feeling pretty pooped after about five hours in the saddle. While I was having a shower, Rita checked her email, to find a message from Dave saying "Wii and Lotus Pond takeaway at Jen's! Come on down!" So we got ourselves ready and headed out again. You don't say no to the Lotus Pond, no matter how pooped you are. It's a fantastic vegan Chinese restaurant. Oh, and Dave and Jen are nice people too! We picked up some more mouthwash/root beer and some of this really good fizzy apple juice we've been drinking lots of, and got the bus to Jen's place. Food was slightly delayed by the phone at the restaurant being permanently engaged, so Jen and Sherry (also attending for Chinese!) jumped in Jen's car to head downtown to order. It turned out to be a very good thing that they decided to do that, because the restaurant had decided to close early! (This is the only downside of the place: slightly erratic opening hours.) They muscled their way in through the front door and persuaded the people in the restaurant to sell them some food, then they brought it all back, and we (Dave, Jen, Niilo, Sherry, Rita, me) ate it ALL!

After some nice chats and some post-prandial Wii-ing, we got the bus back home to sleep, Rita bringing Jen's Salsa cyclocross bike that she'd borrowed to try out. Bikes galore! We had a very very nice bus driver who stopped to pick us up between stops since she was running late and could see that we'd decided to walk to the next stop instead of waiting in the cold. Bus drivers here really are pretty amazing! We got home and rolled right into bed to sssssllllleeeeeeeep!

And that was the end of another wacky Victoria weekend. The next week was going to be extremely disrupted by having to go to Vancouver to pick up all our belongings that had been shipped over from the U.K., but we also managed to fit in a couple of fun things: a couple of yoga sessions and an evening bike ride with Dave and Jen. We met down at Oak Bay Bikes, me on my road bike and Rita on Jen's XC bike, and did about an hour and a quarter along the coast and up to near where we live. It was pretty fast-paced for us, and was a lot of fun. (Well, mostly. I'm not sure Rita enjoyed all the hills, some of which were a bit on the cheekily steep side.) We eventually got back to our place and Dave and Jen came in for cookies before heading home. It was pretty dark and cold by the time we got home: we had a bit of snow, and I spent a good ten minutes rolling around on the floor in agony as my feet warmed back up. But it was fun! Definitely something to make a regular outing as the evenings get lighter.

So, on Thursday, we had a bit of an epic day. We got up at 5:30 (nothing unusual there!), got a bus downtown and picked up a rental van at 7:00 a.m. to drive to Vancouver to get our belongings. I had printed out six sets of driving directions from Google Maps for all the places we needed to go, we had all sorts of customs paperwork, warm hats for the ferry crossing to the mainland, and were generally pretty well-prepared little bears! First, we drove up the Saanich Peninsula to Swartz Bay, where the ferry to Tsawwassen on the mainland sails from. We had no problem getting on the 9:00 a.m. sailing, despite dire warnings from the woman at the van rental place that there might be road closures on the mainland or ferry cancellations because of the weather conditions. It was actually a pretty clear day, although a little cold and windy, and the ferry crossing was very nice. Driving the van on board the ferry was a bit scary, as we were directed to the upper car deck, where there was probably about three inches of clearance between the top of the van and the ceiling. I was worried about pipes and other sticky-out things gouging a big hole in the roof of the van, but we were OK.

We spent most of the crossing inside admiring the view. On the way over from Vancouver when we first arrived here, we'd spent the whole crossing outside, very very excited about being in Canada. This time, it was just too damn cold to be outside!

The crossing to Tsawwassen takes about 90 minutes, and after we arrived, we headed off for our first destination: downtown Vancouver and the Metro Vancouver Canadian Border Services Agency office, where we needed to get some paperwork done to allow us to import our goods into Canada. Driving into town took about an hour, and the only slight hiccup with the Google Maps directions was corrected by some sneaky navigating by Rita. We parked right outside the CBSA office, went in and did our business. And you know what? The CBSA officer we spoke to was polite and friendly and helpful! I could get used to this. It's a bit of a revelation, this idea that bureaucrats and public officials can do their jobs without being assholes! I don't think it would ever catch on in the UK though...

We got some lunch from a slightly odd little sushi place just down the street from the CBSA office. The sushi wasn't bad, but their interpretation of age-dashi tofu, a traditional Japanese dish I really like, was a bit peculiar, and we got some "bubble tea", which had balls of what appeared to be congealed purple snot in it. Mighty tasty, I can tell you.

Next stop was the warehouse where all our stuff was being held. Driving there was no problem at all, although there was one point where Rita had to jump out of the van and press the button for a pedestrian crossing to change some unfavourable lights to our favour!

Sneaky, eh?

As we were driving along, we couldn't help feeling very lucky that we live here in Victoria rather than over in the big city. This little city we've ended up in really is much much nicer than Vancouver, which has more of the characteristics of any other big North American city. Well, OK, apart from the **huge** snow-covered mountains you can see from nearly everywhere in the city!

At the warehouse, we had some more money extracted from us (this international shipping business is expensive, and there are lots of little charges that stack up along the way) and had our two pallets of stuff carried out to us on a forklift. The forklift driver initially wanted to dump the shrinkwrapped pallets directly into our van, but they were both a good foot or so too tall, so we just got him to put them on the ground in the car park so we could break them down and put all our individual boxes into the van. That turned out to be quite a job, because the moving company in the UK had done a pretty comprehensive job of packing and stacking and wrapping our stuff. First we cut off a bunch of packing ties, then a layer of very thick heatshrink packaging, then a double layer of thick bubble wrap, then a layer of normal thin shrinkwrap packing. Rita ended up making four trips to the rubbish bins to dispose of all the packing materials while I loaded our 43 boxes into the van. I guess all that packaging is needed in this case: our stuff had travelled by truck from Avonmouth in Bristol to Liverpool, been loaded onto a ship, sailed across the Atlantic to Montreal, then been put on a train to Vancouver, where it eventually ended up in the warehouse. Lots of opportunity for breakage, water damage, and so on.

After the warehouse, we turned to the fourth set of driving directions and headed on our way. The next stop was a tatami supplier, where we had arranged to pick up three tatami mats to put under our futon. Tatami are Japanese rice straw mats that are used for flooring in traditional Japanese houses. When I lived in Japan, we had a room with tatami that we used as a bedroom, and I remember it smelling so so good, especially with the sun coming through the window warming the mats up. A lovely fresh grassy smell. So I thought we could get some for here, and the only place to get them was in Vancouver. So we headed over to this place (called Lilin), handed over some cash and drove off with three of these wonderful things (each weighing 30 kg, which surprised Rita a bit — they're about 5 cm thick and are very solidly packed straw).

We had one more destination to visit in Vancouver, slightly less exotic, and that was IKEA, where we wanted to load up on cheap kitchen stuff, a few cushions and a couple of throws. We also had a request from Jen to try to find her a dragon-shaped pasta scoop...

Well, we whizzed around IKEA pretty efficiently, bought lots of plates and cups and glasses and candles and cushions and stuff like that. We didn't find any dragon-shaped pasta scoops, but we did find a pair of cuddly alligators, one which is now serving as a draught excluder by our front door, and one for Jen.

After IKEA, we headed back for the ferry terminal at Tsawwassen, hoping to catch the 5:00 p.m. sailing. Unfortunately, this was full by the time we got there, so we had to wait two hours for the next one. We had some (greasy but nice) Chinese food in the ferry terminal, followed by cups of tea and some coconutty chocolate from the Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory (I think the ferry terminal at Tsawwassen is mostly set up for the hordes of tourists that come through in the summer, but we weren't complaining).

This time when we got on the ferry, we were directed towards the deck for BIG things,

so there were no worries about scraping the roof off the van. It was dark by now, so there wasn't much to see on the crossing. I admired the inside of my eyelids for a while, I seem to remember. Once back on the island at Swartz Bay, we drove south to our place, where we unloaded all our IKEA goodies, tatami and our boxes from the UK. Rita sorted out some of the kitchen stuff while I shifted boxes, then figured out which boxes needed to go to our offices. We stuck those back in the van and drove over to the campus to drop them off, which involved a bit of slightly illegal parking (no worries! late at night!) and using the lifts in our buildings for the first (and probably last) time.

After all this, and a bit more sorting out when we got home, we finally got to bed around 1:00 a.m., completely knackered.

I got up at 6:00 the next morning to take the rental van back while Rita stayed in bed (am I nice? yes I am!). After dropping the van, I wanted to pick up my new mountain bike from Oak Bay Bikes, so I spent the time until they opened reading a paper in the Solstice Cafe in town, accompanied by a pot of rooiboos tea and a very nice vegan muffin.

A quick bus ride to OBB, a bit more money spent on bike bits (pedals, mountain biking shoes, gloves, and some road biking overshoes to save my toes from frostbite) and I got the bus home (with my bike — the buses here are fantastic). Then we went to work. I managed to stay awake all day, which I thought was pretty good going.

In the evening, we had two social engagements lined up (believe me, I'm as amazed as you are!). First, we had drinks at the Graduate Club with people from the climate modelling group that Rita is part of (and I guess that I'm sort of part of, too). That was good fun — a bit of beer, some good chats, a bit of food and some small kids running around making a menace of themselves! After we'd done there, we watched Katrin (Rita's boss) and her partner Maurice strapping their two kids into a little trailer, clipping it to the back of Maurice's bike and heading off home. Then we got a bus downtown to go to a Friday Night Quiz at the Fort Street Cafe, with the Freethinkers Of Victoria, a group we'd got in touch with via Stefan, someone we'd met at Dave's birthday party. We bumped into Emily on the bus and she and some friends of hers said they'd join us. People trickled in gradually until we had enough for four or five quiz teams and got asked to move to a big table at the back... The quiz was pretty amusing, run by two English lads who put quite a bit of effort into being funny and pretty much pulled it off! There was some very "English" humour that I think was a little disturbing for some of the Canadians present, but I thought it was great.

Unfortunately, as the evening wore on, I started to feel the effects of a 19-hour day followed immediately by an 18-hour day and just ran right out of steam. We bailed out while the answers were being given and before the final results were announced. That turned out to be a shame, because the team I was on ended up tying for second place and had to answer a tie-breaker question (which they lost!). Better luck next time.

We had a blessedly long sleep the next day, but then had to get going again. We were having people round in the evening for a vegan cooking session, arranged by the UVic Vegan Association. Only problem? Forty-three boxes of stuff piled up in our flat! Yikes! We did as quick a job as we could of unpacking and sorting everything out, but it took hours. Finally though, the flat was more or less presentable. I got to use our vacuum cleaner for the first time (well, we have only been here six weeks or so) and we cleared the decks in the kitchen.

Then I had to do a bit of bike maintenance, since we were going mountain biking again the next day. New Crank Brothers pedals on my bike, cleats into my MTB shoes, a quick

ride around the school car park outside to check on getting in and out of the pedals, and I was ready to go. (Yeah, right.)

The cooking session went really well, I thought. We had just over a dozen people there, and some of the UVic Vegan Association people (Joey, Niilo, Erin) demonstrated cooking a range of simple vegan dishes, using volunteers from the attendees to help. We had roasted veggie sandwiches with home-made houmous, some really nice dahl with coconut, onions and garlic, “Shake and Bake” tofu, a really quick and tasty bean and corn salad and chocolate pudding to finish off with. Good stuff! The only downer was that there were *no* leftovers at all for my lunch the next day! There was lively conversation, Gator the cat came to visit to see what all the commotion was, and it was a pretty good evening. We’ll have to do it again soon, although with less people, so there are some leftovers!

After everyone left, we got another good night’s sleep, then got up and got ready to go mountain biking. This was all a tiny bit complicated, since Rita needed to pick up a bike from Oak Bay Bikes that she wanted to try out before we headed over to Roland’s place for our lift up to the dump (no ride up Hartland Avenue this week!). The bike at OBB was being sold by one of the people at the shop, and it sounded like a very good deal. So, I jumped on my mountain bike, Rita jumped on Jen’s cyclocross bike which she still had at our place, and we headed downtown. A quick pedal switch at OBB and we were on our way. (The bike, a Specialized Epic, was very very nice indeed!)

We had a quick stop at Jen’s on the way to drop off the cuddly alligator. I’d had it in my bag on the way down to OBB with the head sticking out the top (what can I say? I’m an idiot), and one of the people who works at the shop whizzed past on his road bike laughing at us. (They know who we are by now. That didn’t take long.) Jen liked the alligator — she’d been given some vague hints that we’d got her something silly via messages on Facebook, but she was still pretty surprised to see this floppy green thing dangling out of my rucksack as we rolled up her driveway!

Then we rode over to Roland’s, which didn’t take too long. We were passed by Dave on the way, who was riding up to Hartland this week, “for a bit of an extra workout”. After loading bikes at Roland’s, we drove up to the dump. Hartland Avenue looks damn steep, even in a car. I’m glad we didn’t have to ride it this week.

There were a whole pile of us meeting up to go mountain biking: Rita and me, Roland, Dave, Jen, Julia, Alyssa and Mike. After cheesy group photos, we split into Team Well ’Ard (Dave and Alyssa) and Team “Easy” (everyone else) and went off to ride some trails.

Everything started very nicely, with a quick warm-up run along a trail called Shock Treatment. I had new clipless pedals on my bike, which was a bit unfamiliar (much harder to put a foot down), but Shock Treatment went OK. Then we headed upwards into the forest. The steep Pooh Corner hill felt much easier this week — I got up it without too much trouble, and Rita just raced up it like it was no big thing at all. Heading on up a bit further, I had my first fall, the usual low speed, clipped in and can’t get out embarrassment, but no harm done. Then we started riding some more technical trails and I went ass over tit over a big rock at the top of a steep uphill, water bottle flying in one direction, bike in another, and Ian in another. No real harm done — I bent my bottle cage back into some sensible sort of shape and got going again. Rita was looking a bit horrified behind me, though she said later that she was glad she’d seen it, as it was pretty funny.

We rode some trails that we’d done the week before, which was interesting. Last week,

it was just the two of us, and we didn't really know what we were doing, so we tried to ride up pretty much everything, with predictably ridiculous results. This week, we had some people who knew what they were doing with us (especially Mike and Roland), and it was good to see that they just got off and pushed on some stuff, even on trails that were marked as "intermediate" on the map. We both managed to do a couple of other things that we hadn't managed the week before, which was pretty pleasing. Rita practiced rolling down some steeper longer drops than before, and I was particularly pleased with a little ascent over a slimy pile of rocks with a couple of big holes in the middle that looked more or less impossible the week before.

But then, a bit later, it all went somewhat pear-shaped. We were riding a trail we hadn't been on before, and I was riding right behind Mike (way too close, I now realise — lesson learned!). Mike is very very good, and I knew I was in deep trouble as soon as I heard him go "Uh-oh", put his foot down (flat pedals, no cleats, sensible boy!) and hoick himself over a big slippery root on a tight corner. I didn't have time to unclip and bail out, my front wheel slipped on the big root, and I went down like a sack of potatoes, landing with my knee right on a rock. I ended up on the ground staring at the sky, still holding both handlebars, still with both feet clipped into my pedals. After disentangling myself from my bike, I stood up, feeling distinctly pukey from the pain in my knee. I hobbled around for a bit, and it seemed to be getting better, so I thought, "No problem, I can just jump back on!" Not quite. I got back on my bike, but couldn't put any weight on my left leg, not even enough pressure to clip into the pedal, let alone enough to actually move the bike along. Everyone stopped a few metres further on, at a massive drop off some big rocks (no-one rode that!), and we decided that I should head back to the car park. Rita and Julia came with me, which was very nice of them!

Walking out wasn't much fun, since I was mostly using my rather expensive mountain bike as a shiney rolling crutch, but we made it back after a while and I installed myself in the back seat of Roland's car. Rita soaked some clothes in water for me to put on my knee, which was swelling up quite nicely already. I sat there feeling sorry for myself and chatting to Rita and Julia until the others got back (Rita also cleaned my bike for me, which was sweet of her!), then Roland very kindly drove us back to our place, where I had to crawl up the stairs to our flat, since I couldn't walk at all. There are some very funny pictures of me lying on the floor in our place with bloody scabs all over my leg and one knee about twice the size of the other one. Well, apparently they're very funny!

I was pretty lucky though, I think. The rock I landed on was flat, and I just smacked the kneecap hard, rather than twisting or poking anything in the knee joint. The only real pain is due to the swelling when I try to bend the knee. Once that's gone down in a couple of days, I'm hoping it won't be too bad. No more biking for me for a little while though! And I think I might have to reconsider the whole pedal situation a bit. I like to "have a go", but I think I need to develop some more mountain biking skills before I can really benefit from having a go while clipped in!

So anyway, Rita had a good day's riding, and she decided to buy the bike she'd borrowed. This was extra convenient, because it meant she didn't need to take it back to the shop! It also means we're getting back to more or less even expenditure on the "toys & goodies" account we maintain.

It's now Monday evening, I took the day off work, since I couldn't walk anywhere, and

I've been resting, icing, compressing and elevating all day. Rita stayed home to nurse me, but she's now gone off to the climbing gym with Dave, Jen and Kelly for a well-earned break from her invalid! The knee is feeling much better than it did last night, although I don't think I'll be very active for a few days yet.

And that's what we did in the last three weeks. Can I have a day off now?