

# Take a 'lively' trip with the Higham family

**“360 Degrees Longitude: One Family’s Journey Around the World” by John Higham (Alyson Books, 2009, \$17.95)**

**A**S I SIT DOWN TO read John Higham’s book, I’m reminded once again of why I love writing this column. This is a book I’d never pick up on my own since I’m not much into travelogues; but, I’m a pushover for authors with Cache Valley connections and Higham is a USU alum. So, serendipity strikes again!

I loved this book and I think my readers will too. Here’s why: Although Higham is an engineer (I know, boring!), he proves to be the exception to the rule. He confesses at one point that an English teacher told him, “The only reason I’m giving you as high as a D-minus is so that I will never have you in class again,” but the fact is, this guy can write. He’s funny, candid, throws in just enough giggles to keep me reading and the adventures he, his wife September and two children, ages 8 (Jordan) and 11 (Katrina), encounter are interesting and educational. The writing and the circumstances are fresh and lively, and as an added bonus, the book is linked up with Google Earth, where the reader can go for color photos and more information than he could pack into a 300-plus page book.

So Higham finishes his graduate degree, moves to San Francisco to become a rocket scientist — really! — and meets September. Being the inquisitive people they are, they immediately start planning a trip around the world, which will happen as planned after their two children (yet unborn) are old enough to take the trip and learn first hand about world cultures, history, geography and bicycling by tandem across several continents in 52 weeks. Total cost: \$121,275.89, owing mainly to their mode of eating (often ham sandwiches), sleeping in a tent when possible and biking until Katrina breaks her leg rock climbing in Switzerland.

## Regional Reads

By Charlene Hirschi



Among their adventures is “walking between two continental plates,” which gave John the same queasy feeling as standing under a bridge after the Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco, but “if you’re going to tempt fate, you may as well do it in a way that will get you a flashy epitaph on your tombstone.” After failing to convince any other family member to pose for the picture, “I (John) stretched out my arms and placed my right hand on Europe and my left on North America and pushed with all my might. I’m confident that somewhere, someone felt the Earth move. It was me.”

Another “must-see” Iceland attraction is the Blue Lagoon: “Adjacent to a massive geothermal power plant used to generate electricity ... the (runoff) is collected in an enormous pool. Naturally occurring minerals give the water a milky color and texture, and algae give it an unnatural bluish tint. Stated in another way, the famous Blue Lagoon is a basin full of industrial wastewater. Yet people flock to the Blue Lagoon from around the world to soak in the warm water, experience its legendary healing powers, and to scrape the muck up off the bottom and smear it on their faces. Fortunately, the muck is just a mix of minerals and biological sludge that probably won’t kill



## Meet the author!

John Higham will give a presentation and answer some frequently asked questions using Powerpoint and Google Earth at 5 p.m. Friday, Nov. 13, at The Book Table. Admission is free and everyone is invited.

them. I do have a suspicion, however, that if you put it under a microscope, it wouldn’t look terribly different from what you would find on your average barn floor.”

In the beginning, they found that being together 24/7 was a bit wearing on the nerves. “Jordan wasn’t much for pedaling. I had hopes of conditioning him because Katrina, at 8, had been a great asset as a stoker.” He finally decided that perhaps the problem lie more with him than Jordan, rationalizing that although he requested “pedal power” in what he felt was his nicest voice, “under the strain of huffing up a hill, my words could easily be interpreted as a bark to an 8-year-old. He is beginning to withdraw.”

Finding time to be alone as husband and wife also presented some problems, as the entire family was sleeping in the same tent. At some point he came to realize that his physical conditioning wasn’t a problem, but “my mental condition” could certainly be a drawback. “Starting out meant getting adjusted to our new surroundings, our new routine, and to being together all the time. Things weren’t always as we had imagined — sunshine, smiling faces, and deeply introspective family discussions.”

A few fascinating historical facts: Outside Prague is “‘The Church of Bones,’ final resting place of 40,000 souls whose

bones have been arranged into works of art.” At Auschwitz, “some of the grisly reminders” of what occurred are the things Nazis kept in storage and historians preserved “over two tons” of bailed hair from those who entered the gas chambers with shaved heads, “a shoe room ... a handbag room ... an eyeglass room. These items were taken from the prisoner after their arrival. Decades later they are on display behind glass, an echoing reminder that their owners never saw them again.”

The Highams hoped to give their children this Auschwitz experience to make a lasting impression of what had transpired, but were disappointed when the “heat and crowds dampened the effect” and the children came away seemingly untouched, while “nearby two teenage girls were in total hysterics, sobbing uncontrollably as they imagined the horrors of the site. Our emotional meltdown was to come six months later at the Killing Fields near Phnom Penh, Cambodia.” Perhaps a reminder that emotions cannot be orchestrated nor predicted in children.

Finally, excerpts from the journals of all four family members are used to illustrate what each member was feeling and experiencing at various sites along the way. On July 8, Jordan wrote: “Today we rode our bikes for a long time ... looking for a

campsite. (We finally found one) with miniature golf. I hit Mom in the face with a golf club accidentally. Dad says her black eye looks ‘smashing.’”

The same day, John wrote: “We knew there would be hard days when we started. Maybe we underestimated just how hard. But we have been able to clear each and every hurdle thrown at us. Katrina and Jordan have started to see the adventure in every little thing. Jordan has changed the most in the last six weeks. For example, when we were in England, if I asked him to pedal up a hill, I couldn’t tell that he was helping at all. He is now a very good stoker. He is starting to thrive in this environment.”

What is amazing to me are the number of miles they covered in a very short time — in six weeks they had pedaled through Iceland, England, France and Switzerland. In the back of the book are some interesting “facts” of the trip: countries “entered”: 35; “visited”: 28; places slept: 150; average length of stay at each place: 2½ days; longest stay in one place: 28 days; miles traveled: 67,000; “times we wished we were home: zero.”

Earlier I mentioned Google Earth as a fascinating supplement to the book. It is a little tricky getting started, but in an hour I had figured out how to use it well enough to navigate between layers and browse pictures. This is the first time anyone has used this technology to enhance the reading experience. It gives an entirely new dimension that could never be accomplished with a book alone, being entirely too expensive to produce. Throughout the book there are Google Earth logos directing the reader to more “anecdotes, photos, video and stories.” I didn’t want to interrupt my reading at every juncture, so I waited until I finished the book before venturing online. It was a lot of fun and worked out better for me!

Authors, readers and editors are invited to visit [www.charlenehirschi.com](http://www.charlenehirschi.com).