

Great Divide Mountain Bike Route: Full Time Continental Tour

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If you're an expert or pro class cross-country competitor your last race was about 25 miles long. That's a good stretch, but it's time to think bigger. Multiply by 100 and you've got your next competition, which is a race along the 2,490-mile Great Divide Mountain Bike Route (GDMBR). Held each June, this contest punishes riders with grinding climbs, washboard roads, and high passes where oxygen is as scarce as the sense you need to not enter this race. Most likely, before you reach the start line in Roosville, Montana, you'll ask yourself, Do I really deserve this punishment? If you do, by the time you reach the finish line in Antelope Wells, New Mexico, you'll definitely deserve the "bad boy" or "bad girl" moniker.

If you compete, you'll be one of the few, the proud. A mere seven riders comprised the field in 2004. Four reached the end. The "slowest" finisher was Matthew Lee, who rode from Canada to Mexico in just over a month. The fastest racer cut Lee's time nearly in half. Mike Curiak, of Colorado, put the pedal to the metal, scorching the GDMBR in 16 days, 57 minutes, which was a course record. In 2005, seven was the lucky number again, but luck ran out for three riders once more. If you don't find a race with a fifty percent dropout rate appealing, that's understandable. And if you want to prove your competitiveness without averaging 120 miles a day for three weeks straight, that's understood. Like fine wine, the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route is best sipped.

In the early 1990s, an organization now called Adventure Cycling felt there was a gap between the pavement-only bike touring community and the world of mountain biking. Though the popularity of mountain biking exploded during the first part of that decade thanks to National Off Road Bicycle Association races and the emergence of downhill races, a discipline not fully realized was mountain bike touring. With a history of establishing paved routes throughout the country, Adventure Cycling decided to create their first trans-U.S. dirt route. The 2,490-mile trail has recently been extended into Canada for 220 miles, making this international version the longest mountain bike route in the world.

Detailed maps and a guidebook are available for the ride-it-yourselfers. Adventure Cycling also offers guided expeditions for riders lacking expertise. It seems this organization

has covered every aspect of this route, from conception to extension, media to mapping. Approximately 300 border-to-border map sets are sold each year. A total of 450 Canadian section maps have sold. An estimated 3,000 people have ridden the GDMBR end-to-end, which is an average of 375 riders a year. Dual sport motorcyclists commonly ride the route, too, since they're allowed on nearly every section. Each year, more people may ride the GDMBR than thru-hike the Appalachian Trail.

But three important numbers apparently cannot be pegged: amounts of pavement, climbing, and singletrack. Regarding pavement, Adventure Cycling states there are 250 miles end-to-end. The GDMBR race website lists 350. Nearly all GDMBR riders I have spoken with claim there are 400. Regarding climbing, you will commonly see "more than 200,000" vertical feet. But Scott Morris, a reliable source as founder of Topofusion and a GDMBR thru-rider, states even 190,000 is an overestimate. He's confident the figure is 165,000. Regarding singletrack, Adventure Cycling states there are 250 miles. End-to-end riders state there are none.

Yet one thing is clear. The route is beautiful. Spanning the backbone of North America, the rugged Continental Divide, the GDMBR traverses Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. Nearly every conceivable type of terrain will be encountered, from scrub-lined desert jeep roads to dirt lanes just shy of 12,000 feet.

The best months to attempt a thru-ride are, if southbound, August, September, and October. Or, June, July, and August if northbound. The goal is to avoid desert heat and high elevation snowfields in one long ride, which is tough along the Continental Divide. Water and food resupply points can be found about every other day with the most desolate stretches being in New Mexico. New Mexico is regarded as toughest state to traverse, too. Desert heat, long sections of remote terrain, and roads that turn into sticky masses of mud when it rains, clogging drivetrains and turning bikes into \$1,500 anchors, are three evils found in the Land of Enchantment.

The standard riding direction is southbound for a few reasons. First, mileage and waypoints on Adventure Cycling's maps read this direction. If northbound, you have to reverse all directions. The "left turn" on your map will be a right turn, for example. Second, you can enter Grand Teton National Park from the north for free. Entering from the south costs \$12 per person. Third, southbound is the direction the route was established. Generally, steep sections are on south sides of hills. If you travel the GDMBR, the beauty will exceed the challenges no

matter which direction you ride, though. And if you race it, you won't be able to feel your legs by mile 500 anyway.

GDMBR sampler

Idaho, Targhee National Forest Starting at Big Springs Campground, ride west on a gravel road for one mile towards Macks Inn. Turn south on the rail trail. Follow this for thirty miles. Arrive at Warm River campground. Ride south a short distance, then turn northeast on paved FR 082 (Fish Creek Road). This paved road eventually becomes dirt. Turn west on FR 291. Turn north on FR 292. Finish on paved Fish Creek Road back at Big Springs campground. 80 miles round trip. (This route can easily be made an overnight trip.) *Adventure Cycling Map #2, Polaris, MT to South Pass City, WY.*

Wyoming, Union Pass Start at the northern tip of FR 600 where it meets routes 26 and 287. Ride this dirt road south towards the Continental Divide. The climbing is steep for the first five miles. Continue on FR 263 (nearby sign reads "Union Pass 12"). Top the climb and descend to 9,210-foot Union Pass. Reverse course and enjoy a 2,000-foot descent. (To lengthen this ride, continue west on FR 600 through beautiful terrain.) 30 miles round trip, out-and-back. *Adventure Cycling Map #2, Polaris, MT to South Pass City, WY.*

Colorado and New Mexico, Horca Begin where FR 117 meets Route 17 southwest of Horca, Colorado. Ride FR 117 south. Cross into New Mexico. Continue south on FR 87. Enjoy gorgeous overlooks interspersed with rocky, steep climbing, a half-mile section being unridable. As you crest the 11,000-foot level, get ready for a big descent. FR 87 now runs east. Turn southwest on FR 133, which may be impassable during rainfall (if so, ride FR 87 to pavement). End at highway 64 (staying at the campground at Hopewell Lake can make this trip an overnight out-and-back). 50 miles one way. *Adventure Cycling Map #5, Platoro, CO to Pie Town, NM.*

More information

Purchased singularly or as a complete set, maps are available from Adventure Cycling. A guidebook to the GDMBR, *Cycling the Great Divide*, by Jane Crosen and Michael McKoy, is available, published by The Mountaineers

Contact

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Vital specs

Length: 2,490 miles (additional 220 miles in Canada)

Dirt: 2,115 miles (85%)

Pavement: 375 miles (15%)

Climbing: 165,000 vertical feet

Duration: Expect to ride 50 miles per day and expect a traverse to take 50 days

Fastest traverse: Mike Curiak. 16 days, 57 minutes, in 2004

First traverse: Drew Walker in 1997