

## Great Divide Mountain Bike Route: Full Time Continental Tour

By Erik Schlimmer

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If you're an expert or pro class cross-country competitor your last race was about twenty-five miles in length. That's a good stretch but it's time to think bigger. Multiply by 100 and you've got your next competition: 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. And 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 that "bad boy" or "bad girl" moniker.

And 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, riding 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 big time, scorching the GDMBR in 16 days, 57 minutes, setting the course record. In 2005, seven was the lucky number again but luck ran out for three riders once more; only four made a successful run for the border.

If you don't find a race with a near fifty percent dropout rate appealing, I understand. And if you want to prove your competitiveness without averaging 120 miles a day for three weeks straight, I'm with you. Like fine wine, the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route is best sipped, not gulped.

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 countless NORBA races and emergence of the downhill scene, a discipline not fully realized was mountain bike touring. With a history of establishing paved routes crossing 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 second-longest mountain bike route in the world (the longest is the 2,740-mile Western States Mountain Bike Route, though this route's development has become delayed).

Detailed maps and a guidebook are available for the ride-it-yourselfers. Adventure Cycling also offers guided expeditions for riders lacking backcountry experience. It seems this organization has covered every aspect of this route, from its conception to extension, media to mapping. Approximately 300 border-to-border map sets are sold each year and a total of 450 Canadian section maps have sold. An estimated 3,000 people have ridden the GDMBR end-to-end; an average of 375 riders a year. Dual sport motorcyclists commonly ride the route, too, since they're allowed on nearly every section. Obviously, use is very high. Yearly, more people may ride the GDMBR than hike the Appalachian Trail. But, three important numbers apparently cannot be pegged: amount of pavement, climbing, and singletrack.

Concerning pavement, Adventure Cycling states there are 250 miles end-to-end. The GDMBR race website lists 350 miles. Word on the street, from nearly all GDMBR riders I have spoken with, is that there are approximately 400 miles.

When addressing climbing, you'll commonly hear "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 most likely "in the 160,000 to 170,000 range."

To confuse things a bit more, Adventure Cycling states there are 250 miles of singletrack. Many end-to-end riders have reported there are zero. So whatever numbers you come across, take them all with a grain of salt.

But one thing is clear: the route is beautiful. The GDMBR parallels and shares much of its northernmost 800 miles with the Western States Mountain Bike Route, which equals riding utopia. 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, southbound, August, September, and October. Or, June, July and August when northbound. The plan is to avoid desert heat and high elevation snowfields in one long ride; a tough goal along the Continental Divide. Water and food resupply points can be found approximately every other day with the most desolate stretches resting in New Mexico. New Mexico is often 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 paperweights – are three evils found in the Land of Enchantment.

The standard riding direction is north-to-south for a few reasons. First, the mileages and waypoints on Adventure Cycling's maps are in this configuration. If you're northbound you have to reverse all directions: the "left turn" on your map will be a right turn, for example. Trying to do this after riding for seven hours might be a mental challenge. Second, you can enter Grand Teton National Park from the north for free. Entering through the south costs \$12 per person. Finally, 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. 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 from Big Springs Campground, ride west on a wide gravel road for about one mile towards Macks Inn. Turn south on the rail trail. Follow 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* Starting from the northern tip of FR 600 where it meets route 26/287, ride this dirt road south towards the Continental Divide. The climbing is pretty brutal for the first five miles. Continue on FR 263 (nearby sign reads "Union Pass 12").

Top the climb and descend to Union Pass (9,210'). Reverse course and enjoy the 2,000-foot descent. (To lengthen this ride, continue west on FR 600 through beautiful terrain.) 30 miles 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. Climb and 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 near the 11,000-foot-level get ready for a big descent. FR 87 now runs east. Turn southwest on FR 133, which may become impassable during rainfall (if so, ride FR 87 to pavement). End at highway 64 (staying at the campground on 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 also available and published by The Mountaineers

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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

«« **E.S.** »»