

The Tour Divide Race

By Mike Kahnle

How well do you suffer for days on end? If you are considering throwing your hat in the ring for the Tour Divide Race you might want to ask yourself that question.

The Tour Divide is the world's longest unsupported off-road cycling race. It runs 2,745 miles from Banff, Alberta, Canada to Antelope Wells, New Mexico along the roof top of the continental divide. The route has a total elevation gain of over 200,000 feet. For those of you who are distance challenged, that is equivalent of climbing Mount Everest 7 times. And, what goes up must come down, so you will certainly have your fill of wild, heart-in-your-mouth scabbling down rocky, rutted slopes. The good thing is Mother Nature changes the trail every year, so you certainly won't have to worry about getting into a rut (at least not the psychological kind). Also you get to do part of this in the dark with only your light as a guide. This is definitely not a race for the weak at heart. Or, if you make a habit of traveling against the grain, you can start in Antelope Wells, New Mexico and ride to Banff.

The route is about 90% on unpaved roads and trails mostly in wilderness areas. On any given day, you could be riding on high quality dirt roads, gravel, or an unmaintained trail. It is more likely you will see a mountain lion or grizzly bear than a McDonalds. The route is not marked with road signs or any kind of signs so you better know how to navigate circuitous back country roads without directions. The weather is unpredictable and extreme. You can expect to start pedaling through white out conditions, and end up slowly baking in the dry desert winds. The roads are often impassible, so you might want to practice carrying your bike and gear up hill in the dark, in knee deep soft snow. This race is 100% self-supported. That means you have to carry or find your own food, supplies, gear, and do your own bike repairs, often in the middle of nowhere. The winner will be the one who, teetering on the edge of physical exhaustion, fighting an emotional roller coaster, and unable to sit down without groaning, gets to the finish line first - without cracking.

This race requires both physical and mental stamina. You might be in the saddle for 16-20 hours a day. Your legs are going to be screaming. Your arms will be numb. You'll be dirty, starving, thirsty, tired, fed up, and exceptionally cranky. And what happens if you want to give up? Well, you can slam down your bike, stamp your feet, swear, throw your gear, scream at the top of your lungs, cry yourself sick, throw a good old-fashioned tantrum, and then – when you are all done – you are still going to be 100 miles from the closest sign of civilization. So, you will wipe your eyes, blow your nose, tune up your bike, gather up your gear, and start pedaling again.

The pay back for this self-abuse is that you will see isolated rivers valleys, mountain forests, wide open grasslands, high desert, quick (or not so quick) snapshots of wild animals, and beauty beyond your wildest dreams. All this will be seared into your memory for the rest of your life. You will also know a lot about who you are and what you're made of deep inside.

So how long does this race take? If you want to win, you will have to travel 170 miles a day for 16 days in a row. The course record was set in 2012 by New Zealander, Ollie Whalley. He made it in 16 days, 2 hours and 46 minutes. To put it in perspective, one hundred and seventy miles is from Condon to just beyond Butte – but you have to ride it along Richmond Peak, through Sunday Mountain trail, past Morrell Falls, up Cottonwood Lakes Road, down to Highway 200 through Ovando, over the pass to Helena, and so on... Then, after sleeping in the mud for 4 hours, you have to wake up tomorrow and do it all over again. So Mr. Whalley rode an equivalent elevation gain of going up Mt. Everest.... every 2 ¼ daysand down again for 16 days alone.

This course is tough on equipment too. The weight of your gear multiplies the stress on your bike. More stress on the bike means more things break. You might want to have some experience in fixing things. More gear also means more work for you, so, you have to balance the desire to have French press coffee each morning, with the fact that you have to carry that coffee press every one of the 173,923,200 inches along the way yourself. Under those conditions, the extra pound might have you pulling your hair out in no time. You might want to opt for an ultralight sleeping bag, a water purifier, and freeze dried food instead.

Some of the riders travel with no gear other than the clothes on their backs. They can be found sleeping under parked cars, and drinking from cow ponds. But even that plan has its downside. In some places along the route there is no available water source for hundreds of miles. Even a fully loaded hamburger from McDonalds only has so many calories.

The race starts this year on June 14th. The racers travel right through the Swan Valley, and many drop down into Seeley Lake to inhale the largest quantity of calories in the least amount of time possible, grab a tire tube, defrost, get a warm shower, fix their bike derailleur, or quickly purchase a Smartwool under layer for added warmth. If you keep a sharp lookout you might see a thin, exceptionally dirty, man or woman with a great tan, nosing around Seeley Lake looking for possible food sources, bathrooms, and bike gear. Many have some pretty amazing stories to share, if they have the time. Most are friendly and polite despite the fact they are probably sleep deprived, cold, hungry, tired and just post-holed 2 miles through snow, carrying their bike and gear off the top of Richmond Ridge on to Seeley Lake. It is an extreme race physically and mentally and one where if you finish you win.

About the author: Mike Kahnle, owner/operator of Rocky Mountain Adventure Gear in downtown Seeley Lake, is an avid mountain biker. Mike graciously agreed to write this article for the Clearwater Resource Council. Thank you, Mike.