



WHERE Rocky Mountains, USA

START Roosville, Montana **FINISH** Antelope Wells, New Mexico **DISTANCE** 2,500 miles **WORDS** Susan Holt

PICTURES Susan Holt



Photos: susan holt

GREAT DIVIDE RIDE

It's a 2,500-mile mountain bike epic through the USA, following the Rocky Mountains south. **Susan Holt** had never ridden off-road before...

'Ya have ta wait until the bear is about 30 feet away, pull off the safety latch from your canister, and then spray right inna his face. Ya gotta watch the wind direction, though. If it's against ya, ya'll just end up blinding y'self and ya'll be easy dinner for that bear.' Standing there in the hunting store in Whitefish, Montana, trying to take in all this information and hoping I would remember it if and when the time came, the reality of the dangers of this trip started to sink in.

I'd previously ridden across the USA in 2001 from Washington to Maine on a paved-road, self-contained group tour with the Adventure Cycling Association, the US equivalent of CTC. On that trip, I met Matt from California. Matt's Californian 'whatever' attitude contrasted sharply with my British 'prepare for the worst

1) Map checking in Montana.
Susan posted the maps for later sections ahead

2) Fording a stream in Colorado.
Water was to become scarcer further south

3) Montana singletrack –
fortunately without bears!

to happen', yet somehow we hit it off and had a blast. We ended that trip vowing to ride again one day...

THE DIVIDE TO CONQUER

Two years ago Matt suggested riding the Great Divide the following summer. I immediately signed up, despite never having ridden off-road before. The Great Divide Mountain Bike Route is a 2,500-mile long-distance cycle route from the US-Canada border to the US-Mexico border. It passes through the states of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico, following the Continental Divide watershed along the Rocky Mountains. It consists largely of unpaved dirt or gravel roads – heaven for those cyclists who want to experience traffic-free cycling in a wilderness environment.

The route goes through some large, sparsely populated areas, which meant that we would have to carry enough food for three or four days at a time. We would also, potentially, have to contend with snow in Montana yet expect to fry later on in New Mexico. Water, plentiful enough from mountain-fed streams in Montana, would only be available from windmill-fed cattle troughs in New Mexico. Drinking water from all outdoor sources would need to be treated, because of the risk of giardia.

By reading blogs written by other cyclists who had ridden the Divide (including a couple who completed it on unicycles!) we were able to pick up some helpful tips. One of the best ones was to use the US Post Office



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“We cycled through dense forest, from time to time coming across stunning blue glacier lakes. Descents could be hairy, with panniers popping off”

to send gear ahead and thus lighten the load. We also had to consider the practicalities of wilderness camping, which involves taking *everything* out with you.

BEAR NECESSITIES

We set off at the end of June from the tiny border station at Roosville, Montana, heading into an area with one of the highest populations of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states. We had been advised that bears will naturally take the path of least resistance and so that we should expect to run into them on the dirt roads, particularly on corners.

A surprised bear is not a happy bear, so we made sure to sing loudly when approaching bends. This approach appeared to work well because despite seeing bear scat, enormous paw prints, and hearing a bear cry in the distance, we did not encounter any the entire trip. We spent our first night in a forestry service campground, supposedly popular with hunters but we were totally alone – save for the inquisitive mule deer and hungry mosquitoes.

The campsite was beautiful. It was surrounded by tall lodgepole pines and had a cold, clear stream running through it. Despite the vast number of trees, however, we were unable to find one with long enough branches to hang food from. We resorted to leaving our food in the toilet with heavy stones weighted against the door! As the sun went down, the temperature dropped, so we ended the evening with a warming campfire before retreating exhausted to our tiny tents. The first night snuggled up in the tent was a mixture of joy at having started an amazing journey, tired legs, and keeping one ear open for any signs of grizzly interest in our tents.

Over the next few days, we cycled through dense forest, from time to time coming across stunning blue glacier lakes. Although there were several climbs, the roads were nowhere near as steep as those in the UK. Descents could be quite hairy, with panniers sometimes popping off. There was little traffic; mostly ranchers and the occasional logging truck. We enjoyed the solitude of the wilderness, but were excited to be hitting the mining town of Butte on the weekend of its annual folk festival.

BIG SKY COUNTRY

Before we parted, we paid a trip to the first bike shop we came across, with the unlikely name of ‘The Outdoorsman’. Immediately, we were escorted into the shop, given ice cold drinks, and a free goody bag. It turned out that pro racer Levi Leipheimer’s brother, Rob, owns the shop. Rob has a policy of welcoming all Divide riders in this way, and tunes their bikes for free. Bikes cleaned and oiled, we spent the weekend listening to the folk bands, drinking microbrews and letting our legs recover.

Towards southern Montana, the tree cover disappeared. Endless blue skies above were matched with luscious green pastures below. This rich but short-season source of grazing attracted hundreds of settlers in the 19th century to try their hand at cattle ranching. Montana has a total cattle population of two-and-a-half million compared to a human population of around one million. Because the ranches are so vast and roads few, horseback is still the most efficient way to round up the cattle. As a fan of westerns, I was delighted to see real cowboys in action, using lassos to bring down calves for branding.



A short journey across the northern tip of Idaho led us into Wyoming. Unfortunately, the route bypasses Yellowstone, but does go through the heart of the Grand Tetons, a lesser known but equally stunning national park. Being summer, the park was packed with tourists and regulations. We could no longer pitch our tents where we liked but were forced to camp on the industrial-sized campground at Flagg Ranch.

The upside was that the campsite had a pretty good bar within staggering reach of our tents! We had a quick detour into Jackson, the famous ski resort, to visit the bike shop, as Matt had broken a couple of spokes in his rear wheel.

THE DESERT WHERE PIONEERS DIED

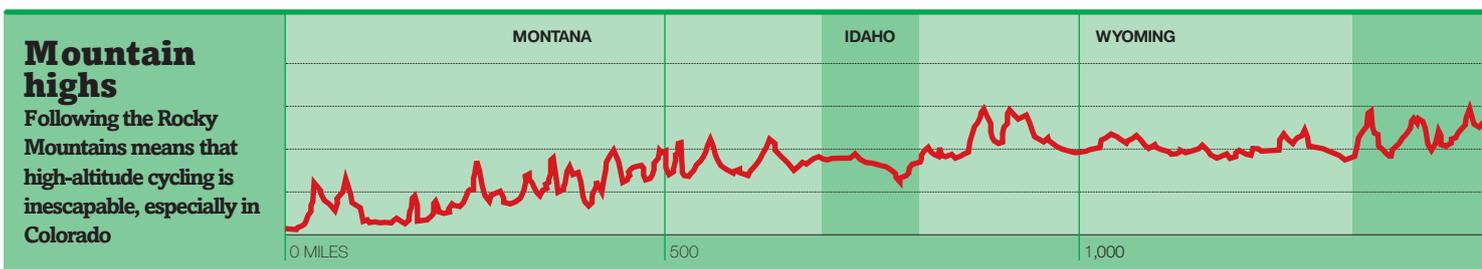
We then entered the Great Divide Basin, high desert terrain dominated by sage and sand dunes. Other than a couple we met in Lima, Montana, so far we had not met anybody else cycling the Great Divide in our direction. So it was with great excitement when we found Bill one night when we stopped to camp. Bill, a nurse from North Carolina, was travelling solo but with only two rear panniers and a backpack, making us feel like cycling juggernauts. We were keen to find out his packing secrets. He did not carry a stove or a

- 4) Stopping for water at the Diagnus Well in the Great Divide Basin, Wyoming
- 5) Move 'em on, head 'em up, Head 'em up, move 'em out, Move 'em on, head 'em out, Rawhide!

water filter. Instead, he was surviving by eating frosted raspberry poptarts and treating his drinking water by adding a few drops of bleach. Tasty!

The next section of the route crossed the desert, with high temperatures of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and few and variable water sources. Several wagon trails crossed this area, as evidenced by the wheel ruts still clearly visible over 150 years later. Not everyone could afford wagons either; some had to push their belongings in a handcart. Around 200,000 pioneers made the journey west on these trails, mostly between 1840 and 1860. Many died along the way and were buried on or beside the trail, leading to the Oregon trail being dubbed 'America's longest graveyard'.

We decided to try to do as much of the 100-mile crossing of the desert as possible in one day, as there is only one potential water source en route, the Diagnus Well. This, according to the map, is easily missed. We made an early start with Bill, but parted from him when we took a 5-mile wrong turning. Mile after mile, the route continued on a trail of sand, dirt, loose rock and sage brush. There was no evidence of civilisation anywhere.



Our minds began to wander in the vast desert heat. We approached each new route intersection and turn with care and much debate. Making another mistake would have been costly. Fortunately, we found the 'well': a galvanised steel pipe gushing its precious contents onto the desert floor. The next potential water source was the lush-sounding A&M reservoir, 55 miles away, so we decided to try to make it there for the night.

After a gruelling ride through energy-sapping soft sand, it began to turn dark. We almost collided with some startled sage grouse on the trail, which reminded us we needed to start watching out for snakes as well! Suddenly, we saw flashing lights on the horizon, and hoped it was Bill, trying to guide us. It was. He was ecstatic to be reunited with us, so grateful he put our tents up for us. We were totally spent. The next morning, the daylight exposed the A&M reservoir to be a dank cesspit, rather than the clear, sparkling pool we had spent the previous day and 90-odd miles dreaming about. Luckily we had just enough water to see us out of the desert and back into civilisation.

DODGING STORMS AND BANDITS

Soon, we were climbing into the mountainous country of Colorado. It was now August and the weather started to develop a familiar pattern of being freezing in the morning, then warming up quickly to brew up a thunderstorm by mid-afternoon. We had no choice but to get up early and brush off the ice to get the miles done to be in camp before the thunder and lightning began.

By now, we had adapted to altitude quite well but we still had to go over the highest pass on the trip, Indiana Pass, a shade under 12,000ft. This turned out to be a steady pull, although it was disappointing to find that there was no official marker at the top. Matt had been carrying a satellite phone the size and weight of a house brick the entire trip, as he wanted to celebrate reaching the highest point by calling his friends back home. I couldn't help but feel sorry for him when everyone he called happened to be out!

The final state was New Mexico. Up to now, my lack of off-road skills had not been a problem. Suddenly, the roads changed to boulder gardens and deep ruts. After falling off a few times, I resorted to getting off and pushing. New Mexico had the additional problem that its

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DO IT YOURSELF

» Visit adventurecycling.org to find out about maps for the Great Divide ride. The website also has a 'travelling companions wanted' section, if you don't fancy riding it alone. Note that you can start this ride north of the US-Canada border in Banff, making it even longer (a total of 2,745 miles).

red clay soil would cake your bike when wet, rendering it impossible to ride. If this happened, you had the choice of waiting out the rain or literally carrying your bike out. And we hit New Mexico in a rainy spell.

Because we had to end the trip by a particular date, we decided to miss out the Gila Wilderness section and take the paved road detour to Silver City. At Silver City, we needed to make the final decision as to whether to ride the last section to the Mexican border. That summer had seen a sharp increase in murders and shootings along the US-Mexico border. However, we had heard from Bill (who by now had finished the ride), that he had cycled this last section with no trouble, so we decided to break for the border. In fact, there was no one else on the road except for the US border patrols who passed by us religiously every 15 minutes with a cheery wave.

We camped the last night in the back garden of Sam Hughes, a trail angel who graciously provides accommodation to Divide cyclists and hikers. Reaching the border, we were glad to have finished but overwhelmed by sadness that the adventure was over. One day, however, we will ride again. ☺

For more photos and information about Susan's trip, visit <http://eatsleepdrinkbeerride.blogspot.com>.

FACT FILE
GREAT DIVIDE RIDE

Distance: 4,000km/2,500 miles
Time taken: 65 days (55 days cycling and 10 rest days).
Daily mileage: From 18 to 104 miles per day.
Route: From Roosville, Montana to Antelope Wells, New Mexico, passing through Idaho, Wyoming and Colorado and crossing Continental Divide over 30 times.
Conditions: 85% off road on forest/gravel roads, 10% paved road and 5% singletrack. Little traffic off-road, moderate traffic on paved sections.
Accommodation: Camping (mostly wild camping, although a couple of times in people's gardens and once on the front veranda of a bar!) and cheap motels. My tent was a 2-man Terra Nova Superlite Voyager.
Maps: 6-map set purchased in advance from Adventure Cycling for around £50 and posted

on ahead of us.
Bike & baggage used: Thorn Sterling expedition bike with front suspension fork, Rohloff hub and Thorn rear rack. Front pannier rack from Old Man Mountain. Ortlieb front and rear panniers.
I'm glad I had... A SPOT tracker. This is a satellite GPS messenger that notifies friends and family exactly where you are, and alerts emergency services if you require assistance in a life-threatening situation. Also invaluable were Mountain House ready-to-eat meals, which just required the addition of boiling water.
Next time I would... Find an alternative to peanut butter bagel lunches. Although they kept for several days in a hot climate, peanut butter bagels were really difficult to eat with a dry mouth!
Further reading: Two Wheels on My Wagon, by Paul Howard, ISBN 978-1845965617

