

NEXT STOP
MEXICO

What sane person would willingly ride their bike the length of the Rockies? Non-stop? Alex Harris reports.

RACE REPORT

HAVE YOU ever held a picture in your mind that is terrifying yet strangely thrilling? An image that fills you with dread, but one you simply cannot shake. It keeps you up at night, beguiling you with the promise of something unknown but special. It causes you to hold your breath and rethink what it is you want to do, and who it is you really are. Such was the picture I had of the Tour Divide (TD). At 4 500 km, the world's longest unsupported mountain-bike race held me, vice-like, in a grip of mystery.

Having raced the Freedom Challenge from Pietermaritzburg to Paarl for the past three years, I was after something a little different. Not that I was finished with it; rather, it was time for a change. I was also growing a profound dislike for the cold and wet that is a hallmark of the Freedom Challenge. The Divide on the other hand, offered monster passes and endless vistas of a wild and untamed part of North America. Throw in some bears and a moose, and it had all the ingredients for an epic bike race. Plus, it would take place in the middle of summer.

On 14 June Crazy Larry, a legend in TD lore, counted down to 8am and officially started the 2013 race. Riders from all over the world – all 143 of them – kicked out of the parking lot behind the Banff Springs hotel and dove headlong onto the Spray river trail. They were hell-bent on one, simple (but for many, disturbing) goal. To get to the Mexican border as fast as possible.

A venture that most would call mad tends to originate from someone who tires of mediocrity, who says "enough is enough" to the same boring trail and then goes out there and does something insane. As did John Stamstad, who redefined what was possible in ultra-endurance mountain biking and non-stop racing. He seemed to go about



ABOVE: st fit fitam itum pl. Tum popublictum etis re tala rendameres! Omnit rem no.

slaying misconceptions with a ruthless disdain that bordered on celestial arrogance. John was one of the first to pioneer the Great Divide mountain bike race in the late '90s, and set the record. In those days the route was 'confined' to the United States only and followed the continental divide along the spine of the Rocky Mountains.

Enter Matthew Lee. The story goes that Matt had found it increasingly difficult to get to Roosville in Montana, a small town on the US-Canadian border where the Great Divide race began. So he decided to start in Banff, Canada. Why? The route developer, the Adventure Cycling Association, had pushed the Continental Divide mountain-bike trail another 322

km further north into Canada, ending at the quaint, alpine-like village of Banff. Matt figured it was far easier to get up there than to Roosville. And thus the Great Divide mountain-bike race fell away and was replaced by the longer Tour Divide: 2 745

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miles, or 4 418 km, assuming you don't get lost somewhere between Canada and Mexico.

I had come off the back of a 40-day desert expedition that had left me somewhat tanned, with tons of endurance, but the strength of a hedgehog. I was weak and I knew it. But I figured that, as this was part of

my three-year plan, I'd do the race – with a set of expectations that teetered on the knife-edge of stupidity. Given my ability to endure, 250 km a day was doable, I thought. That should put me at the Mexican border in 18 days. If all went well, I might just sneak in a top five.

An hour into the race my legs were screaming. Mowed down by the momentum of the bunch, I flowed along, out of sorts. Too fast, I thought – crikey, did they know it was still 4 400 km to go? I sat up and let the front guys go. The Rocky Mountains peeped out of the drizzle and mist from afar; it was spectacular, majestic in a baffling kind of way. I was constantly distracted by the beauty around me and the sense of absolute isolation. I rolled into Sparwood, a small town at 8.30pm. It would be the first meal of many at a convenience store. This one had an A&W restaurant, so a burger and fries were on the cards. Turned out this would be a luxury: most of the garage stops and stores dotted along the route would have nothing more than pop tarts and chocolates. An hour later, I was rolling ever closer to the start of the Flathead Wilderness and some tough decisions. I wasn't carrying a tent or bivvy bag, by choice, contrary to virtually every serious competitor. I figured I would commit to riding more hours and longer days, and making sure I got to a motel or similar.

At 10 that night, a dopey,

a grizzly. It looked at me with a Curious George expression. Cool, I thought, a bear! Then I pointed my light off the road and there was mama. Now that was a bear. And she didn't seem to be as curious. I pounded my pedals for a few seconds before glancing back to make sure I wouldn't be praying I suddenly had Chris Hoy's kick. But they had gone. Fuelled by the burst of adrenaline, the decision was made: I would push on over Flathead pass and head for Cabin Hut.

At three in the morning and 314 km later, I rolled into a clearing at Cabin hut. The shelter sleeps six, but three racers had got there earlier and locked themselves in. I spent a cold and restless two hours bivvying outside, trying to steal some sleep. As I rolled away in the morning I began to question my strategy. The morning was clear with a sharp sky as one pass after another brought me hurtling down towards Roosville and the US border. All too soon, Alberta and British Columbia had disappeared behind me,

along with 135 of the other racers. Ahead, the lush hills of Montana and six to eight riders.

I crossed into the US around midday on day two and made my way up and over Whitefish Divide. Try as I might, I could not help but stop and take my phone out to snap a pic here and there – it was simply breathtaking. As I dropped over the summit, Glacier National Park came into view in the cauldron of dusk. Snow-capped peaks rose like sentinels into a pink sky. The air was still, with only my Hope hub disturbing the peace. I felt a little like an intruder with my noisy bike in an untouched land. But I felt alive. James Olsen caught up with me for the second time that day and we topped out on Red Meadow Pass together. He stopped to bivvy while I pushed on into the night and the town of Whitefish.

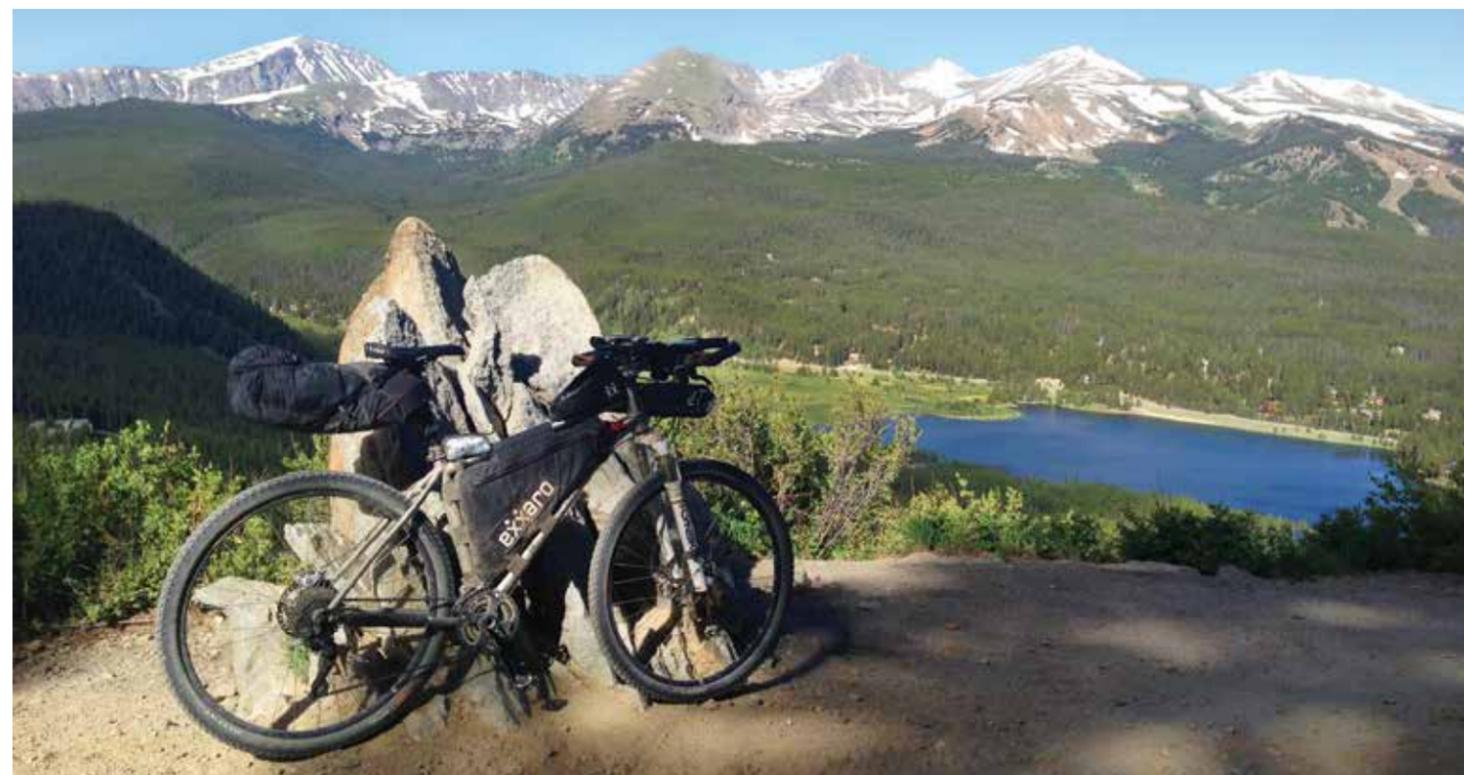
And so, over the next week, a pattern emerged that would largely dictate the tactics for the remainder of the race. Four guys had pushed a day or more ahead at a frantic pace. Another four or five guys including me



would consolidate our pace and slip past each other at the first light of morning or in the shadows of the night. And behind us, the rest of the race would shake itself out into a slow, steady grumble for Mexico. It was impossible to know exactly where anyone was at any given time and only the occasional glimpse or rush of a face would reveal just where you were positioned. It was thrilling stuff.

ABOVE: st fit fitam itum pl. Tum popublictum etis re tala. Por adiae. Equaturio conseqe od mossim sit labor moluptis magnistium.

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RACE REPORT

Thus it was for most of the race. James became my silent confidant: we seemed to weave in and out of each other's day, like two threads of the same story, sharing tidbits of news and information. All fair game in this war of attrition. Subtle, subconscious interrogations tried to squeeze out the essence of truth and observation without betraying intent. Who was in, who was out, where did they sleep, and for how long? Behind us, the green hills of Montana and the dry Great Basin of Wyoming slid into the past. Colorado was a blur of endless mountain passes, almost all in the dark of the night, with nothing but vapours for company. Sleep deprivation took its toll as three and half hours a night seemed nothing more than a gesture. Time and again I found myself negotiating with ghosts and the things that swung between a numb mind and a distant moon. I fell asleep on my bike but somehow held on to my bars and was shaken awake on the side of the road, still upright.

At the back end of an isolated wilderness area, James once again caught up. I had underestimated the availability of food and so had gone close on 200 km with nothing more than a packet of almonds, rationed

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down to three every 10 km. I was gaunt and sucking the energy out of the air in my lungs. We rode on for a while, and then New Mexico split us apart, each fighting their own demons. The worst drought in the state's history had left conditions dry and seemingly endless. One rutted road after another made me dizzy.

Then at last, Liam suddenly popped into the picture. He had



been the third force, remaining elusive as James and I played a game of ping-pong. Liam stayed for a while, and then both were gone.

We rolled relentlessly towards the most unlikely denouement. Mike Hall had won the race in record time, with Jesse Carlson second. In a strange twist of

fate, Craig Stappler, lying in third place, had pulled out. And so it appeared that James, Liam and I were inadvertently fighting for a podium.

On the final night, I was riding with Liam and we'd emerged from terrain with high, forested passes. A monster bush fire had pushed us around the infamous Gila and into the back of Silver City. We slept for just an hour. Was James behind or ahead?

We pushed on in the early light, into the final flats towards the border. While we stopped to fill up on water, James snuck past and quickly put 4 miles on us. We raced like men possessed, trying to haul him in. Liam turned and asked how hungry I was for third place. Famished, I thought. Twenty miles from the end, I caught up with James. I had left Liam about 30 minutes before. James and I sat up, and all too soon Liam was back with us. For the first time in the last 17 days, and with only 10 miles to go, the three of us rode together.

We rolled along in a sort of truce, with minutes left in a race that had spanned most of North America. We shared stories about bivvy spots and bear encounters. At last, we broached the question: what should we do? It was agreed that we would sprint a mile out from the finish. And so we counted down those last few miles until a small set of buildings marked the end of the race and the border of Mexico.

TOP: st fit fitam itum pl. Tum popublictum etis re tala rendameres! Omnit rem no.

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We climbed out of the saddle and gave it horns. In truth, this was more like steenbokkie horns; our legs were toast. I got my Lynskey up to 44 km/h and that was it. James dropped off early on his 1x9, but Liam hung on like a bulldog, still there, just off my tail. I dropped into my TT bars and dug like I've never dug before. This was one sprint I was not going to lose.

Seventeen days, five hours and 28 minutes after starting in Banff, I rolled across the finish line. As I rolled to a stop I was still screaming. I was hoarse, overwhelmed – absolutely finished, but thrilled. I had just come third. And, as Liam had said the night before... this is the Tour Divide. 