

RAAM Course Description

The 2008 edition of the Race Across America is a combination of sections ridden over the past 26 years and safety considerations which take advantage of better roads and methods of ensuring no one gets lost or out of touch. With more simultaneous events and several different start times for various race divisions it is more likely than ever that even in the most remote parts of the country Racers will not be alone on the road for as long as many have been in the past. Some of our most dedicated and resourceful Time Station Crews will be visited again over the 3013 miles from the familiar Start at the Oceanside Pier on the Pacific Ocean to our new destination at the City Dock of historic, colonial Annapolis, Maryland. Many Time Stations will be new and looking forward to supporting world-class athletes doing what only they can do that well, and rookies still honing their skills.

RAAM Racers start their cross-country cycling odyssey in Oceanside, California, leaving the sound of the Pacific Ocean surf hitting Oceanside Pier and enjoy a police-escorted “parade” up The Strand and the San Luis Rey bike path. By the time they cross under I-15, the parade is over and they’re racing with the RAAM staff providing minimal neutral support. The first time that Crews may accompany their Racers on the route comes after about 21 miles. Separate suggested, but not mandatory, routing is provided from the Start for the follow cars and for other Crew vehicles not allowed on the course until after crossing the coastal mountain range. A series of moderate climbs away from the ocean takes the Racers into the shadow of Palomar Mountain near the crest of the Laguna Mountains. Then, not unlike a blast furnace, the temperatures rapidly climb into triple digits during the steep, dizzying, twisty, 3500-foot descent of the “Glass Elevator” into the Anza Borrego Desert. Desert conditions could get even more difficult below sea level along the southern shore of the Salton Sea, as rising humidity levels make a mockery of the “at least it’s a dry heat” West Coast mantra. Brawley, California, is the RAAM first- day desert oasis with a Time Station and full services between two hot 90-mile sections. These sections take Racers over sand dunes and through Colorado River Valley agricultural communities to Blythe and the Interstate Highway I-10 bridge to Arizona.

Without an extensive desert detour there is no alternative to riding the shoulder of I-10 for 30 miles as the race enters Arizona. The route trends up over the eastern lip of the Colorado River Valley to Quartzite (last 24-hour fuel opportunity until Prescott) and then departs the limited-access highway hazards on US 60. The barren stretch between Wenden and Gladden will be mentally demanding: for over 20 miles, the road is perfectly straight and not even the string of telephone poles along the left side of the road appears to alter in appearance. The desert is not a forgiving environment and there are few turnout opportunities for support vehicles maintaining the posted speed. 350 miles into the race, Yarnell Grade along with subsequent climbs into Prescott, finally allow the Racer to bid farewell to low desert conditions while providing white-knuckle driving for support vehicles.

Taking pages from historic RAAM routes of the mid 1980s, this race follows the mountain route from Prescott through Jerome, Cottonwood, and Sedona to Flagstaff. It is suggested that support vehicles not required for this 90-mile section use the fast SR89/I-40 bypass to avoid being trapped into illegal caravanning on the mountain roads and narrow streets of Jerome. The 24 Hour Challenge ends in Flagstaff.



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Departing Flagstaff, the route bends north into the Indian Country east of the Grand Canyon. At Kayenta, the Racers pass between the silent sentinels that guard the spectacular Monument Valley. The Utah canyons around Mexican Hat and Bluff will be equally memorable.

Western Colorado brings the Rocky Mountains: the **high** Rocky Mountains. Between Cortez and Durango, Mancos Mountain and Hesperus Hill are simply polite introductions to the much more significant climbing to follow. After the Racers pass through Pagosa Springs, RAAM turns south into New Mexico then back into Colorado for climbs at Cumbres and La Manga passes that crest over 10,000 feet before dropping into the Alamosa Valley and heading south back to New Mexico.

Approaching Taos, New Mexico, we cross the Rio Grande gorge where finishers of the Race Across the West use cell phones to call race headquarters and announce their impending arrival. Those continuing east check in at the Taos Time Station then leave town the way they entered to circle the Ring of Enchantment around the resort ski area. The Racers then drop out of the Rocky Mountains at Cimarron, from which the flat grasslands stretch to the eastern horizon and far beyond.

While the desert and mountains present known challenges, the unpredictable winds and squalls of the prairies will probably determine whether this will be a RAAM for the record books. Will it be hot, humid, southerly headwinds off the Gulf of Mexico or cold fronts with squall lines riding the westerly trade winds out of the mountains? Those Crews monitoring weather fronts can try to catch and stay with strong winds of storms ahead and to their left and be pushed almost faster than Racers can control their bikes. Whether pushed or held back by weather, the seemingly endless prairie will perhaps pose the greatest challenge to Racers from mind-numbing monotony between the few small towns along the way, while Crews have to refuel at every opportunity to be sure to get through the night. Just because there's a Time Station on the route you must not expect there to be any fuel or food services until halfway through Kansas, seven Time Stations and 400 miles after leaving the Rocky Mountains.

After leaving the always- friendly reception at Pratt, Kansas, the halfway point of RAAM is only three miles outside of town. The next task is to skirt the large metropolitan area of Wichita. This will probably be the first test of navigation on two-lane local streets away from the numerous road signs of the larger highways; a chance to refine skills and organization essential to staying on the route through Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

After Fort Scott, the Racers enter Missouri. Immediately, rolling hills and distinctive lettered state highways will clue the Racers that they aren't in Kansas anymore. Midway across the state, the route crosses two widely separated arms of the massive Lake of the Ozarks, between which the Racers will be forced to contend with an abundance of vacationing motorists. A short while later, Racers circle the magnificent rotunda of the state capital at Jefferson City and cross the Missouri River. For the next 70 miles, the road never strays far from that river and is fairly flat, except for two sections of short, extremely steep, twisty climbs.

Do you know how high your vehicle is with all the gear stowed on top? An oversized- vehicle detour is suggested to avoid the low clearance of a railroad trestle as roads become congested in the vicinity of I-70 nearing St. Louis. After wandering a bit across the great river flood plain, Racers will cycle over the mighty Mississippi on a magnificent golden yellow suspension bridge, The Clark Bridge, into Alton, Illinois. 955 miles to go.



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About 100 miles into Illinois, RAAM departs the familiar transcontinental corridor of US 40 to stay away from major urban areas of the Midwest. Now rural road navigation becomes critical and failing to re-zero an odometer at a Time Station can become a major nuisance. Hilly country will unexpectedly remind some of western mountains while warning others that half of the climbing in RAAM is still ahead. Bloomington is the largest city we go through as we cross the Indiana University campus, catching a glimpse of the stadium where the "Little 500" bicycle race is held, which gives a chance for the legendary coming-of-age battle between coeds and townie "cutters" to play out every year, as documented in the movie "Breaking Away."

Just before the Indiana state line, we go through the quaintly German town of Oldenburg and then try to follow St. Mary's Road as it wanders across many rural intersections, turning at some, not at others, and navigators can be thankful for helpful highway caution signs. In Ohio it's not easy to get between Cincinnati and Dayton without running into rush-hour traffic but the inconvenience, if present, is momentary. In Athens, grades moderate as the Racers cross Ohio University's sprawling campus. Large support vehicles are encouraged to take an alternate route on controlled-access roads to the Time Station past the campus.

RAAM crosses the Ohio River and enters West Virginia on US highway 50, through busy Parkersburg, and starts a series of climbs through the Appalachian Mountains. As the road narrows, it climbs over the Eastern Divide at 3,000 feet above sea level, and then climbs again to the ominously named Mt. Storm before dropping into Maryland. Some of the most intense grades of the entire race are found on scenic US 40 in the forty miles between Cumberland and Hancock. The fourth of these climbs, Sideling Hill, subjects Racers to a 1,000-foot ascent in two miles.

Fortunately, once the route enters Pennsylvania, Racers will no longer face any extended climbs. After crossing the Gettysburg National Memorial at the battleground of the civil war, and just before Hanover, there is a low-clearance covered bridge. A suggested alternate route is provided for tall vehicles. The route turns abruptly south at Hanover and returns to Maryland, where jail at Mount Airy awaits those Racers and Crews which have been assessed time penalties for RAAM rule infractions in the past 2950 miles. Once cleared by officials, Racers proceed through residential areas and rolling country south to the Washington, DC to Baltimore, Maryland corridor. We almost completely avoid its nest of limited-access highways and freeways, except for a couple of miles around the Patuxent River Wildlife Preserve, as all of Fort Meade, home of the National Security Agency, is now behind guarded barriers.

Most of the commercial traffic is behind us at the last Time Station in Odenton where a final call alerts the Finish line, 15 miles ahead, that Racers are coming in. East Coast congestion may rear its ugly head if you happen to hit the area during rush hour, as suburban commuters will keep the roads around Annapolis busy. Thankfully, the final few miles see wide shoulders and much less traffic. As we reach the Naval Academy and enter the historic colonial district, the roads become narrow, but there is little further chance of getting lost if Racers proceed on their own to the City Dock Finish, among the crab and fishing boats and luxury yachts in the compact harbor.

More than 3000 statute miles, more than 100,000 feet of perceived climbing, and 53 Time Stations in your rearview mirror. Life is good!



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