

Tips for International Racers

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Thanks to John Evans who crewed for Jim Rees in 2007 and will be returning with Team Inspiration in 2008 for this perspective.

As a non-American your first challenge is getting you and your crew and bikes to America in the first place. This will usually involve an airplane and is the first obstacle to be overcome. If the rest of the world is anything like the UK for booking flights then be prepared to lose many days searching for the cheapest deal. The world of airline ticket pricing is one of confusion marketing in the extreme. As well as the expected questions; when do you want to fly, where to and how many, other considerations are important. The main thing to check is the airlines baggage policy. How much weight is each passenger allowed? Are bike bags considered normal baggage or will they be charged extra? Is there a maximum number of bags per person? In order to maximize your baggage allowance it will be necessary to spread your bags between the crew. Tell each crew member to bring only one item of personal hold luggage so they can also check in a “team” bag or box. It also helps if they do not bring large hard suitcases because you are going to have to store all this stuff en route across America.

Having arrived in California in plenty of time (you do plan to arrive several days before the race don't you?) you need to decide where you are all going to sleep. Motels are cheap and plentiful along the coast between LA and San Diego but can vary significantly in quality. Choose a recognized national chain and you will get a reasonably standard. Choose a local family run establishment and you may get a very comfortable home from home with character...or Bates motel. The choice is yours, but be aware that the closest hotel to the start line that we booked into last year made Bates motel seem like the Ritz...we took one look at our room and checked straight out again!

There are significant differences between driving in America and the rest of the world most of these differences are a good thing (unless you love the planet).

First thing you will notice is that everything is bigger in America, including most Americans! This means their cars are bigger than you will be used to. Conveniently though since the USA is a big place, most roads and car parks have been sized appropriately. To power these big cars most have big engines, usually petrol driven (gas) rather than diesel and returning perhaps 15 miles per gallon or less in the RV. It is fortunate then that “gas” is significantly cheaper in the US than anywhere in Europe or most of the rest of the world. Be prepared to always fill up when you can though, for some of the race there are long stretches with no fuel stations.

Hiring vehicles is always a challenge! There are only a few companies who will let you hire on the West Coast and return on the East Coast, The costs for the hire of a minivan vary by perhaps 50% from the cheapest deal to the most expensive, it pays to shop around. As with booking flights, the internet is your friend. Things to watch for are, insurance costs, excess charges for damage and mileage charges, it usually pays to get an unlimited mileage deal. Another thing to be aware of is the extra charge some companies make for each additional driver, some charge a lot, others charge nothing. Some companies' computer systems will only allow them to add four extra drivers, this might be an issue for a large crew. Finally, look for discounts for membership of various organizations affiliated to the AAA (American Automobile Association)

You will be needing a minivan as a follow vehicle, do not think the prefix “mini” refers to something small...this is a large seven passenger vehicle and just the job for RAAM. The seats can be removed to provide extra storage and a bed for the rider, but you will have to get these seats to the finish somehow.

Depending on your crew size you may also need an RV (recreational vehicle) also known as a motorhome or campervan. This vehicle can be so big that it blocks out the sun! The good thing is that you can drive these huge buses with a normal driving license in the states, the bad thing is that they are so big that you will almost certainly damage something with them before the trip ends. Try to make it something inanimate and fairly cheap that you hit, perhaps a small bush or something similar. Also be aware that your RV will need to be returned with all fuel tanks full (including LPG) and all waste tanks empty otherwise expect high servicing charges (several hundred dollars).

For any hire you will need a valid driving license for each driver and although international driving permits are not essential in all cases, an English translation of your license may be required. Also make sure you have at least one credit card with a high enough credit limit for the deposit and hire charges. One Czech crew fell foul of this last year that resulted in a last minute scramble for a hire car once they had managed to sort out the international credit limit on their card.

Things that are different on the roads in America.

1. Traffic lights, there are lots of them, more than you are probably used to. However one very sensible rule is that you can make a right turn on a red light, if the road is clear.
2. On multilane highways you will find drivers overtaking on both sides if you are in a central lane, this is accepted practice in the US although often considered dangerous and illegal in Europe.
3. The use of indicators seem optional and less common practice than in Europe, and the fact that some car seem to have red indicators can be confusing at first.
4. American drivers are almost invariably more courteous than we are used to in Europe try to repay them with the same level kindness and consideration.
5. Road rage that seems fairly commonplace in the UK seems almost entirely absent from the US (perhaps because the other driver might just be packing at Magnum 45!)

The guiding principle is that roads and driving standards are reasonably good in the US but you need time to adjust to the small differences so take it easy and you'll be fine.

Good luck.