

Race Across the West

2009 Race Across The West Route Description by Paul Carpenter, 2008 Solo RAW Champion.



Three short phrases provide a concise but comprehensive description of the route from Oceanside to Taos: long steady climbs, intense heat, and strong winds. While these descriptors capture the essence of RAW, they don't fully explain the challenges posed by the wide climatic and geographic variations encountered.

Departing the cool ocean breezes of Oceanside and the relatively flat inland valley, you soon encounter the Coastal Range and two of the primary characteristics of the route: the long steady climbing and intense heat, contrary to the shorter steeper climbs of the East.

While none of the climbs can be characterized as steep, their ongoing nature necessitates finding a comfortable rhythm. This isn't about "muscling" up the mountain. The overall trend to Taos is uphill, you go from sea level to 7000 feet, but most climbs are followed by a fast descent. Add in the distance, dry heat and almost total absence of shade until you pass through Prescott and you will find this route to be very challenging.

After the climbs to Lake Henshaw there is a stretch of rolling terrain before another long steady climb. This is followed by the descent down the 'Glass Elevator' into Borrego Springs. This is one of the highlights of the race—very fast and exhilarating with some amazing views out across the Salton Sea. Descending to below sea-level you discover that you are truly in the desert where there is no escape from the heat and where distance loses all meaning. The terrain is featureless with few reference points to help establish scale and perspective. It can feel as though you are riding a stationary bike, as nothing seems to change to indicate you are



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making forward progress. This section through to Brawley and then onto Blythe can also introduce the third primary characteristic of the route—strong winds. If you are real lucky, it will be a tailwind and you will fly. Less fortunate and you will be eating sand all day. The hot wind can also desiccate you very quickly so make sure you stay hydrated and well protected from the sun.



Between Blythe and Hope there is a short section along Interstate 10 which most riders hit at night. The plus to this is that traffic is light. However, the speed at which it passes you can be unnerving and in the dark it is hard to pick out the debris that is strewn across the shoulder. Coming off the Interstate you are back on quiet desert roads. The stretch into Hope and then on to Congress seems to take for ever as you grind gradually uphill on roads in poor conditions under a hot and relentless sun. I found this section one of the hardest on the route and Congress is one of those points in the race that can be a defining moment. You're hot, tired and have been in the saddle for many hours and Yarnell Grade beckons. Psychologically it can be hard to motivate yourself to get back in the saddle, face the heat and start climbing.

This isn't a difficult climb per se: it's long and steady with no real steep sections. It is exposed and the heat (it was over 110F when I started the climb) can take its toll. The views back across the desert are spectacular, but the heat doesn't leave you inclined to linger. With another long climb to Prescott soon after peaking at Yarnell Grade, there is no opportunity to relax. The climb up to Prescott is less 'well-defined'. It doesn't have switchbacks to the same degree as the Yarnell Grade or the extensive vistas out over the desert floor below, nonetheless it's a significant climb done under very hot conditions.

Out of Prescott you have a relatively flat section before you hit another climb as you head toward Jerome. This is another 'classic Western' climb, not particularly steep, but long and steady, with a series of switchbacks that climb up through the pine forest. This makes for a welcome change from the stark desert conditions, with trees affording some shade. You reach the top of the climb (about 7000 feet) and then there is a short drop before climbing again. The descent into Cottonwood (4000 feet) is fast but tough as the road condition isn't great. You need to modulate your downhill speed to stay in control of the bike. The views are amazing as you look out across the valley and the sun plays on the red sandstone.

The route out of Cottonwood to Flagstaff via Sedona brings more climbing and beautiful forests. The section to Sedona isn't bad as the gradient is very gradual, but the climb out of Sedona up to Flagstaff is a tough, long, steady, steeper climb with a number of switchbacks up through the forest. Depending on the time of day it can get



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chilly as you near Flagstaff which is at 7000 feet. Flagstaff can be busy but I arrived early in the morning and there was no traffic. Out of Flagstaff there is another short but sharp climb before a series of long rollers that trend downhill, where you can get enough speed on the downs to get you through the ups. Once the sun rises, the heat builds and it is back to exposed desert conditions. These conditions intensified on the stretch from Tuba City to Kayenta as the day got hotter and the winds strengthened. This section was very reminiscent of the hard stretch into Hope and on to Congress, hot with no shade and steadily uphill with the added element of the wind. The only respite was the downhill stretch into Kayenta but with the wind, driving sand and intense heat this provided little comfort or relief. On reaching Kayenta the wind had strengthened to about 30 mph and made the heat feel even more intense. The wind was so strong it was picking the bike up and blowing it across the parking lot. Getting back on the bike and facing these conditions left me questioning my sanity! I primarily had a tailwind to Mexican Hat, except in a few places it became a cross-wind that made it hard to stay on the road. When the wind whips up the sand reduces visibility

and finds its way into every nook and cranny making riding uncomfortable. The tailwind, gradual descent, before a short climb, and then a long rapid descent into Mexican Hat made this a fast section. This is an amazingly beautiful section of the route as I headed into Monument Valley and crossed out

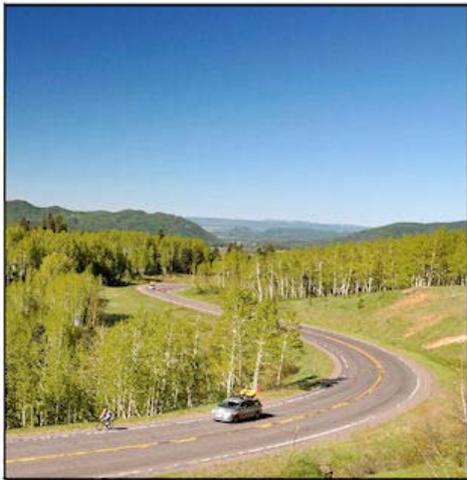


of Arizona and into Utah. I found the first part of the leg to Montezuma Creek hard with one short but sharp climb followed by a longer steady climb before the respite of a fast descent. The leg soon gave way to more rolling terrain although some of the ups were short and sharp. For the most part the wind cooperated and was at my back making the latter part of this leg very pleasant. It was dark when I reached Montezuma Creek but the Time Station was alive with riders. Race Headquarters informed us

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that a wind advisory was in effect for the evening for both the desert and up into the Rockies but as it was a tailwind it made sense to press on. The leg to Cortez, Colorado is uphill although there are no steep sections and with the tailwind it didn't feel like there was any significant climbing. Even so, by the end of this section my legs were heavy. Heading out of Cortez to Durango, the route is uphill with a few minor descents. The climbs are long and steady and have the classic Colorado look, with scenic views across a forested landscape. Getting a rhythm is the key, as the climbs aren't particularly steep. There is a long descent into Durango and depending on the time of day it can be cold. If you don't layer up you can get chilled quickly. Leaving Durango there is one long climb and then a series of rollers, that trend downhill, before a steady, gradual, 15 mile climb to the Time Station in Pagosa Springs. What had been a tailwind became a cross-wind that made me fight to stay on the road.



While there are many significant climbs en route to Pagosa Springs, the next two loom large in a rider's psyche. This part of the course takes you to the highest point and has the longest climb. Conquer these next two sections and its all downhill to Taos!

To Chama, New Mexico, the section has a number of short, steep climbs interspersed with a number of short descents. The wind was really picking up and the crosswinds on the last climb were as bad as I have ever encountered. Throughout the climbing, you are in an alpine pasture with a lot of open exposed areas, flanked by aspen groves.

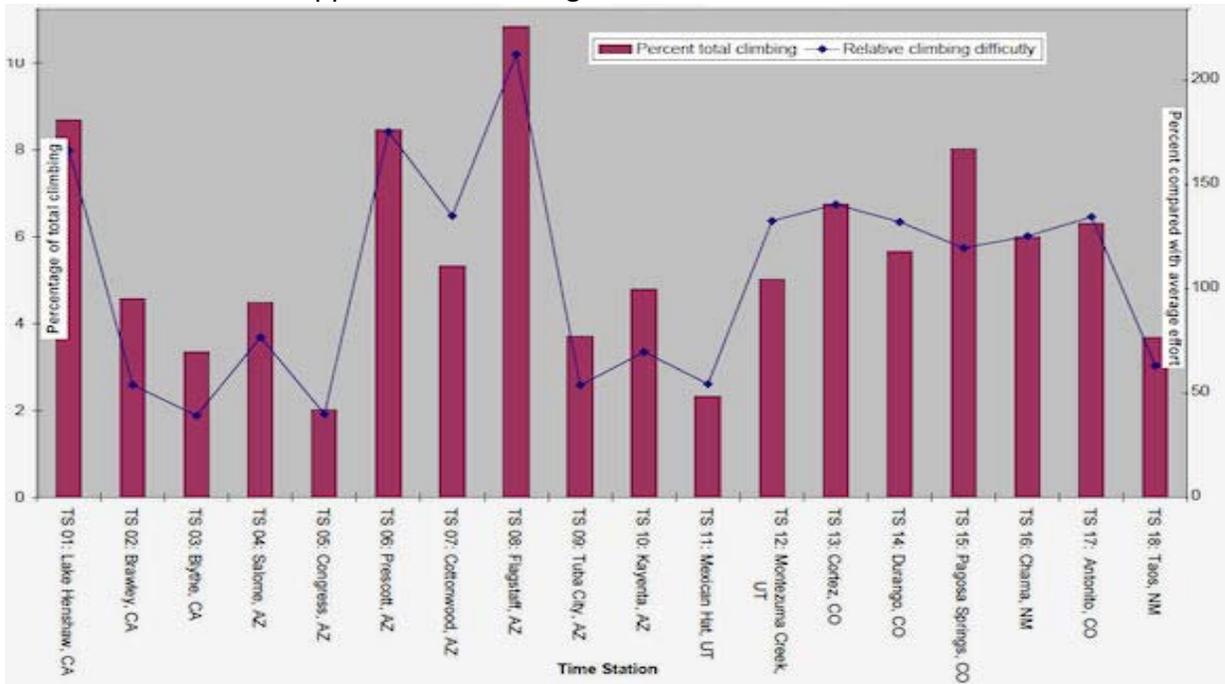
Out of Chama there are two climbs. One is 15 miles and follows an old rail line, making the gradient gradual and steady. This climb goes from 7,800 to over 10,000 feet. The second comes after a short descent and is only a few miles long but takes you to the highest point on the course, at 10,275 feet. I didn't experience any problems with the thin air, but this should be a consideration as you ride this section. The scenery is spectacular with amazing views. Near the top I turned into a strong headwind and almost came to a standstill. It required a lot of extra effort to maintain forward progress. There was snow at the top and with the afternoon drawing on, I stopped to put on layers as I didn't want to get cold on the descent. The descent wasn't as long as I hoped, the road conditions were rough and the vibration made descending uncomfortable. I was pleased when the road leveled out. The initial steep descent leads to a more gradual drop into Antonito with some long sections of relatively flat terrain. Once below the tree line you are in high desert conditions with few features. This type of terrain continues as you start the final leg into Taos. There is nothing out there to see and the section can feel very lonely and exposed. I hit it just after dark and the temperature was plummeting, dropping down to the high 20s. The monotony of this section made it very hard to stay focused and awake. The shadows on the road look like obstructions to avoid and the road surface has

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the feel of a wash board making for an uncomfortable time in the saddle. It is largely downhill after a 10 mile gradual uphill portion out of Antonito, but the drop comes courtesy of a series of rollers. About 6 miles out from the Taos Time Station I could see a red light that marked a stop sign, just short of the turn to the final check point, but it never seemed to get closer. Finally, I was there and had officially finished the Race Across the West! Racing 1000 miles, over mountain passes, along flowing rivers, through deserts and forests, I got to see it all. This was one amazing adventure!



Approximate climbing for each RAW Time Station



Further information available @ www.racecrossamerica.org or raw09@racecrossamerica.org