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Idyllwild resident conquers 2,711-mile trek

Mary Collier couldn't pass up last month's inaugural Tour Divide mountain bike race.

The 29-year-old Webmaster at Idyllwild Arts boarding school had done 12-hour races. She completed and became nationally ranked in 24-hour races. She even did a four-day, 300-mile ride from Idyllwild to Palm Desert to Mecca to Joshua Tree to Big Bear Lake to Banning and back to Idyllwild.

The Tour Divide is nine times as long, starting in Banff, Alberta, and ending 2,711 miles later in Antelope Wells, N.M., at the U.S./Mexican border. Conditions range from below-freezing mountain passes to almost 100-degree desert heat. Riders climb almost 200,000 feet, mostly on dirt trails, the equivalent of ascending Mount Everest seven times from sea level to summit. They receive no aid from anyone.



Joey Anchondo / The Press-Enterprise

Mary Collier rides May Valley Road, the access road for most mountain bike trails near Idyllwild.

Matthew Lee, who organized and competed in the race, considers it the most difficult mountain bike race in the world. He calls it the Tour de France of mountain biking.

Sixteen people started the race June 12. Only nine people, including Collier, finished it. She was the only woman. It took her 29 days, 17 hours and 37 minutes. She did it without taking a day off.

"You never, out there, understand the entirety of it, which is good," Collier said last week, inside the Idyllwild shop where her husband, Brendan, builds bikes, including her Tour Divide bike, which she named Frieda. "But afterwards, looking at an atlas, it's like, wow, that's a long way."

Tomboy to Top Athlete

Collier grew up a tomboy riding dirt bikes in Alamogordo, N.M. Like many people, she said, she stopped riding her bicycle in junior high school.

She started riding again at Southern Illinois University after meeting Brendan Collier, now her husband. She rode a street bike on pavement and a mountain bike on trails. She quickly fell in love with the mountain bike.

"I like that it got me into the woods," she said. "I could be on the road in my car."

She and Brendan moved to Idyllwild three years ago so he could be close to his grandparents in Hemet.



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Mary Collier uses a bike built by her husband, Brendan Collier, owner of Siren Bicycles, for the Tour Divide.

Before the move, Collier had done 24-hour mountain bike races as part of a team. The goal of the races is to complete as many laps as possible in a 24-hour period.

A friend in Idyllwild, Dawne Harris, suggested she try it solo. As a tune-up, she signed up for a 12-hour race in November 2005 at Vail Lake, just east of Temecula. She finished second.

Four months later, she finished third and covered 180 miles in her first 24-hour race in Tucson, Ariz. That included a three-hour nap during the middle of the night. She learned from that. She now eats chocolate-covered espresso beans.

She's ranked fifth in the nation among women 24-hour mountain bike racers. Admittedly, it's a small group, she said.

'Down-Low' Race

The Tour Divide follows the Continental Divide, the mountainous ridge that divides the watershed that drain into the Pacific Ocean from the watershed that drains into the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico.

The race essentially follows the same route as the Great Divide Race, another mountain bike race. But the Great Divide Race, which started in 2004, doesn't include the 225-mile Canadian section.

Lee, who organized the Tour Divide, did the Great Divide Race from 2004 to 2007. He started the Tour Divide this year because Great Divide Race organizers wouldn't include the Canadian section.



The Tour Divide race included freezing mountain passes and stretches in scorching desert heat.

He purposely left the word "race" out of the title.

"It's what I call anti-racing," said Lee, 37, by phone from his Chapel Hill, N.C. home. "There's no prize money. There's no entry fee. There's no sponsors. It's very much on the down-low."

Collier started the race with her bike, the clothing she wore, a sleeping bag, sleeping pad, second pair of shorts, tent, food, water and some nutritional supplements. Race rules allow riders to sleep

at hotels, eat at restaurants, buy food and wash clothing. However, the services can't be pre-arranged.

Collier spent one-third of the nights in hotels and two-thirds in the tent. She survived mainly on gas station food. Little Debbie pastries, Pearson's Nut Rolls and 5-hour Energy drinks were favorites. When she got to restaurants, pasta was a treat.

She covered up to 160 miles in a day. Some days lasted 24 hours. She had a couple of "easy" 85-mile days when her legs swelled, she thinks because she didn't have enough carbohydrates and water. She didn't lose weight, but gained some freckles and her skin got darker.

Her husband, Brendan, 30, dropped her off at the starting line and picked her up at the end. In between, he bought a Blackberry to follow her progress on the Tour Divide blog. Last week, he repeatedly used the word "surreal" to describe what she did.

Collier rode the last week of the race with Stephen Gleasner, a 47-year-old plywood artist from Maine riding as part of a "scheduled mid-life crisis." They met up at the urging of their spouses, both of whom followed the race online.

Gleasner described Collier as "tough" and not having fear. She helped him ride later into the night and faster on downhill sections.

Gleasner and Collier finished the race together in the New Mexico high desert, about 200 miles from where Collier grew up.

"It was an appropriate place to end," she said. "Because you kind of felt like a desert plant when you got there: tough, strong and able to weather the elements."

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