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- [Home](#)
- [Journeys](#)
- [Photos](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Trail News](#)
- [PMags.com Happenings](#)
- [About Me](#)
- [Contact Me](#)
- [Guest Book](#)
- [Search](#)

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[Home](#) ● [Ramblings](#) ● [CDT Planning Guide](#)

CDT Planning Guide

Written by Paul "Mags" Magnanti
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A Continental Divide Trail planning guide. It is similar to my **PCT doc**. A quick and dirty guide to get you pointed in the right direction for planning a hike of the CDT.



The Continental Divide Trail

The Continental Divide Trail is the last of the "Big Three" trails that most thru-hikers tackle as part of the Triple Crown of long distance hiking. Raw, wild, remote and unfinished; it is a trail that will make use of all the skills of an experienced backpacker. It is also a trail that is beautiful, stunning and perhaps the most rewarding of the major long distance hiking trails.

This handout will help you prepare for the basics of a journey for this trail. It is not meant to be an exhaustive document. As always, you should consult with other resources before heading out on an extended trek in the mountains.

THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL AT A GLANCE

- Administered by US Forest Service
- The trail is perhaps 70% done
- No defined route for many of the places and has many alternate routes
- The "trail" is a mixture of defined trail, cross country travel, dirt and paved road walking.
- There is a designated route partially in place by the USFS, but most people take alternate routes in places
- The CDT mileage estimates range from a low of 2500 miles (using guidebooks and maps that are reported to be off) to a high of 3100 miles (unlikely). Most people believe the typical route is ~2600-2700 miles with 2800 miles splitting the difference.

Yeah, confusing. Either way, it is a long freakin' walk. 🤪

- Goes through Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico along the spine of the Rockies (more or less)
- Starts in Glacier National Park and ends at the Mexican border. Three endings: 1) Columbus, NM 2) Antelope Wells, NM or the 3) Crazy Cook Monument

APPALACHIAN TRAIL vs. PACIFIC CREST TRAIL vs. CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL

- Needless to say the AT and the CDT are not alike in anyway. They are both long trails that goes through the mountains... and that is where the similarity ends
- A better comparison is between the CDT and the PCT
- Both are about the same length, go above treeline and in remote areas
- As with the PCT, the CDT is open to horses. Currently parts of the CDT are also mountain bike accessible
- The PCT is finished, is well marked and is relatively well used. The CDT is unfinished, is not well marked in many places and is very unused in places
- Take most thru-hikers 4-5 months to hike the CDT
- Logistics are similar to the PCT; about 5-7 days in between resupplies
- A NoBo will start in late April and typically finish in September. Start too early and you hit much snow in the San Juans of Colorado. Finish too late and you hit snow in Montana
- A SoBo will start in mid-June and typically finish in November. Start too early and you will see much snow in Montana. Dawdle too much and you may hit snow in the San Juans.

TWO TRAIL ORGANIZATIONS

There are two trail organizations that help plan routes for the CDT. The trail organizations are:

Continental Divide Trail Society <http://www.cdt society.org/> An organization started by Jim Wolf. The CDTS typically defines a route that is more hiker friendly (more scenic, sometimes off the beaten path, not always horse accessible) and produces a very popular set of guidebooks

Continental Divide Trail Alliance <http://www.cdtrail.org/> A more recent organization that works closely with the USFS to define a designated route for the CDT. In recent years they have worked closely with local outdoor groups to build and maintain the CDT (esp. in New Mexico). They have been making efforts to reach out to thru-hikers and solicit feedback as well.

MAJOR CONCERNS OF CDT THRU-HIKERS

Most aspiring thru-hikers of the CDT have a few key concerns. A CDT hiker should have considerable backpacking experience and ideally have done a previous long hike on a Western trail such as the PCT. The CDT is ***NOT*** a beginners thru-hiking trail. It is assumed that an aspiring thru-hiker should know how to read a map, use a compass, manage resupplies and water issues. Having said that, the major concerns for most thru-hikers seem to be:

1) Navigation

The CDT is an work in progress. It is not a well marked trail like the PCT, never mind the AT! A CDTer **MUST** know how to use a map and compass.

A great link for learning to use a map and compass is found at: <http://www.learn-orienteeing.org/old/>

Though not needed, a GPS device is found to be useful by many hikers. The GPS helps with what I politely call the ***** (Where The BLEEP)** factor. A GPS will pinpoint your exact position on the map. Many GPS units also have software that allows to you load in maps. A GPS does have limitations, though and it is not a replacement for map and compass and knowledge of their use. A nice little guide to GPS operations can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/3xmqa>

2) Maps

A thru-hike of the CDT needs **LOTS** of maps. Almost all thru-hikers use the Jonathan Ley maps. These maps show several routes for the CDT and have made hiking the CDT less daunting. A CD with the maps can be procured from <http://www.phlumf.com/travels/cdt/cdtmaps.shtml>

As great as the Ley maps are, they are limited. They do not give the wide view sometimes need for taking alternate routes (such as when a fire occurs and/or a major snowstorm happens. Both incidents happened to me!)

The popular alternate maps in brief are:

Delorme Gazetteers – The Gazetteers give a large overview of the area where the trail goes through. Useful for finding out USFS roads, alternate routes and/or bail out points. You may want to trace/draw in your CDT route based on Ley Maps or other resources

Trails Illustrated Maps - For Colorado and Glacier National Park, these maps show the CDT routes in excellent detail. A little expensive (~\$10 ea.) and heavy, but they can make navigation easier esp. if you need to take alternate routes from your planned itinerary

USFS/BLM maps: Though there is new (and excellent!) tread being built all the time, there is still much dirt road walking in New Mexico in particular. These maps are found to be helpful for certain areas of the trail.

3) Guidebooks

There are two popular sets of guidebooks. The **Continental Divide Trail Alliance** puts out guidebooks that are aimed more the weekend or short distance backpacker. They provide trail access info, colorful pictures and trivia. They are of limited use for the long distance hiker, however.

The **Continental Divide Trail Society** puts out guidebooks as well. Popularly known as the “Wolf Guides”, the books by Jim Wolf are very descriptive and accurate. Most long distance hikers prefer these guidebooks.

4) Re-supplying

The challenges of re-supply are about as difficult as the PCT. About 5-7 days between re-supply. If you are not overly picky, you can re-supply just about anywhere. The hybrid approach (buy groceries in a large town and ship out to a smaller town) works well, too.

5) Grizzly Bears

In Glacier, the Bob Marshall Wilderness and Yellowstone, grizzlies roam. You are not at top of the food chain! Luckily, grizzly bears will not bother you for the most part . In Glacier and Yellowstone, bear poles are set up for your use. In “The Bob”, you’ll want to use normal precautions for bear country. Because hunting is allowed in “The Bob”, bears tend to be wary of humans. Some hiker take bear spray as a precaution. Whether you take bear spray or not is an individual decision.

6) Water

In the Great Divide Basin of Wyoming and New Mexico, water can be scarce. But, again, no worse than parts of the PCT. Use your guidebooks and maps, pay attention, and you’ll be fine.

7) Snow Travel

In a heavy snow year and/or with an early start, an ice axe (and possibly crampons) may be needed in the San Juans if going northbound. If going southbound, an ice axe (and possibly crampons) may be needed for similar reasons if attempting the High Line trail in Glacier National Park. Please note that there are lower, if less scenic, alternatives for the high routes.

8) Northbound vs. Southbound vs. Flipping

There is no such thing as an easy hike of the CDT! When going NoBo, there may be a lot of snow in the San Juans and winter may come early to Montana. When going SoBo, you may run into too much snow in Glacier and winter can come early to the San Juans. In 2006, three feet of snow was dumped in the San Juans by mid-September. A good two weeks early! As of this writing (November 2007), no major snowstorms have come to the Colorado Rockies.

Every year is different.

Another option is to flip. My fellow Coloradoan Sidewinder chose to flip. He hiked up to Berthoud Pass near Winter Park, flipped up to Glacier and hiked south to finish back at Berthoud Pass. He missed much of the snow the SoBos ran into in Fall 2006. The disadvantage of this method is that you lose the feel of continuous journey.

PERMITS

There is no master permit such as the one for the Pacific Crest Trail. A backpacker needs to have a permit for each of the National Parks and certain wilderness areas.

Permits are required for **Glacier National Park, Yellowstone National Park, Rocky Mountain National Park** (*if you choose that route*), **Indian Peaks Wilderness** (*if you choose that route*) and a self signed permit for the **Holy Cross Wilderness**.

RESOURCES

Groups

Continental Divide Trail Society <http://www.cdt society.org/> An organization started by Jim Wolf. The CDTS typically defines a route that is more hiker friendly (more scenic, sometimes off the beaten path, not always horse accessible) and produces a very popular set of guidebooks

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ALDHA – East www.aldha.org Though primarily for Eastern hiking, there are many people in the organization who have also hiked the CDT

ALDHA – West <http://www.aldhawest.org/> This org focuses on Western hiking and hands out the Triple Crown awards
Discussion Boards/Lists

CDT-L <http://mailman.backcountry.net/pipermail/cdt-l/> A list-serv for the CDT. Many CDTers are active on this list

Trail Forums www.trailforums.com This website has some CDT discussion

Whiteblaze.net www.whiteblaze.net Though AT focused, the OTHER TRAILS section is getting more and more popular. The CDT forum has a fair amount of use

On-line Resources

SpiritEagle <http://www.spiriteaglehome.com/cdt.html> Jim and Ginny Owen have hiked the CDT twice and many other trails. Their site has an excellent overview of the CDT and resources available for this trail. Their THRU-HIKING papers are a must read for any hiker on *any* trail in my opinion.

James McCreight's site: <http://cdt2003.info/> James hiked the CDT in 2003. Though some of the info is out of date (**ALWAYS VERIFY! THINGS CHANGE ON THE CDT!**), his site was valuable in planning a "buy as you go" resupply

Postholer: www.postholer.com A site with journals, forums and a regularly updated snow percentage level along the divide

Guidebooks and Planning Guides

CDTS Guidebooks aka "The Wolf Guides" The preferred guidebooks for most thru-hikers on the CDT. Very accurate and concise info for the Wolf route of the CDT. If you take a different route, be sure to pay attention to your maps!

CDTA Guidebooks Meant more for short weekend or so type adventures. Really not suggested for a long distance hiker. Pretty pictures, though!

Yogi's CDT Handbook <http://pcthandbook.com/> My good friend Yogi has put out a leaner version of her popular PCT handbook for the CDT. Great information, thoroughly researched and meant for the **experienced** long distance hiker on the CDT. Very useful! (*Full disclosure: I contributed to both the PCT and CDT handbooks. I receive no compensation other than satisfaction in helping out a dear friend in addition to fellow hikers*).

Books, journals and videos

Of course, planning for the hike can be exciting. But sometimes it is inspiring to read other hikers stories or online journals:

Books:

Where the Waters Divide by Karen Berger A good account of thru-hiking the CDT

Westcliffe "coffee table" CDT books Glorious pictures and good writing for each of the states the CDT passes through

Scraping Heaven by Cindy Ross A an account of a family section hiking (and biking) the CDT.

The Backbone of the World by Frank Clifford An excellent account of the land, the culture and the politics of where the CDT passes

The Journals of Lewis and Clark Vivid account of what it was like to travel along and on the divide without guidebooks,

lightweight gear or a microbrew in sight. Call it deep background reading. 😊

Journals:

www.trailjournals.com

Links to many on-line journals for the CDT. If you are curious about what a flip-flop hike of the CDT may be like, read Sidewinders CDT 2006 journal. Besides writing the handbook, Yogi has her CDT journal on this site as well.

www.d-low.com

The man who coined the phrase "EMBRACE THE BRUTALITY" for the CDT.

www.phlumf.com

One of my favorite CDT journals

www.pmags.com

I have my journal online along with many photos

Videos:

The Walkumentary <http://www.thewalkumentary.com/> A video done by my buddy Disco. A funny, heartfelt and true-to-life account of hiking SoBo on the CDT in 2006. The fact I'm in this video does not in any way make me give it a glowing review. 😊

Walking the Great Divide <http://www.flaglerfilms.com/> Mark Flagler came out with a professional grade documentary about the CDT. It is not only about the thru-hiking community, but also about the trail and the land around the CDT. Mark has previously come out with **Appalachian Impressions**.

Scarlet and Wildflower's 2007 CDT Adventure <http://www.scarletandwildflower.com/> A well regarded documentary from Jessica "Wildflower" Winters about a CDT thru-hike.

How to Hike the CDT by Lynn Wheldon www.lwgear.com A very thorough (7 hrs!) video on how to hike the CDT. A little dry at times, but informative

Best of luck on your CDT journey! All thru-hikes demand an odd mixture of flexibility and stubbornness..more so on the CDT!

As my buddy d-low (CDT2005) likes to say about the CDT: "EMBRACE THE BRUTALITY!!!!" Embrace the challenges. Embrace the beauty. Embrace the wildness. Embrace all that is so great about the CDT!

If you have any additional questions about this document or the CDT in general, please feel free to e-mail me.

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