



My Drift

Title: The Great Continental Divide

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I always thought of the Continental Divide as another name or the top part of the Rocky Mountain Range. I didn't know what it really is or how extensive it is. So, in this article we are going to learn something about hydrological continental divides and the Great Continental Divide in particular.

The Great Continental Divide is the principal, largest, longest, and mostly mountainous hydrological divide of the Americas (and the world). This Divide extends from the Bering Strait in northern Alaska to the Strait of Magellan in southern South America. It separates the watersheds that drain into the Pacific Ocean from those river systems that drain into the Atlantic Ocean (including those that drain into the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea) and, along the northernmost reaches of the Divide, those river systems that drain into the Arctic Ocean.

Though there are many other hydrological divides in the Americas and other parts of the world, the Great Continental Divide is by far the most prominent of these because it tends to follow a line of high peaks along the main ranges of the Rocky Mountains and Andes, at a generally much higher elevation than the other hydrological divisions.

Map



Geography

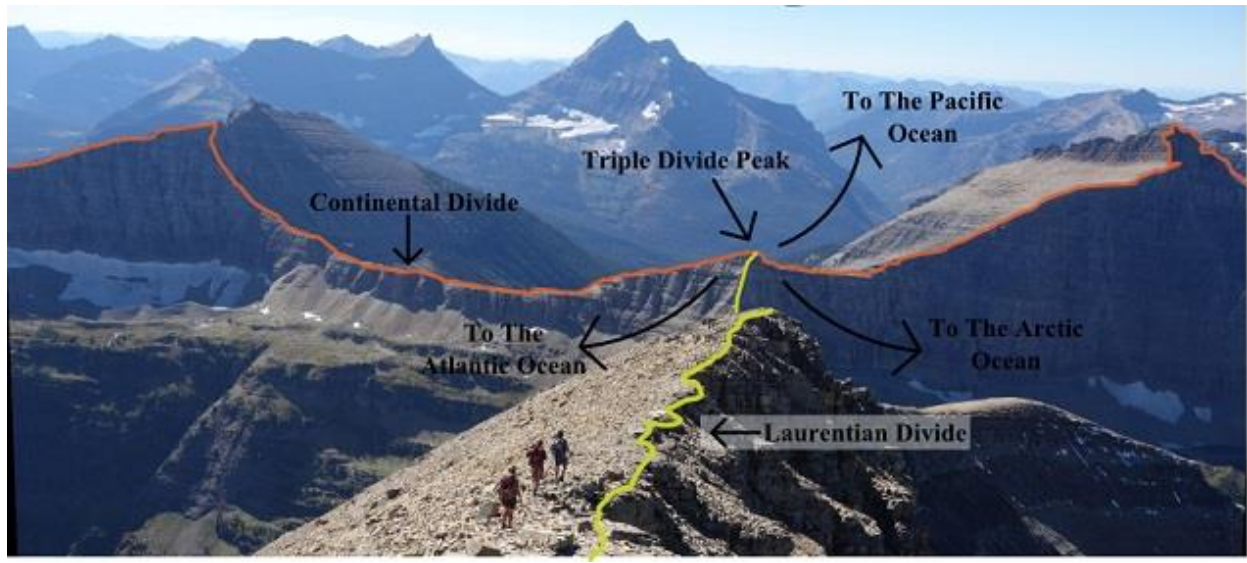
The Great Continental Divide begins at Cape Prince of Wales in the Bering Sea, Alaska, the westernmost point on the mainland of the Americas. The Divide crosses northern Alaska into the Yukon, Canada, then zig-zags south into British Columbia via the Cassiar Mountains and Omineca Mountains and northern Nechako Plateau to Summit Lake, north of the city of Prince George and just south of the community of McLeod Lake. From there the Divide traverses the McGregor Plateau to the spine of the Rockies, following the crest of the Canadian Rockies southeast to the 120th meridian west, from there forming the boundary between southern British Columbia and southern Alberta.



Canada

The Divide crosses into the United States in northwestern Montana, at the boundary between Waterton Lakes National Park, southern Alberta, Canada, and Glacier National Park, Montana. Further south, the Divide forms the backbone of the Rocky Mountain Front in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, heads south towards Helena and Butte, then west past the namesake community of Divide, Montana, through the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness to the Bitterroot Range, where it forms the eastern third of the state boundary between Idaho and Montana.

Triple Divide Peak in Glacier National Park, Montana, is the point where two of the principal continental divides in North America converge, the Great Continental Divide and the Northern or Laurentian Divide. From this point, waters flow to the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean via the Gulf of Mexico, and the Arctic Ocean via Hudson Bay. Most geographers, geologists, meteorologists, and oceanographers consider this point the hydrological apex of North America, as Hudson Bay is generally considered part of the Arctic.



Triple Divide Peak

Let me explain this triple divide point in simple terms most of my readers can fully understand. First of all, you need to hike up to the top of Triple Divide Peak and stand in the designated spot. Get your compass out and face west, take a drink of water and spit – your saliva will eventually make its way to the Pacific Ocean. Now turn around and face east, take a big drink of water and spit – your saliva will eventually take its way to the Atlantic Ocean via the Gulf of Mexico. Lastly, face north, drink more water and spit – your saliva will end up in the Arctic Ocean via Hudson Bay. Got it??

The Divide crosses into Wyoming within Yellowstone National Park and continues southeast into Colorado where it reaches its highest point in North America at the summit of Grays Peak at 14,278 feet.



Yellowstone National Park



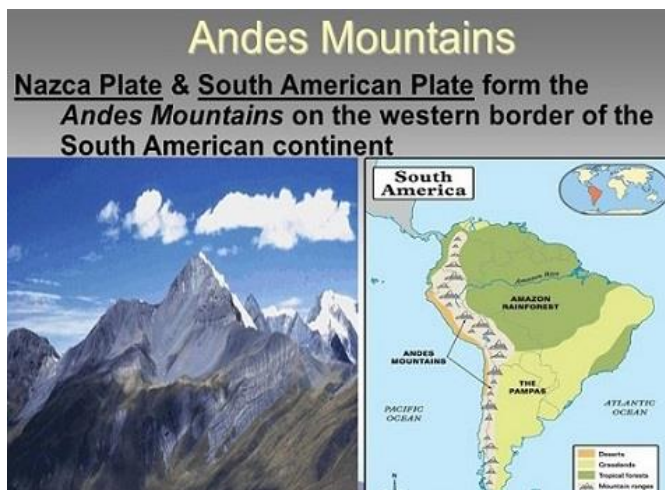
Grays Peak

Independence Pass (header picture for this article) is a high mountain pass in the Rocky Mountains of central Colorado. It is at elevation 12,095 feet on the Great Continental Divide in the Sawatch Range. The pass is midway between Aspen and Twin Lakes, on the border between Pitkin and Lake counties. State Highway 82 traverses it, in the process of reaching the highest elevation of a paved Colorado state highway.

It crosses US Highway 160 in southern Colorado at Wolf Creek Pass, where a line symbolizes the division. The Divide then proceeds south into western New Mexico, passing along the western boundary of the endorheic Plains of San Agustin (An endorheic basin is a limited drainage basin that normally retains water and allows no outflow to other external bodies of water). Although the Divide represents the height of land between watersheds, it does not always follow the highest ranges/peaks within each state or province.

In Mexico, the Great Continental Divide passes through the Sovereign States of Chihuahua, Durango, Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Querétaro, México, the Federal District, Morelos, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Chiapas.

In Central America, the divide continues through southern Guatemala, southwestern Honduras, western Nicaragua, western/southwestern Costa Rica, and southern Panama. The divide reaches its lowest point in Central America at the Isthmus of Rivas at 154 feet in Nicaragua.



Aconcagua with an elevation of 22,837 feet is the highest mountain in both the Southern and Western Hemispheres

The Divide continues into South America, where it follows the peaks of the Andes Mountains, traversing western Colombia, central Ecuador, western and

southwestern Peru, and eastern Chile (essentially conforming to the Chile-Bolivia and Chile-Argentina boundaries), southward to the southern end of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Finally, the divide ends at the Strait of Magellan on the southern tip of South America.



Some Statistics

The Great Continental Divide is 13,340 miles long. Here is the breakdown:

Alaska	960 miles
Canada	2600 miles
Mainland US	2400 miles
Mexico	2000 miles
Central America	880 miles
South America	4500 miles

More Information about Continental Divides

A continental divide is a naturally occurring boundary or ridge separating a continent's river systems. Each river system feeds into a distinct ocean basin, bay, or sea. No real river ever crosses over a continental divide.

Continental divides are broad, continent-wide example of drainage divides, sometimes just called divides. Divides are boundaries that separate drainage basins or watersheds of all sizes. Drainage divides, regardless of scale, occur in raised terrain such as mountain ranges or hills.

Generally, precipitation that falls on one side of the divide will flow to one basin and precipitation that falls on the other side will flow to another basin. In some cases, water runs toward an endorheic basin, such as a saline lake or salt flat. Endorheic basins, which do not connect to an ocean or other large body of water, usually occur in desert areas. Much of the Sahara Desert in Africa, for example, is an endorheic

basin. This means that rivers and streams that flow into Lake Chad, on the edge of the Sahara, have no outlet to either the Mediterranean Sea or the Atlantic or Indian Oceans.

Continental divides are found on every continent. Continents that are bordered by more than two bodies of water may have more than one continental divide. For example, North America has six divides.

Some continental divides span multiple continents. For example, the Great Continental Divide runs through much of North and South America. It separates the water that runs toward the Pacific Ocean from the water that runs toward the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans and the Gulf of Mexico.

Feel like taking a scenic road trip?

Well, the Pan-American Highway is a network of roads measuring about 25,000 miles in total length. It “loosely” follows the Great Continental Divide. Except for a rainforest break of approximately 80 miles, called the Darién Gap in Panama, the road links almost all of the Pacific coastal countries of the Americas in a connected highway system. According to Guinness World Records, the Pan-American Highway is the world's longest "motorable road".



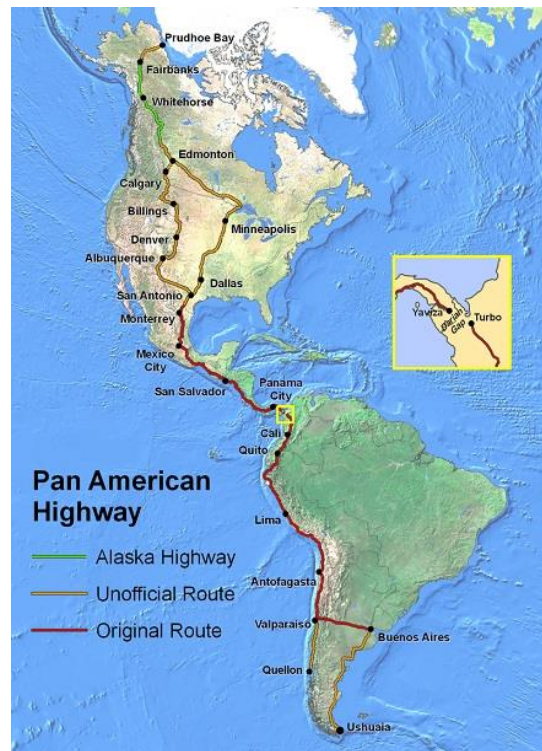
Pan American Highway - Mexico



Pan American Highway - Ecuador

However, because of the Darién Gap, it is not possible to cross between South America and Central America with conventional highway vehicles. Without an all-terrain vehicle, it is necessary to circumnavigate this terrestrial stretch by sea. They have a boat for your car. The Pan-American Highway passes through many diverse climates and ecological types, from dense jungles, to arid deserts, to barren tundra, some of which are passable only during the dry season, and in many regions, driving can be hazardous.

Let's stock up on beer and take your car.



How about a Nice Little Hike?

Just in case you are a “health nut” and enjoy hiking, there is the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail that runs from Canada along the Great Continental Divide mountains all the way to Mexico.



Only about two hundred people a year hike the entire trail (3100 miles) that takes most hikers between two and six months to complete. Actually, a large majority of hikers who attempt it, don't make it. Fortunately, there are many shorter hikes along the trail for people who don't have months of free time for hiking in the mountains.

There are a few expert hikers who have hiked from Mexico to Canada and back to Mexico (or vice versa) on one long hike. In 2007, Francis Tapon became the first person to do a round backpacking trip "yo-yo" on the Continental Divide Trail when he hiked from Mexico to Canada and back to Mexico - he needed seven months to finish this journey that spanned over 5,600 miles. Tapon took the longer more scenic, high, difficult, and dangerous route north and while returning south on the more expedient easier route.

Sorry, I will pass on hiking the Continental Divide Trail. Now days, I get tired just walking my dog around the block.



The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail

There are thousands of lakes, rivers, and streams on both sides of the Great Continental Divide especially in Alaska, Canada, and mainland US. Instead of that long motor vehicle drive or hike, I would love to do some trout fishing in the mountains near the divide.

Just the other night I had this dream where I was up in the mountains sitting on a flat rock next to this quiet little lake. My hook was baited with some cheese and cast out into the middle of the lake. My fishing pole is leaning against a forked stick stuck in the mud next to the shore. I have a cup of hot coffee in my hand and there is a cooler close by which I'm pretty sure contains cold water and beer. I'm in no hurry to go any place and truth be known, I'm not in any hurry to catch a fish. At this moment, I'm more concerned about figuring out the meaning of life. I'm surely not worried about work or the many world problems. As the sun peaks over the top of the pine trees, I can feel the warmth of its rays as I stand up to stretch my legs and remove my jacket. It is a beautiful day and I look across the lake just in time to see three deer run across the opening into the trees. I can just feel my stress and blood pressure going down to its lowest level since high school and I haven't felt this good in years. After a while I give up trying to solve the meaning of life and come to the conclusion that fishing is the most relaxing and healthy activity known to man.

About this time, my dog jumps up on my bed to lick my face and wake me up – it is back to reality and the daily rat race.

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