

London Sightseer

An audax through the streets of London? If you'd dismissed city cycling for pleasure, organiser **Bill Carnaby** shows you something to make you change your mind

(Clockwise from above) Tower Bridge, Hyde Park, The Mall, the Gherkin, the London Eye, and the riverside at Richmond. If you want to explore the capital, forget the tube: take your bike

Get away from its busy thoroughfares and cycling in London ceases to be about jostling for space with buses and taxis. It becomes instead an absorbing mix of green parks, quiet backstreets, riverside vistas and layer upon layer of history. I've enjoyed cycling in the capital for years and devised the London Sightseer 100k randonee back in 2002 to show it to other cyclists.

The last several hundred years have left London with a network of small streets that are ideal for exploring by bike. Together with the numerous parks and the Thames, they form the basis of the route. It starts in Hampton Hill, which has the benefit of unrestricted parking and good local rail connections. Plus it's where I live!

The ride heads along the Thames path from Twickenham to Richmond, and then to Old Isleworth, where old scruffy boatyards and fancy apartments sit by the river next to the London Apprentice pub. Then you ride through Syon Park, with its summer wildflowers and grazing cattle.

Hammersmith is next. Most people see only the Great West Road as they head out of London but just 50 metres away you can take a quiet river path with lovely pubs and wonderful views of the river to Hammersmith Bridge. Heading into Central London through quiet back streets, you emerge at Kensington Gardens and follow the cycle path in Hyde Park past the Princess Diana Memorial Garden and the Albert Memorial to Hyde Park Corner.

If you arrive at around 11.30 they will be changing the guard as you pass Buckingham Palace. The next part is busiest of the route: you take in Trafalgar Square, the Strand, Fleet Street and Ludgate Hill with a wonderful view as you ride up to St Paul's Cathedral. You can use the bus lanes here, continuing into the City and across Bank to Leadenhall Street. Lord Rogers' Lloyd's Building is on the right and Lord Foster's 30 St Mary Axe – known popularly as the Gherkin – on the left.

A few twisty and cobbled streets later you are at Tower Bridge. This is the old Pool of London and it was said that you could once cross the river here by walking from ship to ship. You are on your way to the most modern part of London: Docklands and Canary Wharf, via the cobbled Wapping High Street. All the old warehouses have been converted into loft apartments but you can still get a feel of what it must have been like in Dickens's day.

There is a great view downriver to Docklands from the almost deserted Thames Path here. Next is Canary Wharf where, across the river, you get your first view of the Millennium Dome, or O2 as it is known now. In the audax event, there's a control at the Island Gardens Café.

To cross the river you use the Greenwich Foot Tunnel, which was built in 1902 to enable shipyard workers from south of the river to get to work on the Isle of Dogs. On the other side, you ascend the hill to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park and the best view in all London, looking up and down the Thames.

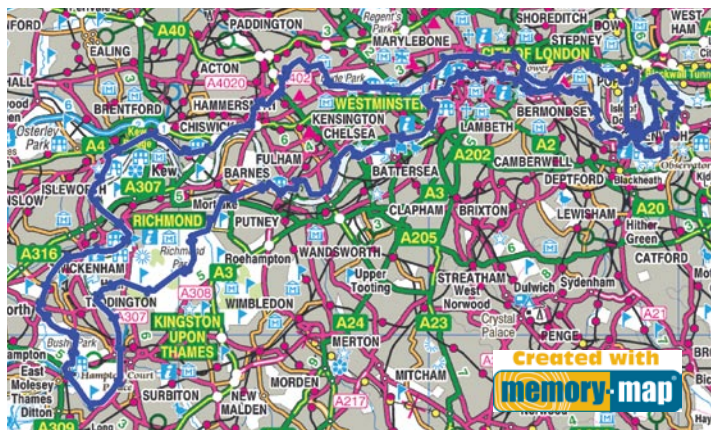


“The Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park offers the best view of London”

Rejoining the river, you ride past the O2 Arena and head back to Greenwich. From here you get a sense of London as the major port it used to be as you pass a whole series of boat-filled docks, wharves and quays in Deptford and Bermondsey to regain the Thames Path by Tower Bridge and the WWII cruiser, HMS Belfast.

You can't cycle any further beside the river, so take to London's cycle routes to pass behind the Tate Modern, the South Bank Centre and the London Eye to Westminster Bridge. Crossing to Parliament Square you pass under Big Ben and pass by Westminster Abbey to reach the Embankment.

Now you can stop navigating and do some steady pedalling along the Embankment to Battersea Park and then through Chelsea to Putney and its boathouses, which border the river where the Boat Race starts. Then it's beautiful Richmond Park, Teddington Lock and the river path to Hampton Court Palace with its two distinct architectural styles favoured by Cardinal Wolsey and William III. Finally you cross Bushey Park to finish in Hampton Hill.



Fact File London Sightseer

- DISTANCE:** 60 miles/100km **TIME:** 6-10 hours for the audax.
- TERRAIN:** Flat, mostly quiet back streets (some cobbled), river and park paths but some busy streets.
- WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR:** Two cities, eight parks, thirteen bridges, five palaces, two cathedrals, three markets, three historic ships, four art galleries, two concert halls, world class architecture, docks, canals, a tunnel and countless other attractions.
- WHEN:** In 2010, the London Sightseer 100k Audax is on Wednesday 30th June and Sunday 5th September. Contact billcarnaby@blueyonder.co.uk
- MAPS:** Transport for London Local Cycling Guides nos. 7 and 10. London A-Z.
- BIKE:** Any but recumbent trikes will have to be carried in places.
- START/FINISH:** Hampton Hill, Middlesex, TW12 1NP (OS Landranger 176 TQ715145).
- GETTING TO THE START:** The nearest stations are Fullwell and Teddington both reached from Waterloo. Nearest tube is Richmond.
- ROUTE DIRECTIONS:** The full instructions would take pages. You need the audax route card, which event entrants get, or the CTC Route Sheet ES2 from www.ctc-maps.org.uk