

LONG DISTANCE



“Even riding 400 miles in 40 hours is not a cardiovascular struggle for a reasonably fit cyclist”

You don't need to be super-fit to do long audax or sportive rides. You just need to look after yourself. **Dan Farrell** extends your comfort zone

Miles better



(Above) Dan, with favourite Fizik Aliante saddle and Spenco mitts
(Left) Ride on: 600 miles into the Paris-Brest-Paris

'Have you ridden this before?' asked the Paris-Brest-Paris veteran beside me as I pedalled out of Paris. I confessed that I was a rookie at this distance (1,200km) and, in training, had done the minimum required to qualify. 'At least you'll be comfortable,' he said, nodding at Moulton I was riding. 'And if you stay comfortable then long rides are like short rides – just longer.' He disappeared into the darkness with a wave, leaving me with his wise words and another 1,175 kilometres to ride.

There has always been a certain romanticism about long-distance travel, and road cycling is its perfect companion. A rewarding combination of physical effort, self-reliance and the journey, the scenery, the people... cycle touring has always encompassed all of these qualities. Audax and sportive rides skew the experience towards physical endurance, and a single day can provide the whole range of cycling emotions.

Cycle tourists and club cyclists are often used to distances of up to one hundred miles, but moving up into the longer audax distances can seem daunting. Riding 400 miles in 40 hours, whilst not to be undertaken lightly, is not a cardiovascular struggle for a reasonably fit cyclist. The difficulty is in staying comfortable on the bike as you pedal for mile after mile. Niggles that may be minor irritants on short rides can turn into long distance nightmares, so it's important to get the basics of comfort right.

Even if you're building up more slowly, extending your riding distance from 30 miles to 50 or 60, the advice here should still be useful.

The backside: saddles and shorts

Possibly the most discussed (and complained about) part of the bicycle, the saddle supports over half of your weight via some of your most sensitive tissue. Saddle choice is very personal but there is some consensus amongst riders: you'll see plenty of Brooks leather saddles on audax rides. I've spent many years on a Brooks Swift and hold it in high regard, but my current favourite is the Fizik Aliante.

Riders who spend many hours in the saddle will find firm saddles most comfortable. Soft saddles allow more heat to build up, leading to irritation and sores. Don't just look at the top of the saddle; titanium rails save weight,

and comfort is improved due to the extra compliance in the saddle frame. Whilst the jury is still out on the subject of holes in saddles, I have tried several and remain firmly in the 'no hole' camp.

Between you and the saddle are your cycling shorts or tights – and nothing else. These have a tough job dealing with sweat, bacteria, heat build up and chafing, especially on rides over 200km. Wear good quality Lycra bib shorts with a synthetic pad. A snug fit is required to keep everything in place. With age, seat pads become thin and Lycra loses its elasticity, so don't keep them for years, and use a new-ish pair for long distances. Don't wash them with biological detergents. Do use Napisan or an equivalent to kill all the bacteria when washing. Every 50 miles or so, clean yourself using antiseptic wipes on your derriere and apply a cream – my favourite is Sudocrem – to help prevent sores and rashes appearing. If they do occur, apply Germolene.

Heat build up can be a real problem and can be alleviated by the use of a firm saddle (preferably leather) and taking advantage of every opportunity to get out of the saddle whilst climbing.

Male or female, you'll feel much more comfortable without the constriction of a waistband, which is why I'd advise wearing bib shorts or bib tights. I used to have a pair of bib tights with a loose elastic waistband and, suffering with nausea on the second day of London-Edinburgh-London, I cut the cord and immediately felt better. The inconvenience of the bib (answering calls of nature is a pain – on cold days put one of your top layers under the bib so you won't have to take everything off) is hugely outweighed by the improved comfort that they offer. Women do need female-specific bibs, with a higher cut at the front or strategically positioned straps.

The hands: handlebars and mitts

Dropped handlebars allow many hand positions, on the bar itself and on the hoods, and really are a must for distance riding. The traditional way of increasing handlebar padding is by using two – or even three – layers of cork tape, and this has much to recommend it. More recent innovations include cork tape with gel, or thick gel strips under the handlebar tape.

'Tri-bars' offer another position, and were used in the Race Across America before Greg Lemond's famous Tour de France victory thrust them into the limelight. In the RAAM their primary purpose was to relieve the wrists and hands from rider weight, which can be a great benefit on longer rides. Control of the bike is affected so tri-bars



(Above) Back on the road on a summer's evening. Sensible bike, sensible kit

should not be used in a group – and are banned from rides like Paris-Brest-Paris. It is possible to ride long distances with a straight handlebar and bar ends, maybe with tri-bars, but in my experience, shallow drops (shallow so that the transition between 'tops' and 'drops' is not severe) are the best way to go.

Track mitts are essential, both to relieve pressure on the hands and to wipe the sweat from your brow. They must fit snugly. Look for an area of towelling on the back and a decently thick layer of padding (like shorts, mitt pads compress with age). Avoid mitts with bulky, overlapping layers of leather at the ends of the fingers. Spenco Ironman Elite mitts are fantastic but are difficult to find in the UK.

The feet: pedals and shoes

Whilst SPD pedals are ubiquitous on longer audax events, the small contact surface demands the use of stiff-soled shoes. Sidi shoes fit the bill and are popular: the MTB versions having curved, stiff soles like road shoes but deep treads for walking safely. Try shoes for size very carefully before buying, as a good fit is vital.

Having had knee troubles for a couple of years I switched to Time Atac pedals. The lateral float has been beneficial and they are proving to be more durable. Allow your feet to breathe – take your shoes off at controls. Racing pedals and shoes are ideal for sportive events as they offer more foot support for the energetic rider.

Bike choice and riding position

Whilst the contact points are often the immediate cause of discomfort, a poor riding position is both uncomfortable and inefficient. It is quite easy to set this up yourself using guides such as the one on www.competitivecyclist.com or in books such as 'The Long Distance Cyclists' Handbook' (by Simon Doughty). Alternatively, good cycle shops can do this, sometimes using sophisticated tools such as Cyclefit.

If the suggested 'ideal' position is significantly different from your current riding position, it is wise to make adjustments gradually rather than in one hit. Bear in mind that a formulaic method of calculating a riding position will not result in a perfect fit for everyone. It should give a good starting point upon which further minor adjustments can be made. When you do have your position set, mark it (tape around the seatpost etc.) and keep a record of it, especially if you have to partially dismantle your bike to transport it to events.

On sportive rides, the popular choice of steed is a lightweight road-racing bicycle in aluminium, carbon fibre or titanium, usually running a compact double crankset, no mudguards and 23mm tyres. Fast and light, these are ideal for blasting out a century (100 miles) in six or seven hours. They make few concessions to comfort: the idea is to get around the course as fast as possible.

Audax events of 300km and upwards dictate long hours in the saddle, and a typical long distance mount – the 'audax' or 'fast touring' bike – will have a longer wheelbase, 28mm or larger section tyres (these offer more shock absorption than narrower tyres), full mudguards and lower gears.

Aluminium frames are necessarily built with large section tubes and hence have an unyielding ride, so titanium and steel are more popular choices. All but the

"A lot of gear can be shared with friends riding together. If you do this, label the Sudocrem pots!"



At the start of the London-Edinburgh-London (above), and feeling the hills at Castle Howard during the LEL (above right)



very fit will need low gears in hilly country, because a gradient that might be breezed up on the big ring on a 50-miler is an altogether different proposition after 200 miles, particularly in the early hours when your body may be complaining that you should really be asleep rather than out on a bike.

High gears and speeds can be exhilarating but don't push it: your leg muscles (and knees) won't thank you for it. Equipped with a 120-inch top gear I once had great fun overtaking tandems on sweeping descents during a Scottish 600km. I paid for it: my hamstrings made me most uncomfortable for the final 200km.

Diamond frame road or audax bikes aren't the only option. Ride a few of the longer events and you'll probably come across a couple of alternatives, both of which can offer increased comfort. I ride a Moulton. The riding position mirrors a classic bicycle, but it is distinctive by virtue of its tubular space-frame construction, small wheels and – crucially – its unobtrusive front and rear suspension. This absorbs road shock well, improving comfort and reducing fatigue.

The other 'wild card' is of a different genre: the recumbent bicycle (or tricycle). As the rider is seated in a chair rather than perched on a saddle, the high-pressure contact points are largely eliminated both for the backside and the hands. The riding experience is very different from an upright bicycle and a period of acclimatisation is required to tone new muscle groups and learn how to handle such a machine.

Keeping comfortable

No cyclist is comfortable grinding out the miles in the rain with cramped legs, an empty stomach, cracked lips and heavy eyelids. Warmth, hydration, nutrition and recuperation are all crucial in order to keep you going as



Audax essentials

Stuff that Dan doesn't ride without.

FOR LONG DAY RIDES

- Bottles & energy drink powder (in 'bottle-dose' bags)
- Lip balm
- Sudocrem and wipes
- Indigestion & Ibuprofen tablets
- Money
- Bonk rations
- Tool kit (inc. tyre boot)
- Map
- Sunglasses & cotton cap
- Lightweight windproof/waterproof top
- Route sheet (in waterproof bag) on handlebar
- Tools, two tubes, high-pressure pump

FOR LONGER DISTANCES

- Lights (front + 2 rears)
- Small head torch (useful for following the route sheet, repairs, and also an emergency front light)
- Reflective belt
- Deep Heat rub and Germolene (not to be mixed up!)
- Wet wipes
- Caffeine tablets
- Warm clothing, including hat & gloves
- Folding tyre
- Foil 'space blanket'

Carry this gear on the bike, not on your back. It looks a lot, but much of it can be shared between friends riding together. If you do this, it is wise to label Sudocrem pots!



(Above) Sometimes you have to stop, even if it's only for a little while

the miles slowly mount up.

Keep warm – especially the knees, thighs and lower back. I'm often wearing bib-knickers (3/4 length tights) rather than shorts well into the summer months. It's also a good idea to do stretching exercises before and during rides. Carry a light waterproof. Riding in the rain for 15 hours is no fun at all. For overnight rides, pack a windproof jacket, tights (or at least leg-warmers), warm gloves and a hat. Even in mid-August temperatures can drop to near zero overnight.

Keep drinking – particularly on hot days. I like to keep one bottle of water and one of energy drink on the bike. Be aware of mineral loss. My GP warned me years ago that endurance athletes eat far too little salt – Gatorade has a special 'Endurance' formula to combat this. In the absence of anything more technical I'll have Iron-Bru in my second bottle: sugar, taurine, caffeine and quinine all help to keep me going.

Keep eating – little and often is the maxim here. I've seen riders with watches set to chime every 15 minutes to remind them to eat. That may be extreme but it's preferable to a three-course meal every five hours. Keep some easy-to-eat food with you on the bike. Fig rolls are my favourite.

On events stretching over more than a day, the body has to deal with a dramatic increase in calorific intake so try to eat the 'right' foods – pasta, mashed potatoes, rice pudding, and porridge are all good – but anything is much better than nothing. Indigestion can be a problem so avoid acidic foods and keep some tablets in your kit.

Stay awake – but sleep if you need to. It is quite possible to ride 600 kilometres without sleeping, but most riders will cat-nap either at controls or by the roadside. Don't risk falling asleep whilst riding. On multi-day events, sleep deprivation can be a real problem and you'll need some proper sleep, but do try and ride through the first night on the road.

Keep going, and remember: if you stay comfortable, long rides are like short rides – just longer!

For more information about Audax riding, including the London-Edinburgh-London that takes place this summer, visit www.audax.uk.net. For information about CTC's series of three sportive rides, visit www.ctc.org.uk/challengerides or phone 0844 736 8450.

Mile-eaters recommend it

We asked experienced distance riders to recommend one thing that made their riding more comfortable.

- Brooks B17 saddle
- Tri-bars
- Recumbent trike
- Selle SMP Pro saddle
- Assos chamois cream – aka bum cream



- Specialized Phenom saddle – allows both speed and comfort
- Small Topeak top tube bag – handy for fig rolls and jelly babies without having to stop

- Brooks B17N saddle
- Marsas tape and gel gloves
- A recumbent bicycle
- Cannondale Scalpel 2000 mountain bike



– I used this full-suspension lightweight racing XC bike a few years back and have not looked back

- SPD sandals – self-bailing footwear for soggy cyclists
- Raising the handlebars a couple of centimetres
- Specialized 'Bar Phat' gel and bar tape



- Sealskin waterproof socks
- Cut your toe nails!
- Brooks Swift Saddle with titanium rails
- A titanium frame
- A correctly fitted bike
- Route sheet holder – reduces the need to stop
- Marsas handlebar padding
- ITM Marathon drop bars



Thanks to everyone from the Audax UK mailing list who replied. Ride long and happy!

Sidebar photos by manufacturers & CTC