



Going the distance

Why do cyclists sign up to ride 600km?

Ross Bentley-Davies examines the psychology of audax

It's 2 a.m. and I'm cycling down a gravel-strewn lane, unsure if I'm even heading in the right direction. The routesheet is hard to read through the rain and that may or may not have been the left turn I was looking for back there in the dark. Something hurts, but I'm doing my best to block it out. It isn't even the same thing that hurt earlier in the afternoon. My riding partner, I've forgotten his name, is maintaining an inane monologue. I don't mind; it's helping to keep me awake.

I don't question why I'm doing it. I'm sure that if I found myself asking questions like that in the middle of the night then I'd pull over and call a taxi to take me home. But it's certainly hard to explain to other people why I put myself through it. Most people struggle to visualise how far 600km actually is. 'I wouldn't even drive that far,' they might say. And if you explain that it involves cycling all night they simply glaze over. It's incomprehensible.

There will be those who tell you that they do audaxing because they love riding round beautiful countryside and they enjoy the camaraderie that the non-competitive nature of the events creates. But if that were all we wanted, then a 200km audax would give a nice day out. Why go further than that?

For a lucky few, a 600km audax is a breeze. For the rest of us, pain is inevitable. I enter these things knowing that they're going to hurt, that there'll be at least a couple of hours in the event when I will be totally not enjoying it. So why enter them at all?

It's worth looking elsewhere to see if we can find some clues – somewhere like Antarctica. Research suggests that the stress and trauma associated with extreme conditions can have benefits. One study of American Navy personnel who overwintered in the Antarctic compared them with colleagues who had also volunteered but who didn't end up going. They found that those who had endured the bleak polar winter were healthier and more



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successful than the colleagues who didn't go.

Those who survive extreme situations evidently emerge with an increased sense of self-esteem and self-awareness, particularly so those who intentionally seek out those situations. That boost can be addictive.

And so back to audax: we put ourselves through difficult challenges because we know that when we've done them we'll feel good about ourselves.

When you listen closely to the stories of experienced audaxers, you realise that they're reminiscing not about pleasant events but about events that made a difference to them because they were hard: the one where their derailleur broke half way round and they finished the ride with one gear; the one where they were so tired that they discovered that sleeping on warm pavement at the end of a sunny day isn't as bad as it sounds; or the one where it rained all day and all night with a headwind in both directions...

In this particular night's rain, I'm grinding my way up another hill and trying not to think about how far I have to go. Just concentrate on keeping moving! I'm having a bad patch. It's okay, though, because I've ridden through patches like this before and I know I'll feel fine later on. Maybe I'll just take a catnap in a bus shelter or eat that Snickers bar in my rack-pack? Or even just savour the joy of cycling through beautiful scenery as the dawn breaks? I know there'll still be a good stretch of this audax when I'll be thoroughly enjoying riding it.

And, of course, the more it hurts now, the better I'll feel about having overcome the challenge when I finish.

For more about audax riding, see audax.uk.net