

FEATURE
*London-
Edinburgh-
London*



WORDS PATRICK FIELD

A LONG DISTANCE CALLING

The four-yearly, 1400km London-Edinburgh-London audax returns this summer. Event veteran **Patrick Field** explains what it's like – and how to join in

It's the fifth and final day of London-Edinburgh-London 2009, and I'm riding on tight, tree-lined Lincolnshire lanes. Conditions are, finally, ideal. The first 100 hours have included prolonged, headwind storms in the north country. I'm feeling pretty jaded. Sleep time has been minimal and nodding-off in the warm afternoon is a risk, or would be if the weather wasn't offering a dramatic remedy.

Every hour or so, a freezing shower, hard rain or hail, blows in across the level landscape. There's no need to change or add clothes. Even during a chill soaking you can see the fine summer day close behind. The rains aren't just a bracing wake-up. The cyclic sequence – observation, anticipation, precipitation, steaming evaporation – offers a whole extra level of entertainment.

After days of concentrating only on immediate problems, with no need to ponder the scale of the whole, mighty endeavour, covering the remaining 100 kilometres to enjoy a successful finish, finally

begins to feel possible. I feel optimistic, not complacent.

RIDING INTO THE NIGHT

Showers relent as we push on to delightful, well-surfaced Cambridgeshire B-roads. Rides like this are something like debauched parties. At the start, almost everyone is well groomed and smartly turned out, eyes bright with excitement. As things progress, you meet folk looking the worse for wear and must ask yourself: 'Do I look as rough as them?' Some of us in the groups that form, dissolve and reform under blue skies and towering clouds come into this category, but all give an impression of good spirits. Morale is almost everything.

As part of my preparation for this trip, I'd spent a long day, a month before, following the route from the Humber back to London. Although I couldn't remember it exactly, I recalled the trickiest details. At a similar stage in 2005, I'd spent a frustrating quarter of an hour trying to find the right road >

“IT’S A MISTAKE TO STOP TOO SOON – AND WORSE TO KEEP GOING TOO LONG”

out of St Neots. This time I was able to pilot an Anglo-German grupetto through the old market town with calm confidence.

Sleep deprivation renders you receptive as a new-born. Deep fatigue – tiredness beyond being merely tired – allows a strange detachment. Turning the pedals seems effortless. Moving is easier than being still. Smooth tarmac, pleasant company – old friends, new friends, international guests – sharing a simple mission, bonded by collective experience and mutual respect.

1400KM NON-STOP... AT 12KM/H

The non-competitive, reliability ride format of LEL is derived from the classic Paris-Brest-Paris. To join the list of successful finishers, you need only maintain a minimum average speed and finish within the time limit. There’s also a maximum speed – which defends the organisers against any charge that they’re holding a race on public roads – but for almost all participants that’s academic. In this branch of cycle-sport, the cliché that second place is ‘first loser’ doesn’t apply. Everyone wins.

LEL is 200km longer than PBP and has a more generous time limit. To pass the test, you need to average a mere 12 kilometres per hour. If you can manage an average road speed in the high teens, you’ll have a little spare time for eating and sleeping. There are controls around every 50 miles, usually based in village halls or schools, where you must get your card stamped, as proof you passed through. Also at the controls are cheerful volunteers who minister to your needs, feed you, even check your bike if you ask. Most of the controls have showers and basic sleeping facilities: a bed, a blanket and, crucially, an alarm call.

You can ride fast – road speed in the mid-twenties km/h – and sleep well each night. If you want to record a fast time, you can ride fast and sleep a minimum. Those who move more slowly must rise early and press on late into the night. What you can’t do is ride slowly and sleep long. You need to be in good health and have a minimum level of conditioning but the test can be as much of efficiency and determination as fitness.

The slower speed demand of LEL doesn’t mean it’s easier than PBP. The higher volume of riders on the French ride, direction arrows on every junction, and villages ‘en fête’ help to sweep you along on a wave of enthusiasm. LEL is lonelier: you have to find your own way from a cue sheet and take much more responsibility for your own motivation. International riders expecting a 900-mile street party may be disappointed, but this year’s edition has the added glamour of an



In the photos
 1 Groups form and dissolve on the road
 2 Author Patrick Field on his Burrows Ratcatcher
 3 Descending out of the mist near Barnard Castle
 4 There are controls every 50 miles or so
 5 Setting off, it’s easy to ride too quickly
 6 American riders climbing Yad Moss

LEL BY NUMBERS

- The planned route is **1418 kilometres (881 miles)**.
- The first LEL was in **1989**. It runs every four years.
- LEL 7 starts on **28 July** and continues for almost five days.
- You don’t need to qualify.
- LEL 2013 has a maximum of **750 places**. In 2009, **530** riders started so there *may* still be spaces. Check here: londonedinburghlondon.com/enter
- Take part without riding by working as a volunteer: londonedinburghlondon.com/volunteer
- The entry fee is **£219**. At controls food, drink, showers and towels, beds, blankets and earplugs, and the labour on any bike repairs, will be provided at no further cost.
- The event homepage is londonedinburghlondon.com
- There are lots of shorter audax rides. Visit www.aukweb.net





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› optional 'prologue' ride taking in the sights of central London early on the morning of the start from the north eastern suburb of Loughton. There's also a new turning point slightly nearer the centre of Edinburgh, and the grandeur of a crossing of the Humber Bridge.

PUSHING YOURSELF FURTHER

If you're tempted to try LEL this year (and there are still places available at time of writing), you need to start planning now. All you need do by way of training is get out and ride your bike. The knowledge that a big test is coming puts you out on the road when, without the deadline, you may be tempted to draw the curtains.

It's good to ride at least one 600-kilometre audax in the run-up to the event, to investigate how you react to little or no sleep. If you're lucky, some of your preparatory rides will take place in 'bad' weather. Anyone can do it when the sun is shining. Cold, rain, or howling headwinds are chances to test your reliability.

If LEL is already booked-up, or you're not sure you'd enjoy that kind of challenge, or you don't think there's enough time to get yourself seasoned for such an epic, why not sign up to volunteer at a control? You'll get to see the excitement, the drama, the comedy of the event from the inside and get a better idea of whether to aim for LEL 8 in July 2017?

The point of an abstract challenge like LEL is that, aside from being a lovely ride, its discipline takes your riding to a new level. Your entry represents a contract that can only be fulfilled by physical effort, mental fortitude and skill as a cycle-traveller, not just riding but managing your welfare throughout. In the words of Paul Fournel, author of *Need for the Bike*: 'When the decision to speed up or slow down doesn't belong to you any more, you become a different cyclist.' ☼



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In the photos
7 Near the Samye Ling temple (a control) at Eskdalemuir
8 On the road between Thorne and Coxwold, enjoying some sun

GOING THE DISTANCE

Fail to plan, plan to fail. A little preparation will go a long way.

TRAINING

The simplest programme is:-

1. Go for a bike ride.
2. Rest and recover.
3. Go for a longer ride.
4. Keep repeating steps 2 and 3.
5. Get plenty of rest and sleep in the fortnight before the big ride.

works for you. If you're in racing condition, you'll need to keep eating all the time. Comfortably upholstered riders can go further between feeds. Even if you plan to eat at all the controls, carry enough food to graze from in your pockets.

PLANNING

The secret of a successful and an enjoyable ride is preparation. Draft a schedule: when you plan to ride and where to sleep. You may need to be flexible – there are plenty of things you can't control – but if you've got a plan, you can change it.

ON THE ROAD

Resist the temptation to set off too fast, burning energy you may need later. If you find yourself struggling to stay in a group going faster than you can comfortably manage, let them go. Drink before you're thirsty. Eat before you're hungry. Take clothes off before you get hot. Put clothes on before you get cold. Monitor your condition closely and treat any developing problems – blisters, sores, sun-burn etc. – at the first sign.

BIKE

Use exactly the same bike and set-up on which you rode preparatory events. Then you'll be sure you can sit on it for extended periods. Get a full service, new tyres, brake pads and transmission before the ride, allowing time for a final shake-down of at least 50km. Some of the roads are rough and you may be riding them in the dark, so touring wheels – with at least 32 spokes – are preferred to super-light racing kit. It's worth carrying small non-standard spare parts; a gear hanger, for example. You can get mechanic service at most controls but they probably won't be able to replace anything too specific.

OFF THE ROAD

Approaching controls, make a mental list of what you need to do: mechanical checks, eating, washing, filling bottles, etc. Set a target departure time and try and stick to it. Early on, when riders are still concentrated in larger groups, it may be worth putting a bit of extra effort in during the last few kilometres before a control to creep up the food queue. If you arrive somewhere very busy, consider getting your card stamped, filling your pockets and bouncing back onto the road.

LIGHTING

A system based on a hub dynamo is the most reliable and requires least thinking. A compact battery rear light is a useful back-up. A head-torch is useful for reading directions or road signs, or nighttime punctures.

BAG-DROP

A bag-drop is included in the entry fee. This allows you to send a parcel ahead to a distant control and extract and replace gear. Picking up clean clothes and spare batteries, dropping dirty clothes and exhausted rechargeables means you can carry less.

LUGGAGE

Memorise where everything is stashed. Make sure you've enough capacity to carry all the clothing you might take off if the weather turns hot.

SLEEPING

It's a mistake to stop too soon, while still too excited, and spend time trying to get to sleep in an unfamiliar and less-than-ideally comfortable environment. It's probably worse to keep going too long, getting slower and slower, when a few hours rest would get you back up to a more useful speed. Make sure you put on enough clothes to stay warm before you fall asleep. Ideally, time your sleeping to coincide with the short hours of darkness. You'll always ride faster in the daylight. Carry an alarm so you can nap without oversleeping.

CLOTHING

You need to carry enough to meet any conditions, including taking a roadside cat-nap. Being able to adjust your temperature without stopping is useful. A clean set of socks and underwear each day is good for morale.

EATING

Use your training to find out what kind of fuelling strategy