

stamina; whatever challenge you pick, success will depend on your mindset as much as fitness.

Audax riding

Many riders joke that they're only in it for the sort of home-baked cakes that I had on the Kentish beach, but the strength of the audax community is its willingness to support each other. It's just one of the benefits of a sport that owes everything to volunteers.

The 600-plus events in the Audax UK calendar are created and curated by Cycling UK groups, clubs and individuals. It means there's a rich mix of rides, from shoestring setups with the most basic of logistics to others offering cake-rich control points seemingly staffed by contestants from the Great British Bake Off. Behind them all is a community of cyclists supporting other cyclists.

The volunteer-led nature of audax means that fees are low. Just £6 might buy you an entry to a basic 100km event. Even a longer ride with food provided around the clock rarely costs much more than £30. Events are open to all, although members of Audax UK and Cycling UK are exempt from a £3 temporary membership surcharge. Apart from that, no special licences, insurances or bikes are needed.

Unlike a sportive, routes are not marshalled or signposted. It's up to you on most events to decide how you want to navigate between the control points – although almost everyone follows either the GPX file or turn-by-turn route sheet supplied by the organiser. At the start you are issued with a small card where your arrival at control points is recorded either by a stamp, a receipt from a café or a piece of information such as a pub name.

And that's it. A few last-minute words from the organiser at the start and you're off on an adventure that could last three hours or a couple of days. Along the way, you support yourself. No broom wagon to patch you up or pick you up; just you, the tools and spares you carry, and the kindness of strangers to keep you going. When the puncture fairy finds

you on a crow-black night in Mid Wales, you'll need to fix it yourself – although you'll probably be quickly joined by others keen to help.

A journey into audax

My first 200km ride in 2003 was the start of a slippery slope. We set off on a foggy February morning from a DIY superstore's car park, then posted our finished cards though the organiser's letterbox some hours later. I rode most of the way with a Dutch postie who was over for the ride and a supermarket manager on his day off. I still hear from both of them today.

Within weeks I had signed up for a 300km ride around the New Forest and had decided to buy some proper lights. By the end of the summer I had tackled a 400km event, which introduced me to the benefits of hill climbing in the dark: you don't realise how big it is until you reach the top! There was also a two-day, 600km audax that took me from Milton Keynes to Retford, around the Fens, to a 24-hour café near Mildenhall and back to Milton Keynes via Watling Street.

Liam FitzPatrick with 600km in his legs at the halfway point of Brest on the 2007 edition of PBP



Four years later I found myself in the company of several thousand riders from around the world, all aiming to finish the 1,200km of PBP in under 90 hours. Paris Brest Paris is huge in France: it's spawned its own pastry and gets mentioned on national news.

Yet the rides I remember most are the ones where I turned a corner and saw the vales of England laid out before me, or when a stranger, unasked, handed me his spare rear light, or where I could have a beer in a park by the Thames with a new friend who'd shared my day out around unfamiliar lanes in Kent.

Liam FitzPatrick is the Head of Communications for Audax UK.

How to enter an audax

Rides are listed on the Audax UK website, and online entry is easy. Cycling UK members are exempt from the temporary membership fee, which also covers the insurance needed to ride. Entrants get a turn-by-turn route sheet and a GPX file

No special machine or equipment is needed. As long as it will get you round within the time limit, you're welcome to join in. And don't worry too much about the technical jargon of brevet cards and multiple abbreviations – someone will explain what you need to know when you turn up.

You'll need to fill out a card to prove you have visited the control points. The instructions will tell you whether it's a stamp, a receipt or a piece of information.

Full details at www.audax.uk.

