

Thanks to Matt Haigh for providing this excellent overview of Audaxes and their organisation.

Introduction

An Audax is simply an organised long distance ride, with typical distances between 50km and 1500km.

The idea was formulated in Italy in 1897 – you had to cover 200km in 14 hours, the time between sunrise and sunset. Henri Desgranges (of Tour de France fame) produced the first Audax regulations in 1904, which led to the formation of the Audax Club Parisien (ACP), which continues to this day as the international governing body.

They are not races, but have to be completed at an average speed of (normally) between 15kph and 30kph. If you want to stop to eat or sleep then you need to ride faster than the minimum speed in order to build up a time buffer. The maximum average speed and lack of published finishing times (the finishers lists is in alphabetical order) ensure that they cannot be mistaken for races.

You are given a routesheet and navigate yourself – there are no marshals or route markings. Unlike Sportives, most Audaxes are low-key affairs – 100 riders is considered a good turn out for average events. Some major events – like the 1200km Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP) <http://www.paris-brest-paris.org> – attract riders from all over the world. PBP has around 5,000 entrants, each aiming to complete the 1200km in no more than 90 hours. By comparison, in 2009 the flagship UK event – London-Edinburgh-London (LEL) <http://www.londonedinburghlondon.com> – had 600 riders from 24 countries hoping to complete 1400km in no more than 116 hours. PBP and LEL run every four years, the next PBP is this year (2011) the next LEL is 2013.

Equipment

People ride literally all kinds of bikes on Audaxes. Tourers, carbon fibre racing machines, fixed wheels, recumbents, mountain bikes – one person rode a 300km hilly ride in Wales on a BMX! Steel framed bikes from Thorn or Mercian are common, as are “winter trainers” from companies like Ribble. Comfortable carbon bikes like the Specialized Roubaix are gaining in popularity, whilst full-on racing machines are relatively rare except on shorter (up to 200km) events as they have no luggage capacity and have too unforgiving a ride.

What really matters is being comfortable for long periods in the saddle – which typically means a slightly more upright position than is usual for sporting riders. It isn't uncommon to see the top of handlebars level with the saddle. Tribars are useful for giving an extra position, but are banned on some rides like PBP. Leather Brooks saddles are fitted to about half of the bikes – even those with ultra-light carbon frames.

Up to 200k there is no need to treat the ride any differently to a club run. Any well maintained road bike would do. Carry parts to fix punctures and simple repairs, water bottles and clothing appropriate for the weather. Also remember a pen or pencil – you may have to write information into your brevet card.



You'll be navigating from a routesheet – a typical one is [here](#). Most riders sort out some way of clipping this to the bars, either using a commercial solution like a Maptrap, or something homemade like this bulldog clip attached to the stem.

Many riders will have converted the routesheet to GPX files and be navigating mainly from a GPS, but you don't actually need either of these – you can just stuff the sheet in your jersey pocket (preferably in a plastic bag to stop it disintegrating due to rain or perspiration) or clip it to your gear cables with a bulldog clip if you have Shimano washing lines.

Regular Audaxers tend to use fairly robust tyres in 25 or 28mm sizes rather than lightweight 23mm racing rubber; Continental GP 4 Seasons are the choice of many for a good compromise on weight, puncture resistance and grip in the wet.

Full mudguards are normally fitted – whilst not required for most rides, spending long hours on the bike getting sprayed with dirty water isn't much fun.

Longer rides need more preparation and equipment. You may be riding through the night, so need good quality long lasting lights (hub dynamos are a favourite power source) and warm clothes in addition to the shorts you were wearing in the midday heat. For multiday rides you may well want a complete change of clothes. Bonk rations are important; it can be surprisingly difficult to find even a 24 hour garage during the night in mid-Wales. For this reason traditional Carradice saddlebags are considered essential by most riders as they are waterproof, rugged and more aerodynamic than panniers.



Some long rides (600km+) have drop bag support – you can give a bag to the organiser at the start and it will be taken to the overnight stop for you. Where an overnight stop is provided, they tend to be very basic; a sleeping mat on a village hall floor is usual, though sometimes hostels are used. Hard core Audaxers become used to getting a power nap in bus shelters, motorway service stations and church porches or anywhere else they can lie down. This bus shelter in Maentwrog is well known to Welsh Audaxers, having space for four sleeping cyclists and en-suite toilet facilities. Pure luxury!

(photograph courtesy of Chris Naborough)

Entering Audaxes

You can enter Audaxes without being a member of AUK. You have to have third party insurance in order to join the rides. If you are a member of AUK, British Cycling (silver or above) or CTC then you have that already and only pay the entry fee. If you are not a member of AUK, BC or CTC then you have to pay an additional couple of pounds for insurance cover.

The calendar (<http://www.aukweb.net/events/>) does take a bit of decoding.

There are three main types of event; there is actually little practical difference in how they are run.

Brevet Populaire (BP),

Brevet Randonneur (BR) and

Brevet Randonneur Mondiaux (BRM).

In 2011 there is also an additional code in the calendar, [PBP], which means that that ride is a valid Paris-Brest-Paris qualifier.

BPs are usually less than 200km and can have very relaxed minimum speeds (e.g. 10kph). They are intended to be introductory rides, but also may be very hilly (these are usually labelled as Grimpeurs and have high AA points). Rides described as “scenic” are usually hilly too.

BRs are the standard rides. They have to be at least 200km, with a minimum speed of 14.3kph (though very long rides have this relaxed). They count towards the various AUK awards.

BRMs are like BRs, but also ratified with ACP, the governing body in France. In practice this means that you get an extra sticker on your brevet card when it is returned, and that there are minor changes in rules (e.g. a minimum speed of 15kph on 200k rides, and no extra time allowance for over-distance rides). Only BRM rides count as PBP qualifiers.

You can ignore if a ride is BP/BR/BRM unless you are particularly chasing Audax awards, it makes no difference to what happens on the road.

AA means Altitude Award (sometimes AAA - Audax Altitude Award). A ride that has AA points is generally quite hilly. The higher the number of points, the hillier it is. Some rides also have the amount of climb listed (e.g. [1500m])

So, for example:-

200km 08:00 from Jackfield, Ironbridge Severn & Wye
BRM [PBP] AA3 [2932m] £5.00 John Hamilton

This is a 200km ride starting at 8am from Ironbridge, the ride is called "Severn & Wye". It runs under BRM rules and is a Paris-Brest-Paris qualifier. It has 3 altitude award points, so is moderately hilly, with 2932 metres of ascent over the 200km. It costs £5 to enter (assuming you have insurance from your AUK, BC or CTC membership, otherwise it will be £7 including day insurance). The organiser is John Hamilton.

On the detailed page for each event on the Audax UK site, there is a "facilities" line, with a series of one-letter codes. If you click the ? next to these, it expands out to something more readable. This line tells you what to expect and any additional rules (e.g. for some winter rides mudguards are compulsory to stop cafe owners getting upset, some rides have accommodation available, etc.).

As for where rides go, the amount of information varies by organiser. Some will have a route map on the entry page and a description of the route. Others are more a magical mystery tour. You can often find a route by googling for the name of the ride - riders may have put up details on bikely etc.

Entering the ride varies a little between organisers. Some will accept PayPal, in which case you can do it all online from the Audax calendar. Others still use the old system, which means printing out an entry form from the calendar then sending it together with a cheque and two SAEs. The SAEs should be C5 size (the same size as a piece of A4 folded in half). You get the routesheet prior to the ride in the first envelope, then after the ride your brevet card gets returned in the second envelope. If you paid using PayPal then you'll normally get the routesheet emailed to you and the organiser will provide the envelope for return of the brevet card.

On the ride

On the day of the ride, you should arrive 30-60 minutes before the start time. This gives time to do last minute fiddling with the bike and have a cup of coffee and a natter. You pick up your brevet card in the hall, with a plastic bag to put it in (very useful with British weather!).

People start to wait outside five minutes before the start, and are waved off by the organiser at the right time. You follow the routesheet; there are no marshals or signing on the road.

On the road you'll generally find that people are quite friendly. You have to be self-sufficient (there is no sag wagon nor is food normally supplied), but if you have problems you'll find that people are willing to stop and help. There is usually a fast group aiming to get around as quickly as possible, but most riders see it as a social event and enjoy the scenery, company and cake stops in cafes.

At various distances on the ride you'll come to a Control, which is used to prove that you were in the right place at the right time. Info Controls ask you a question that you need to fill in on the card (e.g. "Name of the pub at junction" or "Distance on signpost to Sometown"). Manned Controls have somebody there with a stamp to put in your card, sometimes a cafe Control will have a roll of stickers by the till. Occasionally you just have to get a receipt with the town name and time on - so a cashpoint receipt, or one from a convenience store/garage/cafe etc.

Here's a brevet card showing these. The non-info controls show the times that you have to arrive there between (based on minimum/maximum speeds). You'll see info question answers, stickers and stamps. You'll also see that I arrived at the overnight sleep stop at 23:45 (I could have arrived there between 11:38am on Saturday to 8:09am on Sunday, so I had over 8 hours in hand). I slept for 5 hours, plus eating before and after, so I didn't get to the next control (34km later) until 8:24 the following morning.



At the end of the ride you hand in your brevet card to the organiser. He sends it off for validation (which may also involve getting it entered into the big book in France and a validation number from there if it is a BRM ride), and eventually it'll turn up in the post for you. The results get posted on the AUK website – but there are no finishing times listed as Audaxing is not racing. You'll get your own time written on the back of your brevet card.

Competitions

Whilst Audaxes are mainly non-competitive, there are various awards available if you like to have goals and collect shiny things. Rides of 200km+ gain you one point per 100km. There is a cup for the rider with the most points (in 2007 the winner had 405 points – that's 40,500km of validated rides in a year, mainly on fixed wheel!), and a club cup for the club with the most points gained by its top six riders (limiting to the top six means that the most active club wins, not the one with the most riders). The rider with the most AAA points for riding hilly events also gets a cup.

Other awards include medals for rides totalling 1000km, 5000km, 10000km etc. You can purchase distance medals for successful rides. A Randonneur Round The Year award is available for riding at least one 200km+ ride every calendar month for a year. You can get a medal for completing a Super Randonneur (SR) series consists of 200km, 300km, 400km and 600km rides in a single year, or the International version which needs the same rides but each in a different country (Wales and Scotland do not count as separate countries to England!).

And Finally...

Audaxing sounds a bit complicated, but it really isn't. It can be as competitive or as sociable as you like, and lets you see many interesting and pretty parts of the country over routes devised by local riders. Shorter rides are great fun, and allow you to finely hone your navigating and cake eating skills. Riders on these vary from young racing snakes getting in some early season miles to senior citizens out for a pootle.

Longer rides turn into adventures, with ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Riding up Cheddar Gorge at daybreak having spent the previous day and night riding to get there. Riding into the sunset over the mountains. Sitting on a garage forecourt at 4am eating cold sandwiches. Sitting in the sun on a café terrace with friends looking out over the sea. Finding shelter from storms on midnight Pennine crossings. Cruising through glorious countryside on warm afternoons. Eating far more per day than you thought was humanly possible and still not putting on weight! But, most importantly, just being out on your bike, seeing and experiencing every conceivable type of weather and terrain that our country has to offer.