

Preparation for a Randonnée

Simon Doughty, author of the Long Distance Cyclists' Handbook..SD Sport sports coaching 0114 258 7260

Fitness, miles, cycling technique, choice of equipment, luggage, lighting

If you are a regular club rider you should find a 200 km randonnee a 'comfortable challenge' and you're probably looking forward (maybe with a little trepidation) to the longer rides, and perhaps the Super Randonneur series, which will take you through the night and to new personal limits and perhaps you're even intending to ride the 1400 km Edinburgh-London in 2005. If, however, you are new to cycling, or you have not ridden more than say, 80km in day, then a 200km event could be quite a hurdle. So here are some tips.

The secret to tackling any challenge is to build up to it progressively. How far have you ridden in a day before? 60, 80, 100km? And how did you feel after that? Bright as a button, a bit sore, or totally wrecked? And now you're going to ride two or three times further than you've ever been...

Create stepping stones to make your goal achievable and realistic. Ideally, you should be on your bike three to four times per week, throughout the year. You might ride to work, or use a turbo trainer, two or three times per week, and then cycle once or twice over the weekend. For the long-distance cyclist or randonneur, there is no substitute for 'getting the miles in'. Every two weeks or so, increase the distance you cover at weekends by about 5-10%. Soon you'll be covering greater distances with ease and that 200km won't look quite so daunting.

By counting 'hours on a bike' rather than miles covered in training you can compare different types of cycling. If you go mountain-biking at weekends, you won't cover as many miles as if you were on your road bike, but you can compare the time and effort between the two activities. If you can get 10-14 hours 'training' during a week, then you should get you through most events quite comfortably.

There does come a point where you can do too much and become 'overtrained'. So, every four or five weeks, cut your riding back by about 20-25%. In the summer time, when you are spending more hours in the saddle at weekends, you don't need to spend so much time on your bike during the week. This is a good time to ride shorter distances faster. This will help you to recover and prepare you better for the weekend randonné.

You can ride whatever bike, trike or recumbent you like, provided it is roadworthy – but do check as some organisers do demand mudguards for their events. What suits one rider may be wholly inappropriate for you and be cautious of magazines and advertisements touting 'the ultimate audax bike!' Here are some guidelines though:

Comfort and reliability are key elements of a bike for audax events, followed closely by light weight.

Adjust your bike to fit you. A coach, good bike shop or an experienced clubmate should be able to help you. Do not over-stretch to reach the handlebars or pedals.

Err towards more low gears than high gears. A triple chainset is a good idea. You do not need racing gears. These rides will take you anywhere and even 1:10 hills can be very difficult at the end of an arduous day.

Talk to experienced randonneurs. You'll get a spectrum of answers which you will have to filter, but at least they will be based on real knowledge.

For distance riding, comfort is much more important than absolute speed. If you use 700c tyres, 23mm really is the minimum depth you should consider. 28mm is a good compromise.

Choose a saddle which is reasonably firm, to give you support over longer distances. Modern padded saddles are popular but traditional leather saddles still have their loyal devotees - if you can tolerate the breaking-in period.

SPD style pedals and shoes are excellent. You get full power from them, your foot will not slip and unlike racing shoes, you can walk about without waddling like a duck or risking going AOT on smooth floors! Make sure your shoes aren't too tight (your feet will expand during a ride) and try different brands for the best fit.

Carry essential spares and tools. Recommended: 2 spare inner tubes, puncture repair kit, tyre levers, Allen keys to fit your bike. Small penknife - usually includes a screwdriver blade. Small adjustable spanner. Selection of cable ties. Good pump, capable of achieving 100 psi.

Clean your bike before any ride. Check for damage or wear and replace any item before it expires in the middle of nowhere on a Sunday afternoon.

Wheels need to be strong, but comfortable. Nothing fancy, 32 or 36 spokes front and rear, crossed 3 times will give reliable service for most riders. Avoid deep section 'aero' rims. These may be strong and sexy, but they're too unforgiving for long-distance riding.

The length of event and the time of year will dictate how much luggage you take. Carry a lightweight waterproof jacket with you on all rides in case the weather deteriorates. You may also need to take clothes off during a ride (gloves, track top, etc.) and you'll need somewhere to put them. A 'top bag' sitting neatly on top of a pannier rack or saddlebag is ideal.

Use the pockets for tools, food or whatever you need to hand, and the main compartment for larger items like spare clothing. Of course, you can use panniers, or a handlebar bag but keep your luggage to a minimum. Some riders cram everything into overloaded jersey pockets or a seatpack the size of a pea but filled so much that it looks like a duvet stuffed into a pillow case. It's up to you but the golden rules are: Whatever method you use make sure it is secure.

Do not carry unnecessary items

Do not forget essential items

Carry as little as possible on your person. Avoid any bag on your back, even if they're 'designed for cycling'. Use the bike instead.

Never carry tools in your pockets - they can make an additional mess of your body should you fall.

For any ride over 300km, or any ride before April or after mid-September, you'll probably need lights. Good lighting is required for your own safety (and the law), and for you to see where you are going! Although it's over 30 years since Man landed on the Moon, only now is technology getting us anywhere near a decent set of bicycle lamps. Like all things audax, there are a number of opinions on the best method to tackle this.

For rear usage, LEDs are almost universally adopted, being lightweight and reliable. For front lights, you have the choice of batteries - rechargeable or regular (and a choice of chemicals therein) - or generators (sidewall-, tyre tread- or hub-dynamos); LEDs or filament bulbs. There are advantages and compromises to all systems. The jury is still out about what's best but for the latest ideas, keep reading *Arrivée*. Ensure that your lighting system will be sufficient in terms of brightness and run-time. For reasons of back-up and safety, most riders adopt two independent lighting systems.

Some words on clothing. Buy cycling specific clothes, from a good bike shop. Road-style garments tend to be preferred over mountain-biking togs because they are be closer fitting and flap about less in the breeze. Most riders use good padded shorts or cycling-specific underwear. Knowledgeable riders smear the seat insert with an antiseptic cream such as Sudocrem to prevent chafing and saddle problems.

Carry gloves and a hat for cooler conditions and keep your legs, especially your knees, covered unless it really is quite warm. Wear bright colours for greater motorist awareness and use reflective materials when you're riding at night.

Now, put it all into practice and enjoy your ride!

On the Ride

Navigation techniques, dos & don'ts

Okay, so you entered the randonnée, your machine is clean and in tip top condition, ready for the ride, all legal and everything, you're route sheet's been sent to you, you know where the start is, what now?

Trace out the route on a map at home. This will help you understand the route much better when actually riding. Your local library should have a set of OS 1:50,000 maps which can be very handy in the planning stage. However, these maps are too large a scale for most randonnées and you'd need to carrying a library with you. Buy yourself a road atlas, 3 or 4 miles:1". Tear out the relevant sheets and cover them in clear plastic. Fold them into 3x3 sections and they'll fit neatly into a jersey pocket. You'll rarely ever have to carry more than 3 sheets. Road atlases are also cheap enough to replace them every year or two.

Many riders rewrite their route sheets into a more suitable format to follow on the move. If you do this, check and double check that you haven't made any mistakes! Others simply photocopy to a different size or colour code the instructions for better legibility.

When riding, keep checking the route. A route sheet holder attached to the handlebars is very useful. Do not assume the person in front knows where he is going! Use your handlebar computer (set to kilometres) to help gauge your location.

Riding in a group, or with one or two others, and your ride will be much easier. You can chat and take turns at the front of the group, sheltering one another from the wind for a minute or two at a time. On your own, audax rides can be lonely and more difficult, but don't try to keep up with those who are too fast for you. You'll only pay the price later in the event. It's better to have a little in reserve than to do 40 kph at the start with the fast boys, get dropped and then get lost because you weren't paying attention when hanging onto their back wheels!

If your bike is well maintained you should encounter very few mechanical problems. However, accidents can happen and disaster can strike. You need to be self-sufficient enough to get yourself out of trouble. That may mean bodging a repair or a long walk to a telephone box and a call for a taxi to a railway station.

Some riders carry a mobile phone, but don't rely on this. You may not get a signal, damage your phone in a fall, or run out of charge. Make sure you are equipped to cope.

Widespread acceptance of credit cards and cash machines in many places means that you don't have to carry wads of cash with you but once on the ride you are on your own.

Look in your brevet card or on your route sheet for an contact telephone number and let the organiser know if you are going to be very late or are abandoning the ride.

You must eat and drink. Have a good carbohydrate rich meal the night before and then snack on other high carbo foods during the ride. 'Energy bars' are good but can be expensive and you'll tire of them in longer events.

Two bottles on your bike are definitely recommended. Expect to drink about 500ml (1 regular bottle) per hour, more if it's hot, and carry enough spare food.

After a while you'll get fitter and faster and you'll meet up with some of the seasoned campaigners who don't dash about too fast. Note their habits. Don't waste time off the bike. Many slower riders just keep going like Aesop's tortoise, but they all get round. If you are faster, then you can afford to spend some time having teas and toast at a control or two.

Be polite, say thank you to the controllers, obey the rules of the road, smile and I guarantee you'll be making friends and coming back for more.