Endurance cycling à la Audax will always be difficult, but proper preparation can remove the major causes of pain, at best. At worst, it can at least reduce their negative effects on your performance. Proper preparation would embrace aspects of your mindset, equipment, training, diet, and planning.

Let's start with equipment. Other than the riders themselves, the make or break (let's hope not) piece of equipment is the bike itself.

It is about the bike
Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP) is like a bike museum and a modern cycle show rolled together. You will see state-of-the-art racing machines, and bikes right across the spectrum to 'commuta' (sic) bikes: tandems, triplets (one completed the 2003 PBP - crazy Englishmen!) tricycles, tandem tricycles, recumbents, tandem recumbents, three-wheel recumbents and, yes, four-wheel tandem recumbents! In 2003 a 3-km bike (a sort of high performance scooter) completed the PBP in 84 hr 36 min!

Let's consider the essential bike needs of a normal cyclist; (is that not a contradiction in terms?) You must be comfortable on it: the average distance between Controls on PBP is 87.5km. You should be able to ride a 200km Audax without discomfort. Controls provide you with the opportunity to relax, take some refreshments and generally recharge the batteries, but there isn't time to waste.

There are three contact areas on the bike - hands, feet and bum, any one or combination can cause from mild if you are riding close to the time limit. Position on the bike and a good fit is of critical importance. Your experience in the qualifying rides should tell you if you have got it right. If not, seek expert advice.

Heads up!
An area not generally considered is the neck muscles. A head is a pretty hefty thing to support in an unnatural position, for the 60 or so hours out of 90 you will be on the bike. Neck muscles sometimes give in under the strain. It's not unusual to see riders with those neck braces painfully riding along, unable to move their heads. The remedy of course is prevention and really the only way to be sure is to gradually work your way up to a period approximating the time it takes to ride between 2/3 Controls. You also need to keep the muscles flexed whilst riding. The important parts of the bike are the pedals, handlebars and saddle; where it makes contact with your shoes, gloves and shorts.

Best foot forward
Shoes must be an easy fit; feet swell over time and it can get hot in northern France at that time of the year. A cushioned sole and well-aerated shoes help. Pedals for this type of event must have easy access and exit. Look and Time style pedals make walking awkward and uncomfortable, and you do have to walk a bit at Controls. Double sided entry pedals which allow flush soles on the shoes are much more practical.

However, I have seen riders in PBP riding in sandals and takkies (not at the same time though!) Whatever works for you is right.
No more buzz
Hands, and particularly wrists, are very susceptible to damage under these circumstances. What works for me is a combination of equipment and movement. My handlebars are shod in foam rubber tubing and my gloves are the ghillies you can get! Movement means changing hand position on the bars frequently. I notice I change hand positions on the handlebars about every minute or so. It’s not done consciously it’s just the way things have worked out and I have never had trouble with my hands or wrists. Of course you can also do flexing exercises and wrist strengthening exercises, which will help. My grandson tells me those Buzz Baster bar ends from Bontrager really reduce the vibration in the bars, so they may be worth a try as well.

Hoop-la
On the subject of vibration, you will find that 700 X 25 tyre size gives a much better ride than the more popular 700 X 23. Even more comfortable is 700 X 28 but it’s unlikely that the average bike in SA will have the clearances to cope with that size. The bonus is that the larger size gives less rolling resistance and this more than compensates for the slightly greater weight.

Down under
Saddles are definitely the most talked about and written about bike component, so no more from me on that. But shorts! That’s the answer to the bum business. Quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten and this is absolutely sure for cycling shorts. The very best - nothing less - unless you are a masochist or have a brass bum! Buy two pairs and alternate them. Also, although slightly off the subject, meticulous personal hygiene is critical. Bidets are ideal otherwise I recommend a plentiful supply of wet wipes; SAA and Spur have the best! There are a number of anti-friction creams on the market but they have never done anything for me. Try them they may work for you.

Comforts
It’s always best to have a measure of independence on an Audax ride. This means carrying quite a bit more gear than you do on a short ride. Many riders cycle with panniers, saddle bags, rucksacks, burn bags etc. I’ve found it’s best to make a list of what you consider to be essential and then find the best way of transporting everything.

Here’s my list:
- Nourishment - solid and liquid
- Lighting (mandatory)
- Pump, spare tubes and repair materials
- Rain cape - must be wind proof
- Space blanket
- Tool kit
- Camera
- Cellphone
- Wet wipes
- Field dressing/plasters, over the counter anti-inflammatory, pain killers, anti-diarrhoea tablets etc.
- Sun screen
- Extra clothing
- Money
- Small lightweight memorabilia
- Beanie

This is all very easily and neatly carried in a large bike bag, which fits on to my saddle pillar and is readily accessible. The reason for the memorabilia is that you are bound to meet with hospitality on PBP and it’s a nice gesture to give something in return like a picture postcard or a cloth medal.

Audax UK until a few years ago ruled that mudguards were obligatory on their events, not just out of consideration for yourself, but also the other riders. This has been somewhat relaxed now. Mudguards are nice to have in wet weather and commonplace on mountain bikes after the wettest season we have seen in years, but they are not yet readily available for road bikes. I’ve seen marvellous things done with plastic cold drink bottles and cable ties, though!

No fear gears
There is a dedicated bunch of Brits who make virtue out of vice by riding PBP on fixed wheels! However, for us sane people multiple gears are de rigueur (practising my French - afraid that’s about it) I now have a triple chainwheel. You will know your own powers in this regard but don’t be shy or feel superior about using a triple. The new compacts are pretty good but a triple gives you more choice. Although there are no mountains in that part of the world, there is a continuum of seriously rolling hills. Yes, people do walk up hills on PBP!

A space bar or something similar on the handlebars gives greater flexibility for lights, computers, map holder/directions, GPS etc.

That’s about it... new tyres, new tubes, spare batteries, freshly shaved and a new hairdo and you’re ready to go! But you should have seen me when I got back!