

WHY?

It's the first question you hear when someone finds out you're on a bike ride of 600km (typically followed soon after by "Are you mad?"). **Rob Walker** tries to explain...

Explaining that you're riding an Audax doesn't help much either – it's not exactly a well-known term, except amongst other long distance cyclists. Yet, as interest in ultra-endurance events rises around the globe, that's slowly beginning to change. Fitting really, as 2017 also marks the 20th birthday of Audax here in South Africa: It's a significant milestone for an entirely enthusiast-run organisation, and one that has been celebrated with the most active and varied calendar of events to date. Two of these were also firsts. The Cape Beast was the first Audax Club Parisien (ACP) approved and validated 1 000km event to be

held in South Africa.

Over Easter the inaugural Flèche Thomlinson was held - a 24 hour team event, named in recognition of Eddie Thomlinson, founding father of Audax SA.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves - what is an Audax, and what possesses normally sane people to choose a bicycle for distances that many would think twice about driving by car?

"It's not a race" is a mantra that all new Audax inductees hear, and soon find themselves repeating. Which is indeed both true, and somewhat ironic. Another fact newcomers learn is that their newly discovered discipline has its roots in the 1,230km Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP). But the



first edition of PBP, held in 1891, was both a full-blown race and one of a series of events that inspired the creation of the Tour de France in 1903. Again, rather ironic, since the rising demands of the professional era gradually led to the disappearance of extreme events such as PBP from the racing calendar. By then the spirit of audacious, from which Audax gets its name, had put down strong roots. The competitive aspect may, to some extent, have gone – but the desire for brevets (Audax speak for rides) was not.

So, if it's not a race, and it's not for charity, what's the point? It's a tough question to answer definitively. Especially when the riders and machines lined up at the start of a typical brevet all look so different. At local South African events most bikes are at least recognisably similar. Overseas events follow no such conformity – on display will be a fantastic diversity of human-powered equipment: recumbents, velomobiles, tricycles, and even tandem trikes are not unusual. Perhaps within this variety lies some small part of the magic. For Randonneuring (the act of riding an Audax), despite the seemingly ridiculous distances, is surprisingly accessible and achievable – even to those with modest levels of fitness and ambition. Another over-used phrase from the world of endurance riding is "further is easier than faster". And it's true, mostly, except for the suggestion of "easy". As distances grow, the battles become internal – mental strength and discipline become dominant above pure athleticism and

speed. Age and gender are no barrier – the playing field is level to all. The vital attributes are a tenacious attitude and a spirit (and backside) that doesn't know how to quit.

Admit it – at this stage you're curious. You're averagely fit, a decent rider, and the bug has bitten. You're wondering if maybe you could ride 600km, or even 1 000km. Well, the good news is that getting there is more about steady acclimatisation than bucket loads of training. You might be comfortable on a light carbon thoroughbred with unpadded saddle, whereas the next rider wouldn't part with their titanium long wheelbase frame, mudguards, and leather saddle. Whatever your steed though, comfort is the essential factor – because you're going to be on it for hours. However glorious most of those hours are (and they will be), at some stage everyone hits their "shoot me now" moment. At that point, not having a rear end resembling steak tartare, or a spine that belongs in an old age home, is a powerful motivator to keep going. It's the toughest (and probably most rewarding) rite of passage into endurance cycling – the journey of discovering what works for you. >

ABOVE: Open roads, and your own thoughts, are what make Audaxing so special.

TOP: Long rides demand lighting, warmth and visibility.

Wildflower & Succulent
 All plants in this area are
 classified as public domain
 and it is illegal to remove them
 from the area.
 www.wildflowerandsucculent.org



That journey, for most, begins with the less mind-boggling brevet distance of 200km. Think of it as somewhere between a long club social and a low-paced training ride for the Double Century (something many DC teams do in fact use them for). In truth, stepping up to 300km doesn't require much more physical effort – just a few more hours on the road. Aside from occasional mechanicals, and one freakishly hot Cape day that decimated the finishers list, the greatest threat to the generous 20-hour time limit is usually wasting too much time enjoying the mandatory control stops en-route. It's all too easy for one more coffee, Coke float or toastie to creep into an extra hour of relaxation and banter. That danger, and cost, of wasted time off the bike (aka "faffing") escalates sharply as the distances hit the pointy end of the Audax spectrum. There's an ongoing debate whether a 400km or a 600km are actually harder – mainly because the answer depends on how fast you

ODDLY, FOR A SLOW-BUT-STEADY RIDER, A 600KM CAN ACTUALLY FEEL EASIER.

ride, and how well you cope with lack of sleep. For "full-value" riders (those who use the entire time allowance), a 400km brevet will be a 24-hour plus ride, with barely time even for a catnap due to the slower speed. Fine if you can function without sleep, but a serious battle to stay awake while pedalling if not. Oddly, for a slow-but-steady rider, a 600km can actually feel easier. With limited faffing, even a relaxed pace will build up enough time buffer for at least three hours sleep towards the back end of the ride. Faster riders, obviously, benefit from quicker finishes (or more sleep)

regardless of distance, but at 600km pacing yourself to avoid burning out is something that takes experience.

So, we now know that Audax is not racing, it's not just for elite athletes, and if we spend time getting a set-up that is comfortable and building up our distances, we too can take part. But sorry, why was it we decided we're doing this? Aside, of course, from acquiring a story to tell in the pub to counter our mates who've just broken three hours for the Cape Town Cycle Tour (which frankly, we could do if we really tried, right?). But it's not about bragging rights, well not totally anyway. Even the profound sense of personal achievement, not to mention surprise, at actually completing one of these monsters isn't quite enough to definitively answer the question of "Why?". That lies somewhere in an ethereal blend of adventure, freedom and peace which cannot adequately be described, only experienced. My own answer came at 2am as riding



EDDIE THOMLINSON

It's tempting to use the phrase "late bloomer" to describe someone who completes their first PBP at age 73, but in the case of Eddie Thomlinson it would be completely inaccurate. For Thomlinson, the cycling bug bit much earlier. As a lad of 16, in Leith Scotland, he finished second in his first 10km time trial, before graduating to 100 milers and completing a truly impressive 380km in his first 12-hour time trial - a distance that even on modern equipment, few would be able to match. But, as so often happens, life gets in the way - in Eddie's case, a move to South Africa, family, and a prolonged stint sailing Hobie Cats. Those early cycling seeds may have remained dormant but for a chance trip past a Cape Town bike shop window in 1982. He didn't buy the astronomically priced (R1,000!) beauty in the window, but soon after acquired a Du Toit frame which he built up himself. The Hobie was relegated to time on the lawn rather than water, as the rekindled passion took hold once more.

Even with the new bike, it took another happy accident for Randonneuring in South Africa to get properly underway. Audax Ecosse (Scotland) advertised a special jersey for all finishers of one of its rides. Coinciding with a trip to the UK, it was too much for Eddie to resist. That jersey (still owned) could almost be cited as the garment that kicked off Audax SA. Almost, but not quite. The extra little shove needed was a motive that has probably ignited most Audax groups around the world - the desire to qualify for PBP. Eddie's passion for long distance cycling met with a critical mass of fellow madmen and in Johannesburg, 1997, South Africa's first ACP-approved and validated 200km brevet was held. An ITB injury saw Eddie unable to take part in PBP 1999, but four years later he was successful in his quest - and also one of the oldest finishers.

Eddie's cycling achievements do not lie in the past though. Now approaching 88, he's still a regular cyclist. He was first in his age group (85-89) to complete the shortened Cape Town Cycle Tour in 2015. A year later, he was the oldest rider to complete the full distance 2016 edition. There's a wry smile when asked of his time: "6 hours 28 minutes - it's the first one where I've needed to stop for a rest part way round". Eddie's greatest contribution to South African cycling though has been to do what comes naturally to all long distance cyclists: he has kept going. For 20 years he's been the inspiration and enabling force that has helped a generation of local riders discover and succeed in the sport he loves.

buddy Nico Coetzee and I rolled out of Oudstroom on our way back to Stellenbosch from Hartenbos. A full moon lit up the mountains on both sides, and the vast expanse of Karoo which lay ahead. It was so bright you could ride without lights. Barely a car passed us on the 50km to Calitzdorp, only the whir of pedals and hubs, the occasional hoot of an owl, and cry from a jackal to break the silence. Our senses were so alive you could literally smell the earth and the fynbos in the cool night air. It was a moment of such pure perfection that both of us were disappointed when finally the town lights came into view. Despite the 600km already in our legs, and a pressing need for sleep, neither of us wanted that magical stretch of road to ever end. That's my why. Yours is out there somewhere, too, you just need to ride a little further to find it. 🚴

ABOVE: Audax riding takes you places you would never have found any other way.

OPPOSITE: Mudguards, bags and aero bars (for comfort rather than speed) are the tools of the Audax trade.

