

WHAT POSSESSES SOMEONE TO TACKLE A THOUSAND KILOMETRE CYCLE IN A MERE 64 HOURS? ARE THEY MAD, JUST VERY TOUGH, OR A BIT OF BOTH? GILLIAN LAW GOES BEHIND THE SCENES AT MILLE ALBA, SCOTLAND'S LONGEST AUDAX EVENT, TO FIND OUT



GOING THE DISTANCE

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID MARTIN; GILLIAN LAW; ARVID DE JONG; RICHARD EVANS; RIMAS GRIGENAS; MARCUS JACKSON-BAKER

RAIN LASHES against the windows of the Scout hall as 68 cyclists eat their breakfast in silence – the tension in the room is palpable. One thousand long and soggy kilometres stretch ahead outside, waiting to be ridden, and many of the riders have never covered that distance before. Though getting wet is nothing new for cyclists in Scotland, setting off into a solid downpour is a prospect anyone would dread.

Nonetheless, at 7am sharp on 22 June, 66 men and two women roll out of the Fordell Firs Scout activity centre near Inverkeithing, Fife, and turn north towards Forfar for the first control. This is the Mille Alba, a new addition

to the UK's audax cycling calendar and Scotland's longest – a route of 1,000km with a cut-off time of 75 hours. Like most long-distance audaxes, it requires physical stamina, mental willpower... and a generous dose of optimism. Outside the hall, organiser Graeme Wyllie stares at the sky while protecting his camera from the rain with his umbrella. "I think it's getting brighter...?"

An audax is a long-distance bike ride which is, in theory, non-competitive. But the race is most definitely against the clock, with an ambitious cut-off time for completion, check points along the way and maximum and minimum speed limits. The audax ethos is very much one



of self-sufficiency – you find your own way with a route sheet (or increasingly with GPS); there are no signs to follow and no support van. However, camaraderie is a hallmark of the sport – fellow audaxers stop to help one another whenever they can, and often choose to stick together in small groups for the duration of a ride.

In Scotland, it is still a small-scale sport and always welcomes new members. I've been involved with the audax scene for several years now, and most rides I've done have had 20 to 30 starters. Some set off super-fast, others quickly settle into a steady pace.


My own longest distance to date has been 200km – enough to make me a *randonneur* (see page 42) – on one of the longest, proudest days I've spent on a bike. I've finished several 100km and 150km events within time, and have a folder full of completed brevet cards to prove

Kings of the road (clockwise from facing page): first finisher Colin Bezzant leads the pack; preparing to set off; departing in driving rain; refuelling back at base

it. Each of those battered little bits of cardboard is packed full of memories, so helping out at the inaugural Mille Alba seemed a fitting way to give something back to the sport.

A LONG NIGHT AHEAD

Back at Mille Alba HQ in Fife, the half-dozen of us volunteering as organisers and helpers set off for home – and a rest – after the last participant has disappeared into the curtain of grey outside. We'll be back on duty, along with more volunteers, as the riders return to base throughout the night, hungry and tired.

The route is a series of four loops: the first day takes the riders north, over 355km to Banchory and Braemar, followed by a 323km loop south via Berwick upon Tweed and Biggar on the Saturday. Sunday brings a north-westerly leg of 265km over to Stirling and up to Killin, a climb up Ben Lawers and back to Inverkeithing via Aberfeldy, with a little 72km sting-in-the-tail loop to Kinross and 

“MILLE ALBA IS A GREAT RIDE, UP THERE WITH THE BEST OF THEM... SCOTLAND HAS SUCH VARIED SCENERY”



D Falkland to finish. With only 75 hours to complete the route, and a lot of calories to be topped up at food stops, the riders wouldn't have much time for sleep until Monday morning.

By Saturday morning, numbers have dropped to 61. Though the weather has improved, it's still far from summery. Riders set off in ones and twos after refuelling and grabbing what sleep they could in the bunk-bedded dormitory or in their tents outside. Unlike many audax events, which follow a single loop and force riders to carry everything they need, or to send bags ahead, Mille Alba riders return to the same base and bed each night. Many reported afterwards that the 'home base' was a help in getting the rest they needed – but on the other hand, perhaps returning to the base where your car is parked doesn't help with motivation to get out there again...

By Sunday morning, the weather was brighter, but only 51 hard-core riders got out on the road. The team of helpers expected most to finish in the early hours of Monday morning, although they had until 10.00 to make it within time.

At 19.55 on Sunday evening, Colin Bezant rolled to a stop outside and came in, the first to finish. Colin had booked the sleeper train back south for that very night, so had set himself a target of 64 hours. "I was trying to

ration holidays and time away from my family," he explained, "so I came up with a plan of taking the Thursday night sleeper up and the Sunday night one back. Everyone seemed to get behind the plan, and gave me a lot of encouragement – I was buoyed by the sheer enthusiasm of the volunteers."

ARRIVÉE

The other 48 finishers trickled in throughout the night, with the last rider coming in at 9.07 on Monday morning. *Chapeau* to each and every one of them. The question is, why do they do it? And was it worthwhile?

"Mille Alba is a great ride, up there with the best of them" says Colin. "Scotland has such varied scenery, which is easy to miss if you're just hammering up the motorways to the cities or the Highlands. This year I was lucky with spotting wildlife as well, seeing a family of stoats at one point, having a close encounter with a red deer – and finally seeing a red squirrel in the wild, after about 40 years of looking!"

This was Colin's fifth 1,000km ride, so he was well prepared for the challenge, with a structured training programme behind him (see opposite) and a plan to cut his time down as much as possible. "I wasn't the fastest on the road, but I took less sleep than the two or three

Soldiering on (clockwise from left): riders on the Old Military Road near Cairn O' Mount, Aberdeenshire; relaxing in the Scout hall; crossing the Forth; Aidan Hedley on a trike; Arvid de Jong on his recumbent bike



COLIN'S TRAINING REGIME

Colin Bezant has been riding audaxes for ten years now, and started as "just another rider in the pack". Four things have helped him get faster, he says:

- 1 Cross-training in winter (weights and rowing machines) for a strong lower back and connectivity to the legs. This helps to avoid back problems on long rides and apply more power to the pedals
 - 2 Riding with a racing club helps develop the right combination of speed and endurance
 - 3 Racing time trials help develop longer spells of concentration (it's very easy to lose speed when the mind starts to wander) and also speed and endurance
 - 4 Method training on solo permanents, regularly taking in hills and bad weather. "I was worried it would cut up rough on the high ground on the Mille Alba, so in April I did a 200km permanent audax, starting at 2.20am in a north-easterly gale, driving rain and temperatures not much above freezing. I got round, marginally avoiding being chilled to the marrow. So, on the Saturday when we were faced with 140km-strong headwinds, I knew I had ridden in worse so was better able to cope."
-

who were going quicker than me. I give up caffeine for two weeks before an event like this, and that means I can get by perfectly well on three hours' sleep each night – with a cup of tea or coffee at each stop," he says.

Though Colin made it round Mille Alba in remarkable time, he still enjoys the non-competitive side of audaxing. "I also do competitive rides – time trials – and there is a real pleasure in going as hard as possible. But over long distances, and I've done a couple of 24-hour time trials, racing is extremely demanding. When the going gets hard on an audax ride, there is time to break for a snack, slow down and look a bit more at the scenery, or get on the wheel of a fellow-sufferer until things get better."

Duncan Johnston of Aberdeen came in at 03.00 on Monday. It was his biggest ride to date, a jump from his previous longest of 640km. A few days later, he reported being "well into the 'looking back, it was great' phase! And at the time, I enjoyed the vast majority of it. It was great being out in some of the finest scenery on offer anywhere in Europe, for hours on end. Plus the wildlife – you just don't see or hear so much in other places.

"And then there were the people – I usually spend quite a lot of time cycling by myself, which I don't mind, but with other riders the cycling becomes so much easier. One of the major moments of the audax for me was when **D**



D the person I'd been riding with for a day and a half had to quit. I felt really awful for him – but I also felt sorry for myself, because we were at the start of what I knew was going to be a tough part of the ride."

The lack of companionship was a factor in Chris Campbell's decision to give up the ride on Sunday morning, as he was going to run close to being 'out of time' and would have been riding alone. A storm the night before had forced him to shelter in a barn in the Borders for a couple of hours, wrapped in a space blanket, and Chris was tired, cold and hungry when he arrived back at Fordell Firs. To make it in time he would have had to leave again within about 20 minutes.

"I hated 'packing' and I regret it now, but at the time it seemed the only option. I think more than anything I was running out of enthusiasm. I was unlucky with the storm, but if I'd had better training and could increase my average speed, I think I'd have been okay," he says. Chris's longest audax before Mille Alba had been a 400km ride last year, and work and family commitments had kept training possibilities low throughout the year.

"I love the challenge [of audax], and the sense of community among participants. I doubt I would do any of these rides if there weren't some kind of organisation behind it – I would never set off and ride 400km just for the sake of it!" Chris now has his sights set on Paris-Brest-Paris in 2015.

Duncan says thoughts of packing often lurk in the back of his mind on audaxes, "sometimes because of the weather, or because I'm tired, or just because I'm a bit fed up. I tell myself to keep going for another 10km or so, and then I'll review how I feel. More often than not I can continue quite happily. On this ride I don't remember having any serious feelings about giving up, even though we passed within 30km of my house at one point. Thankfully the worst weather was right at the beginning, and I couldn't pack then in front of all those people!"

It's hard to put a finger on exactly what you gain from

an event such as Mille Alba, says winner Colin: "It isn't just a sense of achievement. I find myself so absorbed in a long ride like this – concentrating on the road, thinking about what to eat, looking at the scenery – that I become completely distanced from my normal life. There are few creature comforts in the saddle. The legs will hurt. The stomach will complain. My nose drips constantly. But at the end, all these things are forgotten and I am able to take pleasure in the simple things in life again."

Colin compares audaxing to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in reverse: "After 700km your only needs are food, water and shelter, very basic ones and you do not care about anything else. It's very liberating to enjoy the basics and wipe away life's complexities." I imagine he slept well on the sleeper train back south, too. ■

Ever-changing scenery (clockwise from left): zooming along beside Loch Tay; Perthshire humour; heading out of Dundee in fog

WHAT IS AUDAX?

An audax is a non-competitive, long-distance bike ride with maximum and minimum speed limits. Riders check into controls around the route to get their brevet card stamped, or collect receipts from agreed points to prove where they have been and when.

Organised rides start from short 50, 100 and 150km *populaires*, with 200km the shortest distance for a true audax, and then jump to 300, 400, 600, 1,000 and 1,200km rides including the famous Paris-Brest-Paris ride held every four years. There's also the 1,200km London-Edinburgh-London – less glamorous perhaps, and usually involving some tough weather, but it's still a popular challenge.

Outside the organised rides, people can ride 'permanents' – routes that have been approved by Audax UK. Receipts from

shops or ATMs provide proof of the time the rider reaches each point, and these are sent off with brevet cards for approval. Points are given for rides, with awards for reaching set targets, and although the sport is theoretically non-competitive, people naturally begin to compare points and strive to keep up or pass other riders.

Internationally, audax is managed by the Audax Club Parisien, and many of the terms used are French, including *randonneurs* (people who have ridden a minimum of 200km), *brevet* cards, and *arrivées*, the finishing points. Audax UK is recognised by Paris as the official brevet-coordinating organisation for the United Kingdom.

If you fancy the sound of sleep deprivation and rain – plus great camaraderie and beautiful scenery – have a look at www.aukweb.net