



Rise of the ultra-cyclists: a new breed of riders go the distance

With no spectators, no bags of freebies and no medals, the 400km London-Wales-London ride provides a welcome antidote to overblown sportives

Nick Van Mead

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“Cycling far?” asks a woman in the bakery as a group of us queues for coffee and sausage rolls, as well as an all-important receipt to prove we passed through Tewkesbury.

“Er ... London to Wales,” replies a cyclist behind me. A pause. “And back.” It must be hard not to look smug – he’s probably been dying for someone to ask him that all day.

Some 130 of us are doing just that. We’ve been over the Chilterns and through picture-postcard Cotswold villages. Soon we’ll labour up the 24% ramp of Yat Rock, whizz down the Wye valley to Chepstow, nip into Wales and cross back into England over the old Severn bridge. Then it’s up past the Somerset monument, across the North Wessex Downs, over the Chilterns again and we’re done. At 407km, the London-Wales-London ride does have a truly epic feel.

This is my first taste of audax: a noncompetitive form of long-distance cycling that traces its history to the 1890s, not long after the invention of the modern bicycle. I was expecting old men on steel-framed bikes with calves cast from iron and glasses held together with gaffer tape, cake and clipboards in dusty village halls, and checkpoints on bleak petrol station forecourts. Only part of that was true.

A few years ago I wouldn’t have been far wrong. The London-Wales-London ride had been running for decades under the name of Severn Across, and until recent years the average turnout was around 35 riders.

But ultra-distance cycling has surged in popularity. Just as runners who have tackled a few regular marathons might think “what now?” and have a go at an ultramarathon, increasing numbers of cyclists are looking for something more than a 100-mile sportive. This appears to be down partly to self-supported races like the Transcontinental across Europe and the 6,800km Transamerica, partly to the profile of riders like the late Mike Hall and partly to that familiar human urge to try for a little bit more.

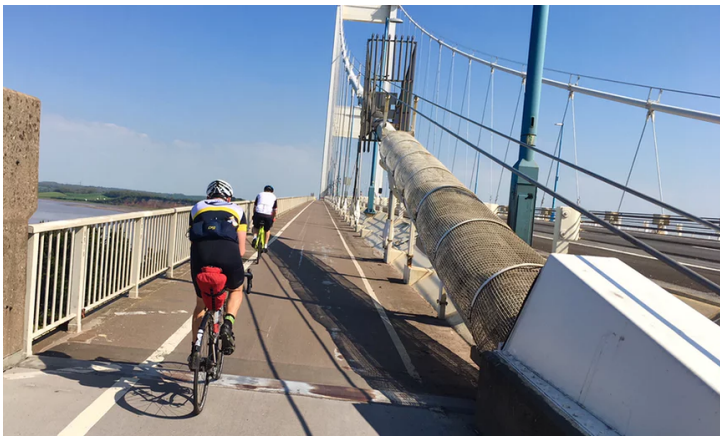


Riders before the start of London-Wales-London 2018. Photograph: the5milecyclist

Spend any time looking into ultra-distance and audax events and you'll soon hear about the 1,200km Paris-Brest-Paris and the 1,400km London-Edinburgh-London, which are both held every four years.

Last year, organiser Liam FitzPatrick rebranded the Severn Across ride as London-Wales-London. This year the event sold out in under eight hours. FitzPatrick opened a waiting list but closed it once he had another 75 names. The flow of emails from disappointed riders continued right up to the big day.

So what I got when I arrived at Chalfont St Peter community centre at 6am on a bright May Saturday morning was a lot of fit cyclists, some expensively cut Lycra and merino, a clutch of carbon bikes ... and the odd crusty old-timer.



Riders cross back into England over the old Severn bridge.

Conscious that it's all too easy to overdo it early on - a lesson learned from a few ultramarathons - I pottered along comfortably enough to the first checkpoint at Woodstock after 70km. I was somewhat surprised to be greeted by a full fry-up - some of the old reputation clearly still rings true - but I'd missed breakfast so wasn't complaining.

There is time to chat to fellow riders, so I struck up conversations, asking people about their setups (lots had dynamo hubs to generate electricity for lights and GPS units) and trying to pick up ideas for future events. Many are aiming for Paris-Brest-Paris next year, and a fair few tackled London-Edinburgh-London in 2017. The growth of ultra-distance cycling can be seen in the participation numbers for that event: 29 starters in 1989, 1,500 last year.

London Wales London 400 km	
Start: 06:00	FINISH: CHALFONT ST PETER 407km 18:34-09:00
11:30h	2350
WOODSTOCK 11km 08:22-10:44	1448
15:30h	15
18:00h	15
18:34-09:00	15

Organized by: Willwood CC
Event Phone: 01931 841 355
Starting from: Chalfont St Peter
Date: Saturday 5th May 2018 Time: 06:00

AIUK Membership Secretary: Caroline Fenton
98 Locksfield Place, London, E14 3AJ

A completed brevet card. Some controls are staffed; others are 'free' (riders collect a receipt) or 'information' (riders answer a question).

FitzPatrick had warned me before the event that the mental challenge could be tougher than the physical. "What makes it difficult isn't so much the speed, it's that you've got time to think," he said. "If your thighs hurt or you've got saddle sores then you might have another eight hours of this, grinding you down. When it's three in the morning, when you've had a couple of punctures, when it's cold and wet ... that's when it gets to you."

His advice for finishing successfully was to pay extra attention to staying hydrated (easy to forget on long events) and not to spend too long riding alone, especially at night.

Following his first suggestion, I stopped to refill my water bottles outside the three staffed checkpoints - which meant I did spend some time on godforsaken petrol station forecourts. For the second, I teamed up with fellow rider Alex Kew when we found ourselves at the same pace.

It's not always easy to know when to hold back or when to press on, but I eased off when he was struggling up Yat Rock; he paid that back many times once he'd recovered. As a time trialist, Alex couldn't help himself every time we hit a long straight A-road - he was on the front, head down, powering away, and all I had to do was stick to his back wheel. The miles flew by.

Darkness fell. Surrounded by silence but for the whirr of wheels and the sound of breathing, we negotiated gravelly, potholed single-track roads at 30mph with just a pair of small lights to fight the pitch-black night. The company took a lot of stress out of it.

London-Wales-London is not a race (technically it's a *randonnée*). Riders are free to complete the 407km at whatever speed they want so long as they average 15-30kph. That made the earliest allowable finish 10.30pm; the latest was 9am the next day.



London-Wales-London riders feed up. Photograph: the5milecyclist

With no serious mechanicals, Alex and I rolled into Chalfont just before midnight. The fastest riders - including world 24-hour time trial champion Jasmijn Muller - were back before it got dark. The last rolled in at 8.20am.

London-Wales-London (or Chalfont-Chepstow-Chalfont, as one wag had it) certainly lives up to its epic new name. Whether you're an old-school audaxer or someone dressed head to toe in Rapha with a fetish for sleeping in bus shelters, it's a welcoming way to explore.

And it's an antidote to overblown sportives. Rolling in after 407km, we got our brevet cards stamped and tucked into warming bowls of homemade daal. There were no spectators lining the finish chute, no bag of freebies, no medals - but it was all the better for it.

London-Wales-London 2019 will run on 4 May

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