

Riding your first Audax?

Many riders new to audax find the format, and in particular the terminology, confusing. These notes aim to shed some light into dark corners, to try and make your first audax experience as pleasant as possible. Obviously we cannot influence the weather, nor other road users.

Entering

While a few organisers have their own on-line entry systems, the standard way of entering any audax is via the AUK website. Here there is a calendar of events, which can be filtered for event length or region. Clicking on an event in the calendar will take you to a page dedicated to that particular event with full details. To enter you merely click on the "enter this event" button. You then have a choice of either printing and completing the form, writing a cheque, preparing two stamped and self-addressed envelopes and sending this to the organiser, or, as most events have on-line entry, just clicking on the PayPal button. The latter is far simpler for both the entrant and the organiser. It does not require the entrant to have a PayPal account - payment can be made by debit or credit card.

Preparing

Once you have entered an audax, you will be sent, or directed to a website from which you can download, the routesheet. This might not be until a week or so before the event, after the organiser has checked the route. You should note that there may be changes in the routesheet if you get it longer in advance, and in any case you will need to check for any last minute changes when you get to the start.

The format of the routesheet does vary between organisers, but the most common is for an A4 sheet split into four quadrants of instructions, which is fairly easy to fold. Consider how you are going to refer to the routesheet. You will need to keep it dry; if it was printed on an inkjet printer it will rapidly become unreadable if it gets wet. Plastic bags or lamination are the usual options, but there are available map-holders, whether as part of a bar bag or a separate unit. Some riders fasten the routesheet to their arm using an elastic band, some to the brake cables using a peg.

The routesheet contains detailed instructions to get you round the event. Every time you need to make a decision there will be an instruction. Note that if you just continue along a road with right of way, each individual side road will not be mentioned - just those that matter. Most routesheets provide the cumulative distance to each instruction (this might not match your own trip computer, but you will quickly get a feel for whether you are over-recording or under-recording) and some give the distance between instructions as well. Shorthand is used for the instructions (eg "R @ T sp Nashville") which are usually pretty obvious, and there should be a key to abbreviations provided. Signposted towns will usually be in capitals if you pass through them (sometimes only if they are the next place you pass through).

There should be no problem using the routesheet alone to navigate the event. However, you may wish to compare the route with a map (and perhaps carry a map on the day), though this is often difficult as road priority at junctions is not always obvious on a map. Some old hands tear pages out of a road atlas to carry with them on the ride.

A lot of organisers will also provide a .gpx track. This will normally provide a "bread crumb trail" on your GPS which you can follow. You should check if the .gpx file provided is compatible with your

particular model of GPS because you may need to adapt it e.g. the number of trackpoints on the provided track may exceed the capacity of your GPS. You can of course choose to create your own file for the GPS from the routesheet to suit your own particular navigation preferences.

Don't forget to check your bike - tyres in good condition, brake pads ditto, chain lubricated, lights working, etc. It would be a shame to fail to finish an event due to an easily preventable mechanical problem

Lights

Except in mid-summer riders of any event of 200 km and more could well be finishing in the dark. Even fast riders can get held up with mechanical issues. It is therefore important to have adequate lighting, front and rear, to avoid being caught out. Also consider how you are going to read your routesheet (or repair a puncture) in the dark. A headtorch is the usual solution.

Arriving at the start

The start control will normally open an hour or so before the start to enable riders to be ready for the off in good time.

Many riders ride or take public transport to events. But this is not required and driving to events is perfectly acceptable. Most events start at a village hall or similar, and have adequate parking. The event notes provided by the organiser will normally mention if parking is a problem, and indicate what you should do. Bear in mind that (1) parking space might be restricted, so park tidily, and (2) the events generally start quite early, so local residents may still be asleep and are unlikely to appreciate loud conversations outside their windows.

When you have got your bike ready, go into the start location. Please don't take your bike in - if security is a concern, lock it up outside. You will need to collect your brevet card. This is a card on which you record your progress - there are printed boxes representing each of the controls, and you will need to deal with these during the ride. There is more information about controls below.

Some organisers like to record riders as they arrive and hand them their brevet card personally, while others will lay all of the cards out on a table and you just collect your own (the organiser will usually work on the basis that if your card has gone, you have started). There usually will be plastic bags available to keep the card dry during the ride.

Please complete the details on the back of the card (name, address, emergency contact name and number) if they are not already written on. Do not sign the card yet. If there are any questions over the card, speak to the organiser.

Some events may allow you to enter on the day (always check with the organiser that this available) you will need to see the organiser. He or she will expect you to have a completed entry form (you can get this from the AUK website), a self-addressed and stamped C5 envelope (that is the size that takes a folded sheet of A4 paper) and the correct entry fee. Note that many organisers make a surcharge for on-the-line entries.

There may be some last-minute changes to the route - these should be made clear by the organiser, but look out for slips of paper on a table.

Once you have the formalities sorted, and your card in your pocket, you can relax. Most organisers provide some light refreshments at the start, which may be included in the entry fee, but be prepared for a modest charge.

Normally a late arrival at the start can be dealt with, but the organiser will not necessarily be there for very long, probably just long enough to tidy up the hall.

On the ride

Unless the entry field is exceptionally large, when riders may be set off in groups, all riders set off together. The large bunch will quickly break up.

Remember that audax is not competitive, so there is no need to rush off with the hares. You should find that the other riders are a friendly bunch, happy to chat as they roll along, and share their experiences with you. But if you prefer to ride alone that's fine. Just be prepared to say "hi" as you pass, or are passed by, other riders.

If you have a mechanical problem, you will be expected to deal with it yourself, though you will find plenty of assistance if you are in a group, and passing riders will generally ask if you need any help. If you don't have the basic necessities to fix a puncture (tyre lever, spare tube, pump) you will not be well-regarded. But the best prepared rider can run out of luck (and spare tubes) and other riders will often help where they can. Remember that there is no broom wagon. If you cannot complete the ride you will need to make your own arrangements to get yourself and your bike back to the start (if you have a car there) or home. If for any reason you are unable to complete the event you should inform the organiser, whose telephone number will be on the brevet card.

Controls

These are to demonstrate that you have completed the prescribed route, and passage through each control point is recorded in your brevet card. There are two main types of control, the information control, and the full control (generally referred to simply as the control).

Information controls are questions in your brevet card that can be answered as you pass the designated place, which will be indicated on the routesheet. They are normally simple questions (e.g. "what is the distance to xxx on the signpost", or "what is the name of the pub") which can be remembered until the next full control when you can sit down and write up the card (a pen or pencil is useful). Not all events have information controls.

Full controls will generally be a place that you can get refreshments, usually a cafe, sometimes a garage, occasionally a private house. The requirement is for the rider to obtain proof of passage on the brevet card. At a cafe or garage there will sometimes be a controller there, who will stamp and sign your card, and note the time. Sometimes there will be a sheet of labels that can be fixed in the appropriate box on the card (you should note the time), and sometimes the cafe/garage will have a stamp which can be used (again you need to note the time). In the absence of any of these, you should obtain a receipt (which should show the location, date and time) which can be handed in at the end of the event. Sometimes there is no refreshment facility, and riders just need to obtain a receipt from a shop or a bank ATM. These controls are often described as free control, meaning you can use anything appropriate in the relevant town or village.

The end

When you have finished the event (arrived at the arrivée) you should sign your card, and hand it with any receipts to the organiser after ensuring that any information control answers are properly completed. And that's it - well done. We hope you enjoyed it. You may be given the validated brevet card back straight away, as a record of your ride, or it may be posted back to you later. There are badges and medals available for a modest charge - let the organiser know at the end if you

require either. Some organisers carry a stock of medals and badges and can sell you one immediately, but usually they have to be ordered.

Some events have postal finishes where there will be nobody to collect your brevet card from you at the finish. You should collect suitable proof of passage as before to indicate that you have arrived at the finish. The organiser may have nominated a shop, pub, etc. that you can get proof of passage or you may be free to obtain proof from wherever you like. After you are finished you should check that you have all the necessary receipts (numbering and putting them in the correct order is a great help to the organiser) and answered any info questions and then post the brevet card off to the organiser. Included a stamped addressed envelope for return of the card if you have not done so already. You should return your card as soon as possible, and preferably within a week, as there is a deadline for the organiser to return the cards to AUK and your ride may not be validated if you miss this deadline.

If you experienced any issues with the routesheet, the organiser would generally like to hear about it. We try to ensure that the information we provide is as accurate as possible, but mistakes can creep in, and signs etc. can change, or disappear. Organisers also like to hear if everything was spot on!

Most organisers provide refreshments at the end (as at the start, may incur a modest charge), and often there is a lot of gossip as riders sit drinking a cup of tea.

If you are driving home, do be careful. You have just completed a strenuous event, possibly the longest ride you have ever done, so you are likely to be tired. If you can take a rest, it is a good idea to do so.