A first time for everyone

Several years ago I managed to persuade a friend of mine to try his first 200km Audax. He was a keen cyclist, commuting about 25 miles a day and regularly heading out on 150km day rides, so he should have polished off the 200 without any problem. The ride was a disaster. The route sheet was poor, with the results that many riders went off-course. The cafe halfway around took an interminable amount of time to produce food and a large part of the second 100km was on busy main roads. By the time we reached 150km he had lost all enthusiasm and I had to tow him to the finish. Despite all of my promises that this was an unrepresentative event, he hasn't ridden an Audax since and says he never will.

But if we are going to get more people into Audax that first-time experience is crucial. Having learned my lesson, I would not now consider encouraging a newcomer to join a ride unless I had tried it myself first and could be confident that it would be a positive experience.

Two rides I've done in Kent this year fit the bill perfectly. The first was the Man of Kent 200, at the end of March. The second was the Fairies Flattest Possible 300, at the end of June.

Man of Kent, run by David Winslade, has been on the list as both a 200 and 300 permanent for a couple years but this was the first time it had been run as a calendar event. "The decision came after really positive feedback from everyone who had ridden the perm," David told me. "The deciding factor was that my brother-in-law, who is the vicar of Bridge Parish, offered the use of the Vicarage as a control. Then Andy Uttley came up with suggestion of using the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway Cafe as well, which was a masterstroke."

The ride begins at Golden Green, near Tonbridge. There is plenty of parking nearby but it's also possible to get to Tonbridge or Sevenoaks by train and have enough time to ride to the start. It first heads east across northern Kent with a control at 37km in Charing Station car park with drinks and snacks provided.

Then it's on to Bridge, at 63km, for tea and cake at the Vicarage, taking in the only noticeable climb of the day, at Charing Hill, and the only stretch that could be even considered as main road, 14km along the A252.

Sandwich, at 82km, is an info control at the local Co-op and then the ride turns south-west towards New Romney. This 50km stretch is particularly enjoyable and lightly-trafficked. There is even one stretch of one-way country lane, something I have never come across before, taking riders down the narrow and steep Gravel Castle Road. What fun to be able to descend at speed without worrying about what might be coming the other way!

Lunch is at the aforementioned railway cafe - and very good it is too Then it's off across Romney Marsh towards Headcorn, again entirely on small lanes. It's a garage control at Headcorn, after another 51km. The selection of food here is fairly limited but with only 25km to go that's not a problem. The last stretch is gently undulating and the final lane brings you out opposite the village hall from where you started.

I would recommend this as a first-time ride for several reasons. Its almost entirely run on small lanes so there's plenty of opportunity for chatting with other riders and, of course, generally more pleasant than being squeezed by 4x4s on the main roads. The route sheet is very easy to follow and the controls are well spaced. Having free food at the first two means that having the lunch stop 131km into the ride isn't a problem. There's also good food at the end. Although it's undulating, there are no hills that would seem gratuitously hard to a newcomer and there are some great stretches where you can really whip along if you want to, particularly between Sandwich and New Romney.

This year 36 started with just two DNFs. I imagine that next years (March 28th) will attract a much larger turnout.

Fairies Flattest 300

The Fairies Flattest 300 is one of five rides run on the same day by San Fairy Ann CC with the declared aim of encouraging first-time riders or existing riders to try longer distances. All start at Bethersden. You really need a car for this one. Trains do run to Ashford, a few miles away, but not at particularly convenient times.

The 300 begins at 2am with a flat and fast run down the (virtually empty) main roads towards Folkestone before looping down to the coast road near Hythe for a dawn feast at a car park control. Another pancake-flat stretch takes you along the coast to Rye, after which there are some gentle climbs back to the start at 100km. Most of this is on main roads but in the early hours of a Sunday morning traffic is minimal so it's very enjoyable riding. There are refreshments at Bethersden and it's quite handy to be able to dump the night riding kit.

The remainder of the ride is also offered as a stand-alone 200km. The route goes west, to Matfield, then turns south to a food control at Mark Cross. It actually gains quite a bit of height along the way but has been planned so well that it's hardly noticeable and it comes as something of a surprise just after Kipping Cross when a spectacular view across the Weald opens up alongside the road.

All the height is then lost as you head off down the lanes to Dungeness on the south coast. At 197km, the 150km riders join the route, supplemented at 226km by those on the 100km, and all four rides descend upon the Railway Cafe at Dungeness - a regular lunch spot for Audaxes in this region. That's at 243km into the 300.

The final two stages are very gentle. From Dungeness it's 32km round the headland to New Romney and then back

across the edge of Romney Marsh to revisit Hythe where the control is at the Light Railway Restaurant - another Kent Audax favourite. The route retraces a little out of Hythe, again avoiding the hills, and rolls easily back to Bethersden.

The combination of distances and the way in which they are all brought together contribute to making this an excellent first-time event. There's even a 50km 'taster' which would be good for young families. Organisation is impeccable and support along the route is very good. For those making the step up to the 300, the 2am start provides an opportunity to get the feel for group riding in the dark on good-sized roads while the other rides all start within 90 minutes of each other so there's a bustling atmosphere in the hall at both ends of the day. And it does what it says on the tin - I never knew Kent could be so flat.

As for my reluctant friend, I know that once he has an enjoyable200 under his belt he will be hooked.
I'm going to try and lure him out to give it another go next year - and it will one of these rides that I use as the bait.

Rob McIvor