

contrôle, which was great news. I saw later that he successfully completed PBP too.

Howard was still very tired when the two of us set out from Mortagne and we had to stop for a couple of pre-dawn power naps. However, as soon as the sun came up and we had refuelled at an extremely conveniently located patisserie (where we picked up Ming again) we started to ride very strongly once more. With Howard, Ming, a Spanish guy and myself rotating at the front of a growing peloton, we powered into Dreux.



Villaines-Howard, Bec, Ian, Katherine and Warren

Katherine, Ian and Warren came into Dreux while we were eating and left 15 minutes behind us. With tummies full of pastries and other edible delights, Ming, Howard and I zoomed along through the sunshine over the flat terrain towards Saint-Quentin. We picked up Geoff Austin from Victoria and later Peter McCallum from Queensland along the way. As planned, we regrouped with Katherine, Ian and Warren about 5 km from the finish which meant that I had the privilege of being one of eight Aussies who rolled into the final roundabout together, past the cheering crowd and across the finish line. What a blast!

It was magical to finish such an epic adventure with Howard and a group of good friends. A brilliant party atmosphere awaited us at the Gymnase. Even though I was completely exhausted, I absolutely loved it. We had loads of time to eat, drink, chat and swap jerseys, which we didn't do in 2007, so I'm now the proud owner of jerseys from Sweden, Denmark and Madrid.

So, will I do it all again in 2015? Maybe.

Paris–Brest–Paris

There and back again (just like Bilbo)

Ian Garrity

What began as a faint idea by my wife Katherine in late 2009 (“Hmmm, the next Paris Brest Paris is in 2011...I wanted to do this 14 years ago....hmmmm”) had been carried through into reality. The training, the qualifying (and prequalifying), the introduction to the Audax ‘lifestyle’ (“We’re just doing a 600 this weekend”) and the attachment of vast amounts of bags and lights to otherwise good looking bikes had all been completed. Our new Audax mates had been full of advice and had told us planning for the ride was important. So we had put our heads together and formulated the rudiments of ‘a plan’...

First of all, which wave to go in? The 80-hour people left at 4 pm Sunday, the 90-hour people from 6 pm, and the rest—the 84-hour group—at 5 am Monday morning.

Our first decision to make was that we were going to ride together; the

Now, where to sleep? We decided on Loudéac (where we could have a bag drop) for two nights and Mortagne-au-Perche as the last sleep spot, which allowed a nice ‘easy’ 140 km ride to Paris for the last day. So that was our ‘plan’—then the temptation, on my behalf, to



Ian and Pepe in the corral waiting for the start.

second was that we were not going to go for a ‘time’. This determined all other considerations. We had also done all our training rides ‘low tech’, so no Garmin (since PBP is signposted the entire way), no powdered energy drinks, no gels, etc. On our rides we took ‘normal’ food such as bread rolls, bananas (until their price went stratospheric), muesli bars and food and drink purchased along the way. Our ‘plan’ was that for Paris-Brest-Paris, we should do nothing different to what we had prepared our bodies for: we would ride our normal pace during the day/night and have four hour sleeps, and then ride at our usual pace the next morning. Thus the 84-hour group was the only choice for us.

go bald and grow a beard in traditional male Audax fashion, and for Katherine to wear a ‘Legionnaires Cap’ as a helmet cover had, however, both been resisted—we hoped we were ready.

With bikes, bags and apprehensions about riding 1200 km in three and a half days all well and truly packed, we were whisked away by Emirates (chosen because they have a baggage allowance of 30 kg per person rather than 23, meaning the dreaded ‘Excess Baggage’ fairy didn’t pay a visit), and deposited in magical Paris at 1.20 pm the Wednesday before the ride. It was slightly less magical Paris at 6.45 pm when we finally checked into the team hotel, mainly because of train/

bus interchanges that saw us walking the streets of Paris with all the other tourists—although we were the only ones who seemed to have brought all of their luggage with them.

present spoke the universal language of the collective groan. At 5.20 am, the rain had stopped, and we also stopped being stopped and we pedalled through the dark, peering at the

did and left the 'coasters' far behind. The second was that apparently passing someone is an open invitation for them to sit on your wheel—despite the fact that somebody might already be there. Before the start, Katherine had joked about getting a sign to hang on my bum saying, "If your name's not Katherine, then piss off." By the end of the ride, it was listed down as a necessity for next time.

The countryside looked nice, but sunshine was conspicuously absent and about 10 km past Mortagne, we got our first rain—we got wet and stayed that way for pretty much the rest of the day. Still, it is only water and it didn't stop us making some preliminary observations about life in all the villages we passed through: most had a high proportion of opticians, pharmacies, flower shops and hair dressing salons. So we began looking out for some drug-crazed, spectacle-wearing, well-groomed French people clutching flowers and roaming the streets, but seemed doomed to disappointment.

At the top of one hill, we passed a stationary tandem that was certainly not of your average design; in fact, we had been told about this bike and had been hoping to see it. We called it the 'push-me, pull-you' tandem as it was a recumbent with the riders situated back to back—it looked like it was two feet high (and seventy feet long) and was crewed by a French couple, and she was the one facing backwards. Apparently they have done PBP several times like this. On the downhill, they flew past us in the rain and back facing stoker was heard to be whistling songs to herself in a merry sort of way. Well, I suppose I would be cheery too if I didn't have to be looking at someone's bum for 1200 km.



Katherine at Montagne on the way out – still dry, but not for much longer

It was catch up time at the hotel, and while it was great to see everyone was there, it was sad that the late Frank Papp was not. We had met him on Lisa Turner's 'Border 600' ride last Easter. He had told us the best hire car company to use (advice we used for after the ride) and his parting words to us were, "See you in Paris"—tragically, we never did. Sandy Vigar and Martin Pearson had organised a memorial Frank wristband to wear during the event to commemorate his life, which we all did.

By Sunday lunch, the 80-hour group people were heading off to the start. To ensure a front row start, Matt and the like were going to line up at 2 pm for a 4 pm off. This meant waiting in the hot sun for two hours in the human equivalent of a cattle stockade—each to their own I suppose particularly if you are going for a time. As the afternoon wore on, the 90-hour people began heading off for their staggered starts. Dave and Bec headed off together and they were farewelled and photographed by many. I didn't envy them.

Monday at 4 am found us bumping our way across the cobbles in front of the Palace of Versailles on our way to the start. The 500 starters in our wave were broken up into two groups—on a first come, first line up stupidly early basis. We were in the second group. A few officials and spectators were on hand to send us off. At 5 am, a desultory cheer went up: the first group of us was off. Still, it was 20 minutes till we left, time the weather gods spent conjuring up some sprinkling rain. All nationalities

flashing lights of our lead car, hoping to be guided through the pre-dawn dark of the unseen outer suburbs of Paris. And it worked, albeit in a slightly hectic fashion, with many twists and turns. We also noticed the remnants of evidence of some serious partying that must have gone on last night. Tents were still set up in people's front yards (all empty) and the garbage bins were filled to overflowing with bottles and cans. There were, however, a few hardy souls out and about to cheer us on, which was nice.

When the sun did come up, we were to be found out in the French countryside in a big group of riders, but after about 100 km, we elected to ride at our own pace together and pretty soon found two things that held true through the rest of PBP. One was that most riders didn't pedal downhill. We

Smiles all round at Brest for Katherine and myself—halfway!



Our first checkpoint at Villanes la Juhel spoiled us for checkpoints for the rest of the ride. As we rode into the village, we were greeted by the sound of both music and that of a man on a microphone—it was like a stage show, and we (the riders) were the unwitting stars. After getting our food, Katherine seemed to be in a tussle with a small boy who appeared to be wresting her tray off her, we soon realised that his job was to carry riders' trays from the cafeteria to the eating hall. Katherine quickly dug out some Australian pins (she had brought for just such an occasion) as a reward, and they seem to go over very well. We began to realise that PBP was a 'big thing' not just for the participants, but for the locals whose village the ride passes through.

About 10 km after restarting, we got a pleasant surprise: Warren had caught us up. He was the first Aussie rider we had seen since the start he became our riding companion for the next 1000 km.

The rain continued off and on, but always seemed heaviest when nearing a control. About ten kilometres from Fougères, we got soaked in a rainstorm that continued through our time off the bike and into our departure. We had eaten again here (more pins given out) and met Pepe as we did so, and so we set off as a team of four Aussies...but, once again, it didn't take too long for our 'train' of non-Aussies to form.

The rain had eased, but the heavy cloud persisted, and a truly spectacular electrical storm was going on all around us with the lightning worryingly close at times. It seemed obvious we were 'racing the rain' and we put our heads down to try and get to Tintineac before a) it was dark, and b) it began raining again. We failed on both counts by 10 km—heaviest rain yet into the checkpoint, where we passed a covered stage with some manner of folk music/dance troupe doing their thing, with a bedraggled bunch of locals watching on. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, but squinting through spectacles awash with water trying to find both the control and a dry place to sit, I'm not sure I was.

We restarted and, as if on cue, 10 km from Loudéac we all got bucketing rain again—so it was into the checkpoint all awash again, but at least this time we knew we wouldn't be leaving for about another six hours. It was 1 am when we rolled in, and it was just a hive of activity: people coming in,

people leaving, and people trying to eat, shower and sleep (sometimes all at once). The bike compound was very crowded and so was the dining hall. There were hordes of people sleeping at the tables and on the floor and in any available place that people weren't actually walking on. The showers were like a school camp: open changing room for the males that fronted onto a corridor that led to the more private women's showers. After paying your €3, you were given a cake of soap shaped not unlike a hockey puck, and a handful of paper towels. The shower room was just that—a room full of shower nozzles sticking out of the ceiling. Ah well, when in France... A nudie run to the shower room was accomplished, hopefully without offending too many



A light breakfast for Katherine on Day 3 at Loudéac

people. Katherine had enjoyed a far more private shower and had met Bec there, and the following conversation occurred, "Way to go Bec, you must be riding really well, on your way back already", "No, I'm still heading out.", "Ah...oh dear..." We booked beds and got in them (in our fresh cycle gear) at 2.00 am, requesting a wake-up call at 6 am. Surrounded by hundreds of occupied beds, I certainly didn't spend too long tossing and turning: lie down, blanket on, briefly listen to the sound of rain on the roof, and then snooze—only waking up three hours later when someone mistakenly turned the gym lights on.

I had the opportunity to hear the sounds of my fellow PBPers in the morning, and it mostly consisted of rustling plastic bags and farting—lots and lots of farting. They seemed to come from all areas of the gym, and I peered vainly around trying to see if a conductor was at work, but it seemed to be an impromptu jam session. With this chorus ringing in my ears and smelling in my nose, I went to check the weather. Ha! Success! The rain has stopped (but still foggy) and it became apparent that a lot of people had already left. We joined the exodus and as we climbed to Roc'h Trevezel—the highest point of the ride—the low cloud got closer, with result being the large communications tower that is a feature of the region was largely hidden in fog and I missed seeing it (got quite a surprise on the way back when the fog had lifted).

We began a descent that seemed to go on for about 40 km. As usual, Katherine, Warren and I had picked up a train, and about eight of us headed down to Brest. We rounded a corner near the end, revealing the bridges of Brest—we Aussies all whooped and hollered, for we could see our halfway point. Our silent wheel-sucking companions said nothing and, if anything, glared disdainfully at us for showing emotion. We stopped for photos at the bridge, so our sour-faced friends had no option but to ride on without us. We pondered where the famous lighthouse was—it and the Eiffel tower are the 'landmarks' of the event and feature prominently on the official jersey—it is actually a further 20 km away, and I found it a bit ironic that the two icons of the event cannot actually be seen from the ride route. We had a tour all around Brest, being compulsorily shown the sights (the ship building area being a highlight) before we were sent up the hill to the checkpoint.

The food at Brest won the dual prize of being the most expensive and worst of the whole trip—I really think a plate of pasta should have a little bit more than a tablespoon of bolognaise sauce dripped upon it. It was bit of a reunion as Dr Jonathon and Pepe were there as well as Bec. Dr J was the envy of all as he tucked into food (bought by his handlers Richard and Sonia) that didn't come from the checkpoint. Pepe announced he had had enough, his neck had collapsed—he couldn't hold his head up—and he was getting a train back to Paris. Soon it was time

to go, and we left the others to their fates (of which Bec's appeared to be snoozing at the table) and we headed off, following signs that now said 'Paris' rather than 'Brest'. After Roc'h Trevezel, the ride back to Carhaix seemed to

their tale of woe. It was here our plan changed—Katherine said we have to help them get to the next checkpoint in good condition, which meant not letting them ride slowly by themselves. I was a little apprehensive about this,

would ensure they always had a wheel to sit on and didn't have to face the wind. It might mean WFHT, but we could afford it—we had spare time up our sleeve and were riding well. So, after an additional 45 minutes of WFHT while they ate, we were off. And what a difference it made—Bec has never ridden better. We flew over the rolling hills of this part of the route and made Fougères in good time. Food was had and we clocked up another 30 minutes of WFHT, then whizzed along to Villanes, picking up Ming along the way. The checkpoint was even better on the way back, principally because it wasn't raining this time. We rode down the main street and it felt like the finish—a real party atmosphere.

All the usual food was had, and then Howard and Bec dropped the bombshell that they had a bag drop here and would be changing outfits. We went back to the bikes and Ming, rather optimistically, got his bike out from the rack as if to go. Katherine soon put him right. Pepe surprised us all by turning up—he hadn't pulled out! Turns out there were no TGVs from Brest, and the normal train was going to take so long, he thought he might as well ride back. We spent the next 45 minutes communicating with the watching locals, and Katherine bought out the Australia pins again, and every kid around us was lining up to get one. There were a few unhappy faces when Katherine interpreted a few requests of, "Yes, I want a pin" as "No, I don't want a pin." It was all resolved in the end, and when Howard and Bec turned up, Katherine was giving out the last of them.

On our bikes again, and it wasn't long before the wheels started to fall off our little train. With our catching up and regroupings, we had an Aussie



Howard and Ian at Tintineac on the way back—not all WFH time is bad

be tailwind and downhill all the way—woo hoo! We set a good pace—but not as good as one of the HPVs who flew past us on a downhill at an estimated 90 km/h. We got him on the next uphill though. Back in Loudéac at about midnight. Katherine had a spare pair of ear plugs she gave me—a good move as it might cut out hearing all the farting.

The earplugs were removed in the morning, and I seemed to be hearing rain on the roof. "Don't tell me it's bloody raining again," I grumbled to myself. Only one way to check: quietly out of bed and out to door to view... stars, in a clear night sky...whaaaat? It turns out the noise of people rustling through plastic bags sounds exactly like rain on a tin roof—at least, it did on that morning.

It was a fast run out of town in the dark (via a secret control) and we got our first real sunshine of the ride heading into Tintineac (no folk group this time) and we had a nice feed and the comforting feeling that everything was going to plan. I was having one last pee stop when a familiar voice rang out, "E! Over here!" It was Howard, our first sighting of him. He had heard us at the secret control, but he had been lying down and was too tired to get up to greet us. He had got to Loudéac after us, and had left before us—and had had about two hours sleep so far the whole ride. He had met up with Bec and they were riding together. We went back upstairs to the restaurant and heard

and the reason for this was/is 'Waiting For Howard Time' (or WFHT).

WFHT is the amount of time you have to wait for Howard to prepare to get on his bike again after a break. Normally the more eager people are to go, the longer WFHT is (note: this sometimes gets modified to WFFHT when one is in a grumpy mood). This is not helped by the fact that Howard prefers to pack his bags with small coiled springs (like those in a Jack-in-the-Box) so the moment any bag is opened, all his important Audax possessions immediately leap from the bag and litter themselves around his feet and bike. WFHT mostly involves regathering these possessions and repacking them in his bag, taking care to ensure the springs are reloaded for the next stop.

However, a pair of mates needed help, so an Aussie train was organised—we

At Villanes, Ian explained WFH time to Ming



bunch of seven riders rolling along, plus about another five hangers-on. And then Howard had a flattie. We all pulled over, and Katherine announced that 'the girls' (she and Bec) would ride on. The world's fastest case of mass gender reassignment surgery occurred and I was shortly thereafter left alone with Howard helping him fix his puncture.

The sun was beginning to set and that was the trigger for Howard's lack of sleep to catch up with him. For the next hour or so, I had first-hand experience of what sleep deprivation can do to people. And, quite frankly, it's a bit scary. Howard normally makes a lot of sense, but he was making none that night. We finally stopped at a small village where we regrouped and Howard had two coffees, a Coke and a good lie down, then headed off to Mortagne. It was a painfully slow trip—the coffee and Coke didn't seem to have worked, and Bec was continually making sure he didn't fall asleep.

Midnight at the checkpoint was a hive of activity—people everywhere! We went for food and noticed a lot of tired people here. Not too surprising really. Physically, we had had a very easy last few hours, but mentally it was a bit taxing. Howard and Bec were going to get up and be on the road at 4am, but we were going to have our four hours of sleep. We had no new gear to wear, so we decided to forgo the shower and head straight to bed. Now, I have never been in a morgue, but being shown by torchlight to our beds, made me feel like I was in one—bodies were laid out as far as I could see. It was like we had ended up in the aftermath of a terrible catastrophe.

Once again, the number of bikes in the morning is far less than the number there last night, tail-end Charlies again! Off into the dark, down the hill out of town and after a while we began to notice a lot of people sleeping on the side of the road—fellow PBPers I mean, not drunk locals. Some were asleep on grass verges, some in town squares and some on church steps and in doorways. I thought the best one, though, was the gentleman asleep in a field of cabbages—it looked like he had tumbled off the road in exhaustion, landed in the patch and thought, "Ah well, this'll do." Curiously, we were seeing riders heading the opposite way. We thought this strange, until we saw a motorcycle marshal stop, and try to turn one of them around. It would seem

these poor people had slept somewhere on the road, woken up and, in a hazy fog of exhaustion, had started heading back the way they had come.

It was about this time, Katherine attempted to strike up a conversation with a rider we were passing and who we subsequently unanimously agreed won the title of 'Mr PBP Grumpy Pants 2011'. The conversation went something like this. "Good morning", says Katherine brightly.

"What's good about it?"

"Well, it's the last day and we're nearly back to Paris"

"We're not going to Paris. We're going to Saint Quin-tain". Katherine swiftly decided he wasn't worth talking to.

At Dreux we saw Howard and Bec again. Howard was still 'doing a Howard', and Bec had her arms metaphorically full dealing with that. They and a little group of Aussies left 15 minutes before us and we rather arrogantly (based on previous performance) expected we would catch them up before the finish. Well, we saw neither wheel nor lycra of them. We debated whether we had passed them somewhere and not seen them, all the time thinking, "They couldn't still be

given out. We managed to swap our jerseys, me with a young Taiwanese rider who had jumped onto our Aussie train ("You guys Aussie TGV") and Katherine with an older Portuguese man who had just finished his sixth PBP which was impressive. She did find two large brown capsules in the back pocket later though...hmm, which was less impressive.

Katherine, Warren and I headed back to the hotel via the now familiar route of the Palace Gardens, and the ice cream vendor near the lake, dispensing his wares from the back of a restored 1920s truck, had three eager cyclists stopping to sample his products. There might be better places in the world to relax and contemplate the completion of a 1200 km bicycle ride than the gardens of a royal palace but at the moment, stretched out on the grass with a chocolate gelato cone in my hand, I couldn't think of them.

And in conclusion? Well, we felt our planning was right for us. It mightn't have worked for other people, but knowing your strengths and weaknesses was critical for planning the ride. We treated it like three and a half long training rides, and that's exactly



The three musketeers have finished!

ahead of us. If they are, they must be riding like the wind." It turns out they were riding like the wind, swapping off turns like a racing peloton. At 5 km from the end, there was a cluster of Aussie jerseys that, better yet, had a cluster of Aussies in them. In a neat role reversal, they were waiting for us!

And so we finished as a group and to be honest, it was a bit anti-climatic: processed though and your brevet stamped for the last time. Photos were had, people were met and our generous token of ONE free drink was

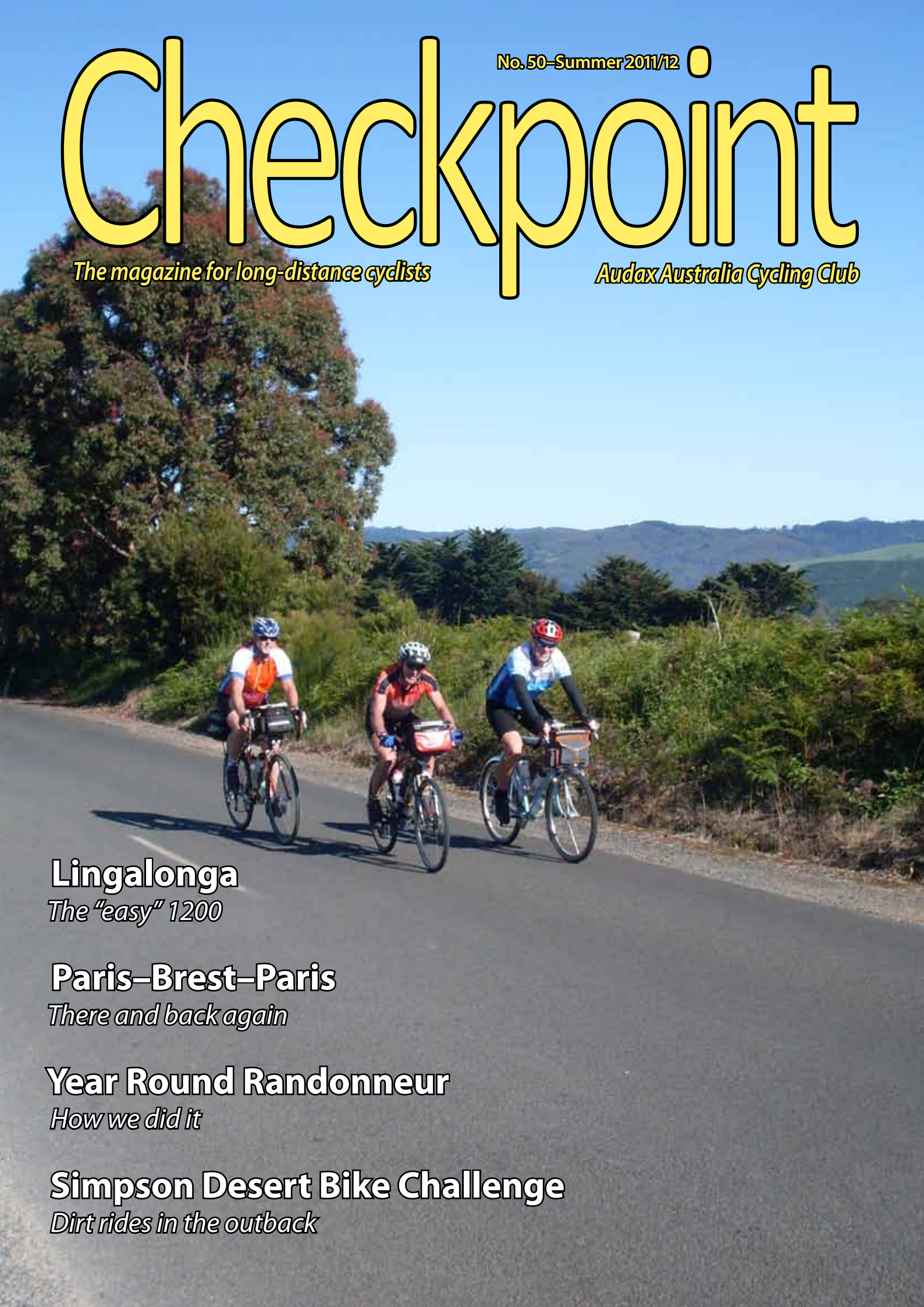
what it felt like. Checkpoints **didn't** blend into each other, we didn't suffer any hallucinogenic episodes, we never asked ourselves, "Why are we doing this?" and I wouldn't say it was a life-changing experience—it is, after all, just a very long ride on a bicycle. It was tremendously satisfying, and we were very glad to have done it and would certainly go back. Mainly for the patisseries...

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