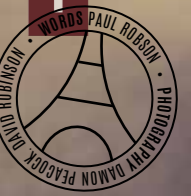


PARIS



BREST

To ride 1200km non-stop across northern France is asking a lot. But the oldest cycling event still regularly held on the open road offers a great deal in return...



PARIS

You have to be a certain type of person to be attracted by the notion of riding 1200km from Paris to the western tip of Brittany and back again in a single event, and for most of my adult cycling life I've existed on the fringes of this group.

I'm by no means a seasoned mile-muncher, but while most of my colleagues and friends scoff at the very idea of riding Paris-Brest-Paris, I've always been intrigued – not so much by the huge distance, but rather by the thought of being a part of history. A very small part of a very particular history, for sure, but even in the 21st century, to be an *ancien* of Paris-Brest-Paris – an event that dates back to the 19th – still means something.

I'd researched the event in the past so I knew, in pure statistical terms, what I was up against. To qualify to ride PBP you have to complete a set of sanctioned qualifying rides of 200, 300, 400 and 600km between January and July leading up to the race, after which there is just the small matter of completing the event itself.

It's also worth noting that PBP takes place once every four years – like the Olympics – so if I didn't commit to it in 2015, who knows where life would have taken me by 2019? Plenty of people have ridden multiple PBPs, but for me it felt like it was now or never, and I knew I'd end up regretting never.

Perhaps the biggest initial wake-up call as to the sheer scale of what I'd undertaken came when I submitted my entry for my 600km qualifier – Windsor-Chester-Windsor. First I had to come to terms with the fact that, yes, it really was *that* Chester. Then came the realisation that riding all the way from Windsor to Chester and back represented only half of the distance I would eventually be riding in France.

I decided to take myself off to meet Nick Thomas of The Endurance Coach in Lancashire. While seasoned long-distance riders might like to describe PBP as 'just a bike ride', I had never ridden further than 300km in one go – and that only once. This was clearly something that I was going to have to train for. Seriously.

But whether it was the gruelling month-by-month training plans Nick delivered, or the increasingly arduous qualifiers, the one thing that kept me



Fresh-faced at the start: just 1200km to go!

going was the thought of being a part of Paris-Brest-Paris. And come mid-August, there I was in a hotel on the outskirts of the French capital, a handful of kilometres from the new national velodrome in St-Quentin-en-Yvelines and less than 24 hours away from beginning a bike ride that would last from Sunday evening until Thursday morning.

Drawing a 1230km radius on a map reveals that the distance I would ride on PBP could take me from my home in Bath to Prague, as the crow flies. But then, in a world of ever more extreme challenges, where triple-Ironman events aim to out-tough transcontinental bike races or desert ultra-marathons, Paris-Brest-Paris remains aloof and in a class of its own.

First run as a race back in 1891, it was PBP's success that inspired the first Tour de France. Now in its 18th edition (and 72nd year) as a Randonneur event, it is so much more than an endurance suffer-fest.

Of course, there are times during the 1230 hilly kilometres across Brittany when riders have to dig deep into their resolve. What do you do when it hurts to sit in the saddle and hurts to get out of it? When you're physically and mentally tired and the next control is still 80 night-time kilometres away? But it seems no one is here to prove anything to anyone but themselves – six thousand people with the same goal: to reach Paris, and with almost as much

interest in ensuring those around them make it as they have in making it themselves.

We counted riders from Japan, China, New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, Canada, USA, Malaysia, Singapore, Colombia and more amongst our fellow travellers, and just about every country in Europe was represented (or in the case of a team from the Serb-speaking part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, some areas that aren't even countries).

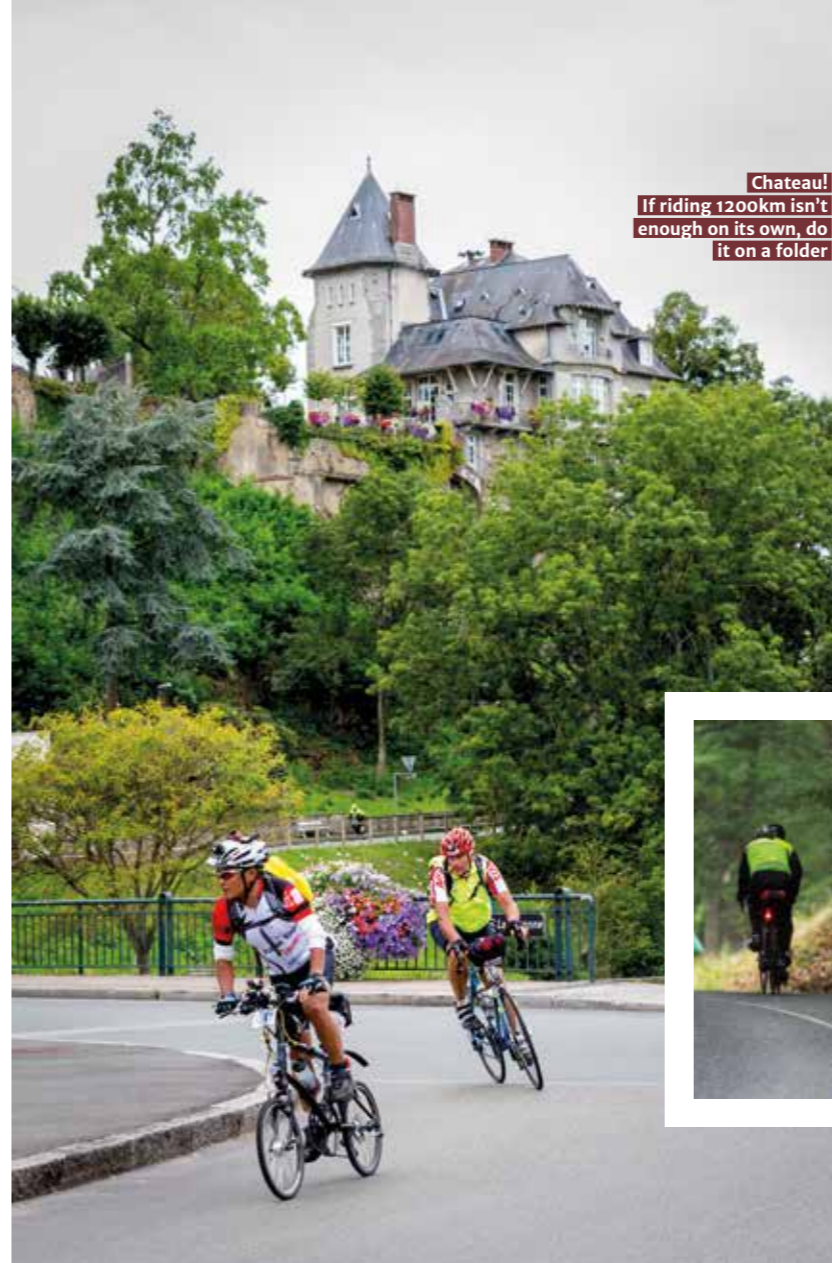
They had gathered from all corners of the globe to ride this historic event in one of cycling's greatest heartlands. In effect, this is a cycling World Cup – a World Cup in the sense that it brings together like-minded communities from all over the globe in celebration of their passion, not in the sense that it then pits them all against each other to decide who is the 'best'. Paris-Brest-Paris is pure festival, run by cyclists for cyclists, with the profit motive non-existent. In its purity it may just be the greatest cycling event on the planet (although, yeah, the Tour de France and Tour of Flanders are pretty good too).

The ride began from outside the national velodrome as evening fell on Sunday 16 August and, although riders had begun leaving two hours before my group rolled out, the crowds still lined the streets as we made our way through the Parisian suburbs and out into the countryside. It is a deliberate ploy of the organisers to keep largely to the French equivalents of B-roads as they

This was clearly something that I was going to have to train for. Seriously.

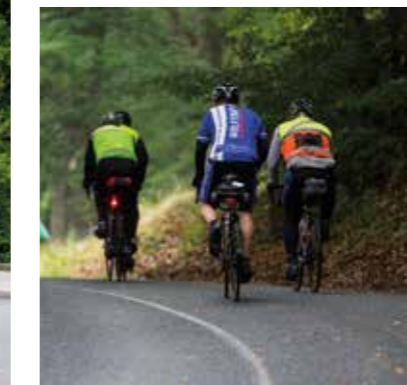


Light entertainment: riding through the night is just one of PBP's challenges



Chateau! If riding 1200km isn't enough on its own, do it on a folder

The first night and day of riding went to plan – to the extent that I had one



darkness, and when I think back to how long and arduous the latter part of my 200km qualifier had felt

wind the riders coastwards, avoiding most signs of the modern world as the villages and small towns of rural France roll by.

Not only does this make for a pleasant route, but it also means the event visits places that don't usually see much 'action'. These are the places that will make a week-long festival of a fleeting visit from the Tour, but once every four years they become the centre of the universe to a particular breed of cyclist, and they respond in stunning fashion.

Not a single village or farm turns its back on the riders of Paris-Brest-Paris, with families offering support and coffee in equal measure at their front gates and decorated towns hosting 24/7 refreshment and good humour.

The first night and day of riding went to plan – to the extent that I had one. It was a long 140km run to the first refreshment stop at Mortagne, but arriving in the dark to find a giant outdoor grilled sausage stall meant tasty topping up of energy levels was possible in short order and before long we were on our way again towards the first control at Villaines-la-Juhel.

That came after 220km of mostly

back at the start of March (see issue 302) it seems incredible that we have all but coasted here, each rider one small link in a chain of red rear lights blinking their way to the horizon.

Villaines itself is quiet and dark as we roll into the control with food, coffee and getting the first precious stamp on our brevet cards foremost on our minds. It will look very different when we return in the opposite direction on Wednesday.

Having ridden all night, our next objective is... to ride all day. The 'plan' that I referred to a little earlier involved me making it to Carhaix, 526km into the ride, before getting my head down for a few hours. There are a couple of bail-out options before then, but taking one of them would inevitably have meant falling back into 'the bulge' – the main body of riders that quickly clog up a control adding time to every aspect of your stop and making the idea of getting a camp bed for a few hours little more than fantasy.

I make it, however, coaxing myself to press on from first Loudeac and then Tinteniac to reach Carhaix in the early hours of Tuesday morning to secure a bed

until 6am. It comes with a bedsheet, but no blanket, and the room is far from warm. The army of volunteers that make PBP possible deserve the unstinting appreciation of every rider, and appreciate their efforts I do, but that appreciation doesn't stop keep out the cold, and in the end I spent the four hours resting rather than sleeping.

Leaving Carhaix on schedule, knowing that the next stop is Brest, is a huge boost to my morale. As always seems to be the case with out-and-back audax rides, however, the turnaround leg is a monster: 90km out to the coast, and 90km back means that I'll be riding 180km just to end up standing exactly where I am now. You could, of course, make the same argument for the whole endeavour, but for me that notion of working very hard to go absolutely nowhere always tends to hit me hardest at the turn, and in the case of PBP it doesn't help that this leg also includes the longest climb and some of the busiest roads of the whole event.

In the midst of all that, however, comes one of the event's highlights, the crossing of the old bridge into Brest to arrive at the control in a huge local school, knowing that the signs you will be following from now on will all say 'Paris' on them. It has taken me longer than I had hoped to get here, though, so I have no time to wallow in the satisfaction of a job half done.

I do know, however, that I will be able to break the journey back to Carhaix with coffee and cake outside a small butcher's shop opposite the old abbey in the beautiful village of Sizun. I know this because I broke the outward journey there too, basking in the warmth of the sunshine, the locals and my fellow cyclists.

In such moments, divorced momentarily from the pressures of maintaining forward momentum, it is possible to see Paris-Brest-Paris in its true context. A small village in a tucked-away corner of France is alive in a way it might not be again for another four years. Cyclists sit on every wall and kerb eating and drinking, locals line the streets proffering food and drink and the village café spills out into the middle of the road beneath the bunting as children rush around making the most of the fact that, for about 36 hours at least, their home is also home to people from across the globe.

The attraction of PBP to those who line the streets is that it gives them the opportunity to be part of something bigger, to witness ordinary people doing extraordinary things first hand. →



Racing through the dark: teaming up at night can be a thrill

distances increase that if you can just keep going during the tough times, even if you're reduced to pushing your easiest gear, you will hit the heights again. There were times during PBP when I thought I would never see the big ring again, only to be hammering along once more within half an hour.

Leaving Mortagne for Dreux on the final night is my leap-of-faith moment. My plan (which has proven beyond me once already) was to get to Dreux, just 64km from the finish, before sleeping, but my fall-back was to sleep at Mortagne. Although time is on my side to press on, I am tired and in considerable pain. But I have arrived at enough controls on my knees now, only to leave them with renewed vigour, to trust that I can do it again, and the difference between facing a final 64km in daylight tomorrow and 141km having to start in darkness is such that I decide to step back out into the night for one last big effort, praying that my lights and legs still have enough charge for the challenge ahead.

An inherently pessimistic person, I have increasingly found that life actually rewards optimism – and so it was that Paris-Brest-Paris rewarded my act of belief by presenting me with some of my best moments of the whole event. At least, that's what happens after I really commit to the challenge, having descended into



All roads lead to Paris – after 600km anyway

badly) and subsequently seeing the white lines in the road as a fence, which given the tractor incident was probably more a defence mechanism than anything else.

The night's endeavours set me back on course, but by this stage my legs are tired and my contact points with the bike are far from happy. I brought two pairs of shorts with me (a change of kit safely stowed away in my trusty Carradice) and I'm now wearing them both. I am also loosening off my left shoe constantly in an attempt to alleviate the increasing pain in the ball of my foot. I have the same pain in my right foot, but thankfully to a lesser degree. Out of the saddle, into the saddle, out of the saddle, into the saddle... mine is not exactly a wheel to follow.

My other technique for lessening the pain is to press less hard on the pedals, changing into lower and lower gears and going ever more slowly as a result. As it has before, however, company saves me. After eschewing the control food in Fougères in favour of a bar outside selling sausage crepes, on the next leg my spirits are restored by striking up a conversation and suddenly realising that I am riding at the same speed as my companion with no ill effects.

Indeed, it is a mark of long-distance cycling that form can desert you and return without warning or explanation with peculiar regularity. This is where your PBP qualification events will stand you in good stead, as you will learn as your

Out of the saddle, into the saddle... mine is not exactly a wheel to follow



Hotel Audax: Any time, any place, anywhere when the need for sleep strikes

what I imagine to be a thickly wooded valley and begun to climb out again wondering what the hell I am doing out here on my own, chasing down random blinking lights in the dark.

Firstly I come across one of the Italian riders I had seen at the sign-on on Saturday, dressed head to toe in vintage woollen cycling kit and riding a bike that predated the First World War.

As we drop into a small streetlit village, I find him with his feet on the handlebar, pedals spinning unaided thanks to his fixed gear, approaching two marshalls with widening eyes, to whom he calls out, "Bella vita, boys, bella vita" as he sweeps around the corner they are manning. It is the most stylish piece of cycling I have ever seen. I would see him again back at the National Velodrome in Paris and, with no mutual language, I shook his hand and gesticulate enthusiastically to him. He probably thinks it was to congratulate him on completing the whole ride on a bike almost as old as the event itself, and I suppose it was, but mostly it was for that moment, a highlight of my entire PBP and an image I'll never forget.

The next wonder of the night is the spontaneous formation of a multinational group of Spaniards, Seattlites and a Brit



Bench warming: a lone rider layers up before attempting to sleep

that eats up the kilometres despite the Brit still having to constantly switch between standing and sitting in an effort to manage the ever-increasing pain. Barrelling through the pitch dark with just our bike lights to illuminate the way is a thrill ride, and gets us to Dreux in time for me to sleep.

Sleep, again, is a generous description of the rest I get on the dormitory floor (the beds are full), but nothing can dampen my mood now. My overriding thought from the moment I set off four nights ago was to be here, now. I've had my first Paris-Brest pastry and a mug of hot chocolate and I've got four hours before I need to get up, eat breakfast and roll into Paris.

Come morning, the control has become considerably busier as those who have ridden through the night file in, eat, and fall asleep where they sit. They also look wet, and indeed the first rain of the week has arrived for the final kilometres. Nothing can dampen the spirits now, though, and anyway, I've got mudguards.

One of said mudguards comes

Barrelling through the dark with just our bike lights to illuminate the way is a thrill ride



Heads down: even a short nap can be a big help

a bit loose after 20 or so kilometres, and I ask an American rider if he can have a look as we ride to check it's nothing serious. As we strike up a conversation my new companion Wei's bar bag falls off in front of his wheel but he skilfully avoids disaster and we both set about our fixes and ride to the finish together. Crowds await us as arrive at the velodrome, but the overriding sensation is one of relief rather than joy, and we're both aghast to discover that we have arrived too early for beer to be on sale.

A short ride to a nearby pub soon rectifies that situation, and it is here, reflecting on a momentous 87 hours, that an overwhelming sense of satisfaction starts to kick in. It doesn't take much to make a sleep-deprived cyclist that's just ridden 1200km tipsy, especially when the beer is Belgian, but we indulge in a couple before wobbling back to our hotels with smiles, memories and a sense of achievement for company. **PUS**

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

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