

Epic rides: Finding the limits

What distance is a challenge when 100km isn't nearly enough? **Matt de Neef** investigates, and reveals a personal exploration.

Everyone rides for different reasons. Some people love a Sunday cruise to keep up their fitness, others like their social coffee-shop rides; some people like racing and others ride simply as a means of getting from A to B. And then there are the riders who enjoy covering distances that most of us would consider to be a long drive.

For me, the most appealing aspects of riding are the social interaction, the challenge of climbing, getting fit and the adventures that a bicycle can take you on. And every so often I like to throw in a very long ride to test myself, to find out where my limits are.

I've completed Bupa Around the Bay three times and the SCODY 3 Peaks Challenge three times as well. While these rides are very different in terms of their difficulty – Around the Bay is almost entirely flat while 3 Peaks definitely isn't – they're both more than 200km long and both require a very long day in the saddle to conquer.

But having survived six 200km+ rides, a part of me has started to wonder: how far could I ride in a day? How far could I get before my body (and mind) gives up?

For the past few months I've been thinking about a long ride I'd really like to try, to see if I'm capable of pushing myself beyond the 200km mark. The route I have in mind is a one-way epic that covers the length of Victoria's Great Alpine Road from Bairnsdale to Wangaratta. I call it The Great Alpine Ride.

Limit seekers

Early last year, one of my good mates, Dougie Hunt, wanted to find out what the limits of his physical ability were. He went out and rode 300km, mostly solo, and got through it with few hassles. Reasoning that if he'd gotten through 300km smoothly, then he mustn't have reached his limit, Dougie took the train to Mt Gambier one Friday late last year, and rode back to Melbourne the following morning: 436km in a single day.

I know what it's like to put in some big days on the bike. But the idea of riding 400km+ in one 24-hour period boggles my mind. But it gets worse.

If you've been in and around the cycling community for a few years there's every chance you would have heard of the Audax Australia Cycling Club. Audax riders revel in the near-impossible, riding distances in one day that most of us wouldn't dream of riding in five days. And it's not just one-day rides: there are several events on the Audax Australia calendar that have riders covering many hundreds of kilometres over just a few days.

One rider who's learnt a lot in the past year is Joel Nicholson, a guy I've had the pleasure of riding with on several occasions. In just over a year of doing Audax events, Joel has completed 25 epic rides, including five 200km rides, five 300km rides, a 360km ride, three 400km rides, five 600km rides and a 1200km ride.

"One of the main appeals of cycling

is the challenge of pushing your own limits", Joel told me. "In most cases that means riding faster or climbing bigger mountains but I find the challenge in riding longer distances because there is really no upper limit to how far you can ride and so no upper limit to how much you can challenge yourself."

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"I mean, you can only ride so fast and mountains only get so high, but the road just keeps going forever ..."

When I spoke to Joel, he was busy training for the Delirium 24-Hour Cycle Race on April 20–21. Held on a 3.7km circuit near the Western Australian region of Margaret River, Delirium is a

simple race to see who can cover the greatest distance in 24 hours. The race record is an astonishing 647.5km in a single day.

I asked Joel what he wanted to get out of the Delirium.

"I am hoping to be able to ride at least 600km during the 24 hours. Previous

experience suggests that 600km+ is certainly achievable (if painful), so it is a matter of preparing well and just hoping that it all comes together on the day."

One of the most recent Audax events Joel completed was a 600km ride in late February along the Great Ocean Road. Joel completed the hilly and windswept

course in a little over 24 hours, without any sleep. Just thinking about that sort of effort makes me hurt all over.

The Audax concept certainly isn't unique to Australia. In fact, Audax (Latin for "bold or courageous") began at the end of the 19th century in Europe wherein a team of cyclists, led by a captain, would cover great distances together at a fixed average speed. The Audax rides in Australia are a different sort of ride: the more popular "randonnees" are done by individuals, without a fixed average speed but with a generous time limit.

The most famous of all the randonnees, Paris–Brest–Paris, is a 1200km epic that riders must complete within a 90-hour time limit. The course record for amateur riders is less than 43 hours – an average speed of almost 28km/h, assuming no breaks were taken in that time. Incredible.

And then there's the Race Across America: an annual event that takes ►►

riders nearly 5,000km from the west coast of the US to the east coast. While many people do the race as part of a relay team, there is a solo option in which the riders are given 12 days to traverse the country: more than 400km per day, for nearly two weeks.

With rides this long, we're surely getting close to the very limits of human endurance; the most punishment the human body can take before it breaks down completely. For most bike riders, this kind of limit-pushing has very little appeal.

I look at feats like these and marvel at how amazingly fit and strong (both physically and mentally) these riders are. But I have no desire to go out and ride for 24 hours (or longer!) just to see if I can.

That said, I do like the idea of riding the Great Alpine Road in one day. Maybe that desire is less about the distance (although it would be satisfying to say I'd ridden 300km in a day) and more about the adventure – the sense of conquering a long, hilly stretch of road in its entirety, all in one go.

Exploring my limits

The route of my Great Alpine Ride is roughly 306km from start to finish with a small bump – Mt. Hotham – in the middle. There's no doubt it would be a challenging ride, but it would also be a terrific adventure.

Why that particular route? I'm not the sort of person that would simply go out and ride 300km on flat roads or a small circuit – to me a ride of that length has to have some kind of meaning to it, whether it takes me on a particularly scenic bit of road, or a meaningful loop, or gets me to some particular destination. For me, riding the length of one of Victoria's most scenic tourist roads has a nice, clearly defined feel to it.

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So what's involved in completing a ride like that? For a start, I'll need to pick a date that's far enough away to allow me to train for the distance. I'd also want to pick a bunch of people to ride with me – there's nothing more boring than riding that sort of distance on your own. Having others with you on a ride that long is a great way to pass the time, and you'll all have a story you can tell in the years to come.

I'd try to organise a support crew as well. Having someone to meet you along the way with real food (there are only so many energy gels you can eat), drinks and

an encouraging word or two can make all the difference.

With the date set, the on-road and support crew picked, and accommodation at either end booked, it's all about the training.

For a 300km-long ride, with a whole bunch of climbing, I'd be looking at about 12 hours on the bike – a massive day whichever way you look at it. That will require a serious amount of endurance so I'd be looking to do several training rides of 200km+ with a handful of climbs.

In my experience it's not only the physical training that's important, but also the mental training. If you're an impatient person like me it can be easy to spend most of the ride looking down at your speedo, counting down the kilometres. But when you're aiming to ride 300km in a single day, that sort of approach will only be cause for frustration and impatience.

I know if I'm going to ride 300km in a day, I'll have to get used to not looking at the distance I've already covered, instead focusing on enjoying myself and getting used to spending hours at a time riding at a comfortable rhythm.

Riding 300km in a day might sound like a ridiculous undertaking – and it is; that's part of the appeal – but there are riders out there that see 300km as you or I might see a 50km ride. I'll let you know how I go. ⚙️

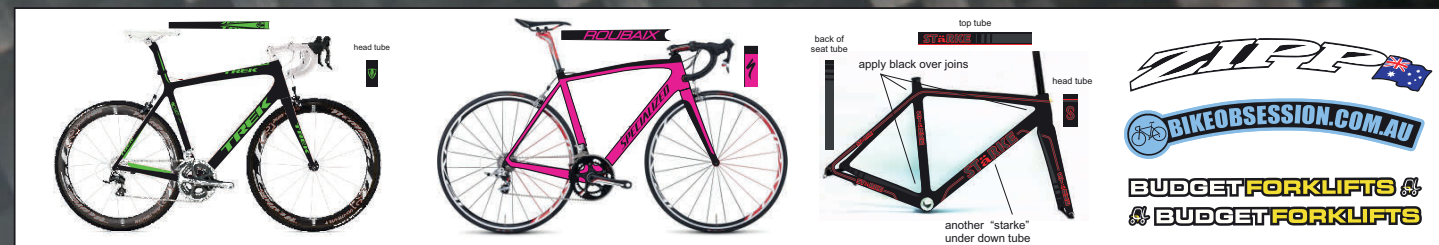
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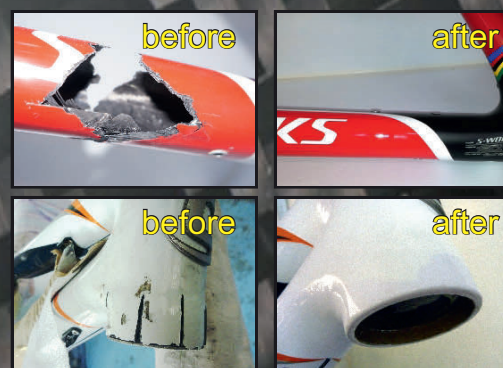
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