

Mille Cymru 2014

written by Marcus | 4 July, 2014



Any miles in the legs up until our departure date next month can only help so last weekend I took on the Mille Cymru Audax: a 1018km self-supported and self-guided ride around some of the most scenic and spectacular (i.e. hilly) roads that Wales has to offer.

Kirsty is far too sensible to take on this sort of ridiculous challenge but she was able to watch my physical and mental degradation as she was volunteering at one of the control points where food and beds were provided. So the tandem was left at home in favour of a solo bike but I was joined by my loyal companion for these sort of adventures, Matt, along with 83 other foolhardy riders.

Here's my account of the journey:



Brevet card for collecting stamps at each control as proof of passage

Apprehension at the start, rain forecast, photos taken then we're off. 1018km ahead of us. 16,000m of hills, 75 hours to ride it in. How much would it hurt? Was it even possible?

Rolling Shropshire countryside, through Bishops Castle (last visited for the tandem triathlon), over the Long Mynd and first dose of glorious views. Showers then hot steaming roads. Repeated climbing until first control and first sight of the delightful AUK Van of Delights. Matt and I regroup and continue after eating cake. Held up by a flock of sheep in the road. Into Hay and up the Gospel Pass. Always worth the effort. One of my favourite descents down to Llanthony Priory with risky speed into sketchy corners. Food. Onwards on familiar roads to Monmouth and Tintern. More food at a hidden brewery! Distraught rider with broken cable saved by Matt's magic Caradice.

Up and over to Raglan, Abergavenny with signs up for the National Road Race Champs. The polar opposite of our ride? Past Tallybont, Brecon until Mynydd Eppynt stands between us and sleep. Loose gravel on the descent scrubs off any ideas of a speedy drop to the main road. Nice spin into Llanwrtyd Wells, the smallest and best town in the UK, to be greeted by Kirsty with plenty of hot food. Day 1 done.

2 hours sleep in a proper bed (thank you Kirsty) isn't enough to shake off much tiredness. Shouts from a stag party amused by the buff on my head, I had my stag in Llanwrtyd Wells too "And you came back?" they ask. Bowl of porridge, fruit juice, tea but no Matt. 2:55am and I'm ready to go back to bed when in he stumbles. Force feed him and out the door by 3:05. Both of us feeling groggy and lacking much power but the faint glow in the sky tells us morning is on its way. Something flaps around in front of me then flies into my chest. A bat! Familiar roads from the Brevet Cymru then the climb over Llanllwyni Mountain. Now plenty of daylight but plenty of mist and fog too making it quite eerie. A group of ponies peers at us from the mist at the top. Cilgerran control where we scoff sausage sandwiches and coffee. The 4 Germans that were ahead of us are now 3 and riding on no sleep.



St Davids, Pembrokeshire

A missed turn before Fishguard adds an extra climb and some bonus kms. Steep drop into Fishguard and steep out again sets the theme for most of the rest of the day. Along with scorching sunshine. Feeling a bit sick at St Davids and only manage half a baked potato but push on regardless. Road like a saw edge with sharp pointed climbs and descents in and out of sandy bays. Wonderful views. Interaction with a triathlon and shouting encouragement to the runners. We used to do that once upon a time. Wish I'd eaten more of that potato.

Big bridge over into Pembroke, Saundersfoot, Pendine Sands. A tunnel out of Tenby and being told not to cycle in it. A toasted Panini at The Smugglers Inn and Matt realises he's left his wallet in St Davids. I'm not going back to get it for him. The butcher where he bought our bananas would post it back to Bristol. Phew.

More Van of Delights with tea and stock up on cake. Then A40, more A40 and then a bit more A40. On paper an easy spin but in practice a head wind (of course) and tired legs left me tucked up behind Matt. Eventually Llandovery for a quick breather

before the final climb of the day back into to El Dub.



Matt on the mountain

No sign of Kirsty this time but plenty of hot food to fill up on. A tough day and my knees are telling me as such so a few pills and some freezing spray are swallowed and squirted. Still no Kirsty so looks like I'll have to brave the village hall. Staggering out onto the street and there she is, thank goodness! Tucked up in bed with a nice cup of tea and out like a light for 6 luxurious hours. Well 5 luxurious hours as the clock was an hour fast. 60 minutes snooze before breakfast at 2:30. Now Sunday morning. Matt not far behind this time and both of us ready to tackle the 3rd day. Even my knees feel ready. Outside there's rain and darkness and we begin to climb. And climb. And climb. Devils Staircase with 25% gradient up 15% gradient down. Easy on the brakes. Rail it round the corners on single track roads. A great way to start the day. We pass a group of three who issue a warning for the final drop into Tregaron. It is well advised. Long but steady alpine-like climb up to Devil's Bridge with acres of greenery all around. A buzzard chewing on some road kill misses our

approach. Startled, it takes off and flies alongside at arm's reach for a few metres. Whoop with amazement! Out of the village then sharp right into sharp descent to the next control. Andy's house is calm and serene in the valley. A fellow rower and marathon runner. Steve is there having breakfast, he braved the Tregaron road overnight. The Germans had overslept but still 2 hours ahead.



Matt on the Craig Goch Dam, Elan Valley

Only one way back out and with a bellyful it isn't easy climbing back to Devil's Bridge. But legs feel good for both of us, the first two days must have served as training to make us stronger? Up onto another mountain road with open countryside all around and not a single car. Right turn into The Elan Valley which I have wanted to ride for a while. It doesn't disappoint as we are treated to fine views over the lakes and dams all bathed in sunshine.



Elan Valley

Stop in Rhayader for a banana then lumpy road to Llanidloes to join Steve again for 3rd breakfast. He is planning to ride home to Milton Keynes afterwards. Another level of bonkers. Ahead is a real highlight as we take on the mountain road to Machynlleth. A few ups and super-fast downs. Speed wobbles at 45mph on one drop raise the heart rate nicely! Then we hit the climb proper to the summit with views to the coast and the road snaking out below us. Quick photo stop then freewheeling fun all the way into Mach.



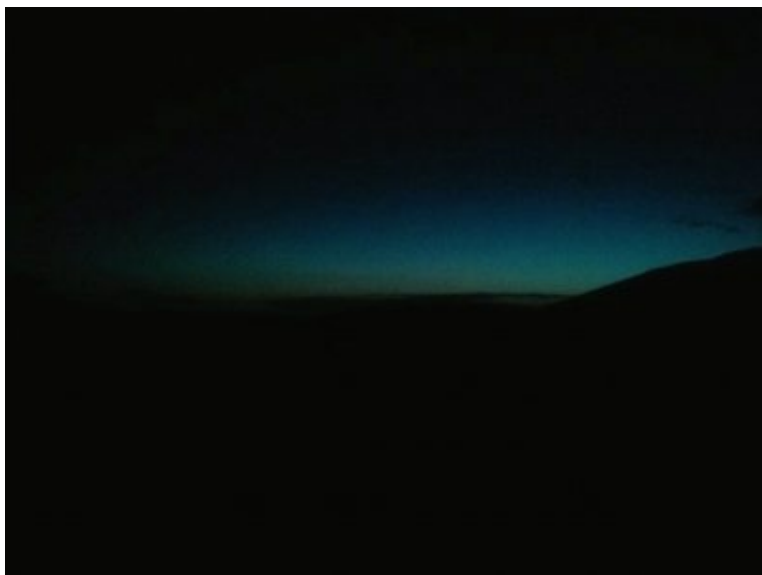
Downhill all the way to Machynlleth

Out of Mach and turning left instead of the more familiar right to head towards the coast. Past a finishing line for a charity ride from Wolverhampton to Averdyfi. Resist the urge to cross it with raised arms. Lovely road winding round the shoreline and into Tywyn, last visited when Racing The Train. The estuary opens up in front of us and Barmouth Bridge comes into view. Too early for the Van of Delights this time. Bumpy crossing into Barmouth for fish and chips. Strange being amongst 'the general public' not helped by peculiar looks at my oily face (Matt hadn't told me). Quick visit to a cash point for a statement as proof of passage then onwards to Harlech. Huge sandy beaches below and Snowdonia dominating the horizon. Could the weather get any better?

Convoy escort for a long stretch of roadworks and big queue of impatient cars at the other end. We're not sorry. Right turn towards Rhydd. Steep and wooded. Worth the effort as we cruise alongside a tranquil lake. Climb again to Beddgelert then long steady climb out. It never seems that long the other way round. Warm summer evening in Snowdonia and we skirt round Wales' biggest mountain. Hunt for the info control then off to Llanberis. Stop for Lucozade to fuel us for Pen-y-Pass then up we go. Perfect evening for a beautiful ascent. Rescue-copter hovers off Crib Goch helping stranded climbers. Feeling smooth and strong then it kicks up a little more before the top. Admire the view, pull on a windproof and drop 10 miles down to Betys-y-coed for the end of the 3rd day.

The control helpers are caught by surprise but quickly rustle up broth and butties and hot drinks. Matt and I dazed and confused being so near and yet so far from the end. Rumours of no food at Lake Vyrnwy until later mean stocking up with flapjacks and bananas to make sure we make it all the way. More riders arrive but plug in the earplugs and pull down the

eye mask. Time for a short nap with an 11:30 wake up booked. By 11pm not much sleeping is happening so may as well carry on riding. This time alone as Matt is keen for more zeds. A decision confirmed by one of the volunteers who tells me "Audaxing is a cruel sport, do what you have to do". Rice pudding and coffee then out.



The final morning is on its way

Wearing all the clothes I have (not enough) out into the night again and refreshing cold air. Must not make a mistake as this is risky riding alone. Info control to name a church that I can't pronounce so take a photo instead. Climb, climb, climb Cym Hafodredwydd up through the woods out of the saddle for 3km. Feeling toasty at the top but straight away cold and getting colder as the road slopes down again. Then colder still with every dip that crosses a small stream. Icy cold. Must keep riding hard to generate heat. 27km to Bala where perhaps there would be a pub or petrol station for warmth? Wish I had some leg warmers but they were sent back to Bristol in Kirsty's car. Must not make a mistake, must not get a mechanical. Finally the bright lights of Bala. A change of gear and a twisted chain. Badly twisted. Not good. Off the bike, chain breaker and quick link in shaking hands. The link won't join until I stand hard on the pedals. A 10 minute stop and I am now shivering uncontrollably. Mild panic as I can't

ride in a straight line and no sign of anything open to find warmth and shelter. Ride round the high street for a few minutes, peering through locked hotel doors before feeling more composed and the decision is made to get on with the next climb.



Dawn over Lake Vyrnwy

Taking note of each house as I pass in case I get into trouble and have to come back down. Easing up Bwlch y Groes. Talking to the sheep and owls to keep myself awake. The last big climb of so many big climbs. The shadows of the hills all around start to become faintly visible with the hint of dawn breaking through. Then the top arrives with enough light to make out the outline of the valley ahead. Narrow, gravel strewn descent to Lake Vyrnwy and a memorable circuit around the lake shore with the dark waters appearing through the trees and vivid colours now in the sky. Across the dam and down to the most welcome control of the whole ride. I'd survived the freezing night and am rewarded with beans on toast. 952km ridden, just 66km to go and the flattest of all. After the 3km climb that is.

Once up and over this lump, the English border is fast approaching. Strong legs but sleepy head. Very sleepy. Too sleepy. A nice porch in a churchyard provides a bench to lay

my head. Woken 8 minutes later by an explosion or a gunshot. Nicely awake now. Flat fast lanes towards the finish with each route sheet direction a manageable 2-3km. Keep ticking them off. Approaching Shrewsbury and mingling with the commuters, oblivious to where I'd come from. Last few lines of a very long route sheet and a last gentle climb along a narrow lane and finally rolling back into Upton Magna where it all began, 68 hours ago.



And all for a medal
and a mug.

Welcomed by John and Linda, brevet card stamped, mug and medal awarded. Eat and rest, rest and eat. Call to Kirsty to tell her I'm alive and well. Hauling the tent out of the car, quick pitch then climb in for glorious sleep. 2 hours later wake up cooked and dehydrated and clambering to open the door for air. More sleep with a cooling breeze this time. Matt arrives and sleeps in the sunshine. Both of us exhausted, broken but happy we'd made it.

The longest of long rides (so far) and the hilliest of hilly rides but a journey to remember for a lifetime. Thank you

John, Linda and all the volunteers for making the extraordinary possible.