

## Perth Albany Perth – An Aussie AUDAX 1,200km Randonee.

Whilst not in the same league number of participant wise as the better know Paris Brest Paris (PBP) 1,200km ride, the Perth Albany Perth (PAP) ride is an Australian version held in Western Australia every 4 or 5 years.

I decided some time ago that I needed a focus for my long distance rides for 2006 and going over to Perth for this ride in October seemed like a good idea.

Training through the year for me involved lots of long distance Audax rides up to 300km a day around the ACT and NSW countryside as well as my daily commute and long morning rides. I had about 15,000km in my legs before the PAP.

I ventured into four figure rides with the Great Southern Randonee in 2004 and a 1,000km out of Canberra in May of 2006 so I already had the equipment sorted.

I jetted into Perth a couple of days before the ride started and met up with Bob another Canberra Audax rider and we explored some of the extensive bike-ways, routes and Cafes of Perth. Overall Perth really impressed me with its bike facilities and the general attitude of cyclists, waving to each other as they passed and basically being good citizens. It's a great place for cyclists with dedicated lanes everywhere you would expect one to be and good on-road lanes that actually are well signed and go where you want to go.

There was a small group ride on the Thursday morning to pre-ride the Southern Freeway bike path and get familiar with the various deviations due to major road works. This ended with a pleasant lunch in a South Perth Café with Bob, Ian and Steve.

The Friday before the PAP I took a train to Fremantle and ferry out to Rottnest Island. Hired a big fat heavy mountain bike and did a 35km circuit of the island which has no private cars, lots of tourist accommodation and lots of kids on holidays. Didn't see any Quokkas (small bouncy furry marsupials) unfortunately. There are some lovely beaches and views about the island although it does get very windy out there.

On the 2006 PAP there were 17 starters (8 from WA, 3 from VIC, 2 from ACT, 3 Germans and a lone American - Paul from Seattle who also did the GSR in 2004).

The organiser had implemented a special rule for PAP to encourage riders not to be out on the Busselton Highway after dark for safety reasons and due to limited support vehicle and helper resources. This suited me fine, as my intention was to maintain a good pace during the day and get a good sleep at each of the three overnight controls generally taking in the scenery and bakeries. Of course a die-hard could ride straight through and not stop if they really wanted to try and prove something.

The first 45km of the ride was along a nice straight bike path following the freeway South. Having ridden the initial section a couple of days before and sorted out the dead ends and turns because of road works so I knew where I was going. The local Audax riders leading the bunch out Saturday morning seemed to be talking too much and missed a turn. That was about the last I saw of the main bunch of riders as I cruised away into a strengthening headwind at my pace. I had already entered the route on my GPS so "*Mr Garmin*" and I pedalled southwards away from the suburbs on beautifully quiet flat and smooth roads through very green and wet farmland. The first control was at Pinjarra bakery (84km) and I partook of the baker's product. There were a couple of the Audax helpers here and I got the impression they may have been ex-racers by their comments.

From Pinjarra south the roads were very flat although the headwind made up for the lack of hills. Duncan from WA on his lightly equipped alloy road bike with minimally spoked wheels caught up with me at Busselton (250km) during one of my extended control stops which was a good effort considering the strong headwind. Duncan was carrying the absolute minimum amount of gear and clothing on his bike with the rest of his day gear being carried in the support vehicle trailer which he cursed when it failed to turn up, a situation which highlights to me the need to be independent and well equipped on Audax rides. We sort of rode together the remainder of the afternoon and night through to the first overnight control at Manjimup (370km) hostel. Red tail black cockatoos screeched through the treetops as we climbed from the coastal plains between Busselton and Manjimup. Got into the hostel at around 9:45pm and got some pasta down before taking a shower and hitting the sack.

Some of the other riders had a really hard time the first day and got in after midnight. Ian Boehm from Melbourne was just in when I was getting ready to roll around 3.30am. He later retired with an Achilles injury and Steve the other Victorian rider pulled out later that morning. Beyond Manjimup the South West Highway goes through some more "scenery" before finally reaching the Southern Ocean coast at Walpole (490km) and the bakery and shop were just

opening on my arrival. The wind intensified to a gale from the East along the coast and combined with the numerous ups and downs was quite demoralising. A quick stop at Denmark Hostel (555km) for some pumpkin soup and bread and it was out into the gale towards the turn around point of Albany (620km). Caught Duncan slogging away into the wind coming into Albany. The support at Albany was very good and it was great to have the wind directly behind on the return to Denmark. My "shadow" suddenly increased his speed with his larger sail area and rode away from me. On this leg it was good to see and greet the other participants on their outward leg.

Overnight at Denmark with about 8.5 hours off the bike time to eat, send an email or two, sleep and out riding again at 4.00am. I caught others that had left very noisily at 3am around Walpole and then the climbing started again.

Coming up from the coast through the tall timber forests was quiet beautiful. Although the hills kept coming and the legs were getting tired the scenery and birdcalls were very distracting and enjoyable. No granny gear climbs on this section which was nice. Through Manjimup (862km) again and a visit to the bakery replenished energy stores.

A lumpy road led through Nannup (921km) and Kirup (962km) and then a very dark road led to another hostel at Donnybrook (988km) for the overnight stop.

"Mr Garmin" knew the way and it only required an occasional check of the route sheet to keep on track. Arrived at Donnybrook around 7.45pm for another feed and 8 or so hours off the bike. This hostel was overrun by foreign backpackers who work in the local fruit and winery industries.

Out again at 4.00am for the last day's run (210km) back to Perth. Paul from the USA had just got in but was in good spirits. The wind was favourable after the sun rose at Australind (1033km) and it turned out to be quite hot by the time I approached Perth. The last day basically retraces the outwards route and apart from a rough, busy 30km highway verge out of Australind it was mainly quiet back roads wandering North towards Perth. Traffic started getting busy with big trucks closer to Perth and finally reaching the freeway bike path entrance was very nice.

Started to get a very floppy neck about now so I tried a few variations of my recumbent neck rest contingency plans which proved less than satisfactory.

About 40km from the end, my fuzzy brain realised that if I pushed it I could probably get in to the finish in less than 80 hours which would be a worthwhile target so I ramped up the pace and my floppy neck issue seemed to right itself.

Barrelling along an excellent bike way with a tail wind and the sun on my back, I felt really great. Rolled into the end at South Perth at 1:11pm giving a total time of 79 hours 41 minutes. Couldn't find the designated Audax official (gone for a cup of tea) so got my card stamped at a local hob nob restaurant. Got quick service when they thought I wanted to sit down and eat in my smelly, unshaven and dishevelled state. Had to hang around a few hours for the drop bags to be returned and greeted all the finishing riders and took photos. Bob from Canberra came in not long after me and was pleased to complete a 1,200km ride on his 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Germans were happy to complete and headed off to the closest pub for some more beer. Beer had been an important carbohydrate source for these guys during the ride apparently. "Beer is food, Yah?"

Bob and I got our bags and rode the short way back to the hotel for a shower followed by a bucket of potato wedges at a city eating establishment.

The main organiser, Nick Dale, kindly opened up his house for a raucous evening of food and war stories where most of the participants and supporters actually got to converse in more than a few grunted comments.

It was great ride. Most enjoyable and very memorable. My congratulations to the WA Group organisers and helpers. You done good! I was very surprised that there was not more support from East Coast Audax riders who seem only too willing to commit many thousands of bucks and time jetting to some French ride when there is a perfectly good (fantastic even) 1,200km randonee on home soil about four or five hours flying away.