

DAWN RAIDERS

Looking to add more spice to a classic, **John Kitchiner** and friends pack light to ride from London to Brighton, off-road, at night

EMERGING SLOWLY FROM our deciduous canopy, the landscape finally opens its embrace. Through tired, dust-ravaged eyes we can just make out soft freckles of morning light on the eastern horizon; the light hitting bull rushes and dormant grasses to perfectly direct our forward progress. The Adur lies still beside us, not a ripple breaking its surface, the most gentle of mists adding a dreaminess to the moment.

It was a moment we'd been talking about, hoping for — and now it was here we let it soak over us. Our timing had been flawless and we were revelling in a plan coming to fruition so beautifully. The more we rode on, the more our quiet chatter was joined by birdsong; blackbirds, thrushes, even the odd robin sounding their waking calls. An exquisite daybreak to follow a fortuitously balmy night.

By the foot of our final hurdle, the sun's baby rays had begun caressing the hilltops ahead, beckoning us upward. The going begins easy, then quickly steepens, dramatically, traction hard to find on loose rocks. But the grimacing is thankfully short-lived and soon replaced by appreciative smiles and long overdue embraces. The finish lies in sight, across verdant downland. It's truly glorious and while we empty the last of our waterbottles, we're reminded of the words of one-time local Alfred Lord Tennyson:

*You came, and look'd and saw the view
Long known and loved by me,
Green Sussex fading into blue
With one grey glimpse of sea.*

Another bone-shakingly brilliant descent and we hit civilisation again, for the first time in several hours, before a weary sprint to the shingle beach and that last dismount. We'd completed the London to Brighton, off-road, at night and, without doubt, it's one that will live long in the memory for myriad reasons.

Luck on our side

Like pretty much the entire global population, plans of any sort had been a constant shuffle of postponement and revision for much of the previous year. Cycling adventures had likewise taken a back seat to more pressing concerns. Most major events too had either been knocked off the calendar completely or shunted to an unseasonably late date. However our group had been hedging its bets, keeping its collective fingers crossed for one special, small-scale outing that looked set right on the cusp of when pandemic lockdown restrictions would potentially be eased. And, in the first of several large slices of luck, the organisers got the definitive thumbs-up only a few days before the off.

The deliberately limited numbers also allowed things to run in a natural, relaxed, Covid-safe way; a mere 75 of us took to the start, a small fraction of the thousands usually signed up to huge road sportives. With riders set off in waves and rapidly dispersed across the route, it meant we could enjoy the time without niggling virus worries. Chatting to fellow riders at the evening briefing, everyone shared this relief and was simply relishing the challenge ahead.





An added chunk of good fortune came our way with the weather forecast. Checking and refreshing the Met Office website almost hourly in the lead-up pointed to laughably good conditions for the duration, possibly the finest overnight temperatures of the entire summer. That meant we could be confident in packing much lighter than we normally would — bulging rucksacks eschewed in favour of small handlebar bags or seatpacks, with windproofs stashed in rear pockets, along with easily-accessible snacks. Ageing backs and injured shoulders would thank us, particularly on the rutted second half of the course. As it transpired, we recorded 21-degrees at 10pm that night and 16-degrees at 4am the following day; jerseys only, certainly no jackets required.

Capital to coast

Of course the concept of riding from the city to the sea overnight isn't new; Audax riders have been doing variants across the country for decades. Indeed a couple of our party had done capital to coast a few times previously in classic style: minimalist kit, following as quiet a route as possible, with a plan to refuel or shelter at 24-hour petrol stations if the going got desperate. This latest venture had a similar feel, but was almost entirely off-road, bar a few short 'linking' sections on country lanes.

The L2BO@N is really a ride of four distinct quarters and it's useful to break it down that way mentally to help tick the mileage off. The grand depart is always at one of the big sports grounds or parks in south-west London, meaning the first leg is a mad dash alongside the Thames, your efforts cheered by loud groups



in riverside pub gardens. The pace is typically high as everyone races to leave the bright lights behind; this year we're 'treated' to dust clouds like the Strade Bianche peloton and woe betide anyone who'd neglected to bring clear glasses. You're never too far from the River Wey as the route turns due south, the first major milestone chalked up when the A3 has been crossed. It's also the last you hear traffic noise until you're pretty much in the home straight.

Next comes the North Downs, heart of the stockbroker belt and spiritual home to London's mountain bike community, where singletrack trails abound. Copses give way to denser woodland, the gradient kicks up — and sharply down — and this is where your handling skills meet their sternest test. The darkness and unfamiliar shadows add a frisson of excitement on rowdy chutes and drops, and it's here the few who've opted for drop-bar gravel bikes question that decision. Sadly we're skirting the rowdiest of the Pitch Hill network tonight and weaving a wide, circuitous arc to the west of Cranleigh and, later, Horsham.

Act three takes us across the Weald on the famous Downs Link bridleway, a converted railway track that runs from near Guildford to Shoreham-by-Sea.

ABOVE LEFT: a stunning dawn by the River Adur.

ABOVE: the first rays of sun arrive before the grand finale.

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Trains ran along here for 100 years until the line was closed in the aftermath of the Beeching Report in 1966. Now it's a largely 'hardpack' recreational route enjoyed by families and users of every description — and that heavy footfall shows. There's humps and holes all over the track, and even though there's zero navigational difficulties you daren't slack on the concentration front for fear of being bucked off; this is where those nimble, narrow-tyred bikes edge ahead of heavier mtbs.

Shrouded by trees there's little to distract you, your lights illuminating an endless tunnel of foliage, and there's no option but to get your head down and grind out the miles. The four of us form two pairs, set a big-ring tempo and do just that. It's a huge advantage having a wheel to follow and friends to chat with through here and, as the leaves begin to thin, we know that the epic finale is close to hand — and with it our specific goal of topping the South Downs for sunrise.

As we meet the winding River Adur we pause in a strange pre-dawn glow, turn off fading headlamps, dial the other lights down a notch and chomp the remains of our sandwiches. Looking ahead, our final challenge is silhouetted against a cloudless sky and we count our blessings. Sharing this moment with old friends, riding together again after such an enforced gap, just felt magical.



USEFUL INFO

■ The London to Brighton Off-road at Night is organised by Max Darkins and the team at Rough Ride Guide (roughrideguide.co.uk). They have been running mostly off-road events for 20 years, including the daytime version of the London to Brighton Off-road, in partnership with the British Heart Foundation, which is the biggest off-road charity ride in Europe. Among a long list, they also offer more sedate 'Brewery & Vineyard' rides, and will provide back-up and bag transfers if you're planning your own self-supported challenge, like King Alfred's Way, the Ridgeway or South Downs Way.

■ **PREPARATION** — before tackling the L2BO@N, we'd suggest doing the daytime version, which usually takes place at the start of September. If you don't ride 'off-road' very often, this will familiarise you with the sort of terrain you'll encounter, get you used to lengthy saddle time, and help you decide on what kit to take and what's overkill. Faster, fitter riders can complete the course in 6.5-8 hours, while riders new to off-road can easily take 10 hours, so you need to be prepared.

■ **WHAT TO TAKE** — as a bare minimum you'll need to pack two spare inner tubes (fixing punctures at night, in the middle of nowhere, isn't fun), tyre levers, mini-pump and multi-tool. You'll need a lightweight waterproof/windproof jacket and potentially a spare warmth layer, plus you'll need bottles or a hydration pack to carry water — there's up to 4 feed stations on the route for top-ups. To minimise stops and cover the worst eventualities, we each took sandwiches or bagels too, and cereal bars. Helmets are compulsory and we highly recommend clear lens glasses (for flying dust, dirt, insects and overhanging branches), padded cycle shorts and lightly-padded gloves.

■ **LIGHTS** — we'd recommend taking three front lights: one helmet-mounted (for peering round corners and off the trail), a powerful bar-mounted light with long run time for the darkest sections in the North Downs, and a smaller bar-mounted light for the easier riverside paths and open ground. Add to that 1-2 bright rear lights for visibility.

ABOVE: one last climb at dawn, up to Beeding Hill on the South Downs.

ABOVE LEFT: brekkie and beer awaits at the finish on the beach.