

Cycling Plus previews Rapha's Paris-Roubaix homage, A Day in Hell, which loops from North London... and is coming to a city near you this April

Words Charlie Allenby Images Joshua Gordon

ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY

The annual UK event is run on the morning of the real Paris-Roubaix so that you can watch the pros battling away once you've finished



“A small group has formed, and we take turns playing cat and mouse before we’re suddenly thrust into the shadows of Hadley Wood and the first ‘secteur’ of the day”



P

unctures. Cobbles. Crashes. Ask the average cyclist what Paris-Roubaix means to them, and it’s unlikely that they’ll regale you with stories of famous wins or daring moves. Instead, they’ll focus on the brutality of road cycling’s most notorious Classic, nicknamed Hell of the North. A 256.6km race that includes 54.5km of cobblestones over 29 separate sections (or *secteurs* if you know the lingo), the iconic Monument began in 1896, and often falls on Easter Sunday, when conditions can shift like the allegiance of Judas – any rain turning the dusty *pavé* into a mud bath.

Thousands of spectators line the streets and cobbled farm tracks of northern France, experiencing the mind-boggling speed up close as the peloton winds its way from the outskirts of the French capital to Roubaix’s velodrome on the Belgian border. Although a Brit is yet to win one of its 120 editions, its influence is keenly felt on this side of the Channel. The race has become a must-watch moment for those whose only other fix of the WorldTour is the Tour de France, and it has even inspired events, including Rapha’s suitably named A Day in Hell.

An event run and organised by Rapha since 2010, it offers masochists the chance to sample a sector-strewn ride of their own on the same day as the Paris-Roubaix before sitting back and watching the cross-channel action unfold in the warm and dry on a big TV with some Belgian staples – beer and *frites*. I went

along to the London event to get the immersive Paris-Roubaix experience a (cobble) stone’s throw from my front door.

Receiving the GPX file a week ahead of the event, I could see that I’d be tracing familiar ground. I started dabbling in gravel riding in early 2020 and spent the first lockdown exploring the bridlepaths and byways of Essex and Hertfordshire that had been restricted to my peripheral vision when riding a road bike. In the three years since, I’ve built up an encyclopaedic knowledge of off-road trails within a 20km radius of my home.

Starting and finishing at Rapha HQ in Archway, north London, the 101km A Day in Hell route would be bookended by 13km of fairly busy roads (par for the course when starting and ending a route in the city), but the middle 75km would be a blend of quiet country lanes and 14 sectors. While there wouldn’t be any actual cobbles, the off-road stints would contain a smorgasbord of the capital’s gravel offering – lumpy green lanes, all-weather paths and singletrack.

Decisions, decisions

Doing my final prep for the event, I know tyre choice, pressure and clearance will be crucial. After the wettest March in 40 years, there’s potential for waterlogged ruts and deep mud, even if it has been relatively dry in the week leading up to the ride. I’m

Above right Thankfully there are no Forest of Arenberg-style cobbles here

testing the 2023 Pinnacle Arkose X Di2, the 650b wheels and 47mm WTB Venture tyres it came with will offer me a good balance on the mixed terrain – its central section smooth enough for low rolling resistance on tarmac, and chunky side lugs should be able to dig into the soft stuff when required. Supplied with the wheels set-up with tubes, I can’t be bothered with the cost or faff of switching to tubeless – especially as the bike will soon be going back. Instead, I opt to run the tyres hard at 50psi – sacrificing comfort and a bit of grip off-road with the belief it will help me avoid pinch punctures.

When I arrive at the start point, it’s interesting to see what kit others have chosen to tackle their day in hell with; from roadies with 28c slicks to hardtail mountain bikes, it’s certainly an eclectic mix. After sign-on, it’s time for a quick briefing from event organiser Louis van Kleef, where he admits that a week before, some of the course was underwater. And with those wet warnings ringing in our ears, we’re off.

Breaking free

Riding in London would constitute ‘A Day in Hell’ for most cyclists, but the early, 8:30am start means that the capital’s roads are relatively quiet. There is still the devilishly difficult matter of Highgate Hill to tackle moments after setting off, though. Just under 1km in length and averaging 7% with a couple of traffic lights

thrown in for good measure, I’m suitably warmed up on reaching its summit.

The route continues northwards, following Finchley High Road as it cuts across the flowing artery of the North Circular, past deserted retail parks and sleepy parades of shops, until my head unit tells me it’s time to turn off the thoroughfare and onto quieter, residential roads. A small group has formed, and we take turns playing cat and mouse before we’re suddenly thrust into the shadows of Hadley Wood and the first ‘secteur’ of the day.

Short and sharp, it’s over before it’s really begun, but it’s not without its difficulties: a punchy incline combined with slippery roots and uneven ground mean line choice is crucial to maintain speed.

The first is closely followed by the second – a fun, fast, twisting descent and ascent through the grounds of Trent Park – and by the time I reach Crews Hill, it feels like I’ve ridden through a vortex and been transported to the countryside. Passing beneath the M25 and breaking free of the capital’s orbital pull confirms it. A dusty climb up Burnt Farm Ride – constantly dodging potholes and slowing to pass a horserider – is my reward.

The following 15km is back to the blacktop and offers me a chance to take on some food, slurp a drink and stuff my outer layer into my shorts’ cargo pockets – a winter gilet no longer required after a full-body



Left Kit choice is important, with tyre width, pressure and tread worth honing to the conditions

Below You could enjoy a welcome caffeine boost at the control point en route to keep you going



Above Although it's not a gravel event, given the conditions, plenty of riders used gravel bikes

Left The 2023 London event had two distances to choose from: 100km and 140km

Right Rapha coined the term 'gravel' to describe the route's mix of bridleways, byways, tarmac and more





Above Thankfully on the day, there were blue skies and spring was definitely in the (initially chilly) air

workout on the first three off-road sections. My Arkose X's 47mm tyres and 1x Shimano GRX Di2 drivetrain are handling the parcours well – even if others on more road-leaning bikes are slightly more aerodynamic and have more gears at their disposal on the asphalt. But knowing what's coming up next, I'm not too worried.

Roman remains

Spend any time riding off-road and you'll soon find yourself on a path that has had a former life. Old railway lines, drovers roads and neolithic trails make up a network of traffic-free routes that can be found across the UK, and thanks to the rise of the gravel bikes, they've been made more accessible for drop-bar cyclists (even if mountain bikers will tell you they've known about them for years).

Ermine Street is a great example. A Roman road that once connected Bishopsgate in London to Eboracum (modern-day York), the 311km path has been paved over, re-routed and lost over the centuries. But sections of it – such as that through Broxbourne Woods – remain just as they would have in the times of William the Conqueror and Oliver Cromwell (who are both said to have ridden through here).

Turning off Cock Lane onto the fast, arrow-straight descent (it's a Roman road, after all), I channel my inner Tom Pidcock, relaxing my arms and letting the bike rattle around beneath me as hard tyres strike the stones and gravel. I swerve the bogs caused by two small streams – my local intel comes in handy as I know that there are hidden footbridges that can be used instead – but it's hard to escape the spray from a rider in front as puddles cover the path. Caked in

flecks of mud from head to toe, at least I now look the part. Returning to the road in Hertford Heath, loose dirt flies off of my tyres like mortar boards on graduation day, and after another 8km of road, cut-throughs and green lanes, I reach the Farmers Boy pub – control point and spot for a quick hit of caffeine – and stock-up on rice bars and water.

Bump and grind

Complimentary espresso downed and cargo pockets suitably stuffed, it's time to get back in the saddle. Rather cleverly, the route includes four 'bailout' train stations – ideal if you have a mechanical you can't fix and need a way of getting back to London (or have just had enough punishment for one day). Passing the third in Bayford, I keep crossing my fingers that my tyre-pressure tactic doesn't fail.

A woodland section labelled 'very muddy' on the course notes comes and goes – the only obstacle a dog that has decided to sunbathe in the middle of the path – and before long, I'm able to open up on the wide, dry bridleways, spotting wild muntjac grazing in a neighbouring field and golfers teeing off at Essendon Country Club.

Passing through its namesake's village, I know that the next part of the ride could be the hardest slog. Although just 3.6km in length, the back-to-back sections of green lanes are a favourite of 4x4 drivers, creating ruts that can be deeper than a bike's bottom bracket. Overarching trees mean the paths also wouldn't have dried out much, while a constant false flat is the icing on the Mississippi mud pie.

As predicted, it's both physically and mentally draining. One whole section resembles a pond,



“Buoyed by the promise of frites at the finish line, I get my head down and tap out a forgettable, if necessary, final 40 minutes”

leaving me with damp feet and feeling ground down (probably like my drivetrain). Reaching the end, it's a relief to see the pine tree plantation in Hatfield Park and enjoy the descent down Wildhill Road.

From here, I'm in uncharted territory, unsure what the next 15km has in store. A fast, (relatively) smooth farm road whizzes me past the pitches and futuristic domes of Arsenal and Watford Football Clubs' training grounds; I'm ferried along a dry footpath through a golden field of rape seed, its mustardy scent lingering in the warm, spring air; and then the route's final sector takes me along the Watling Chase Timberland Trail. All are traversed with ease and logged in the memory bank for future routes.

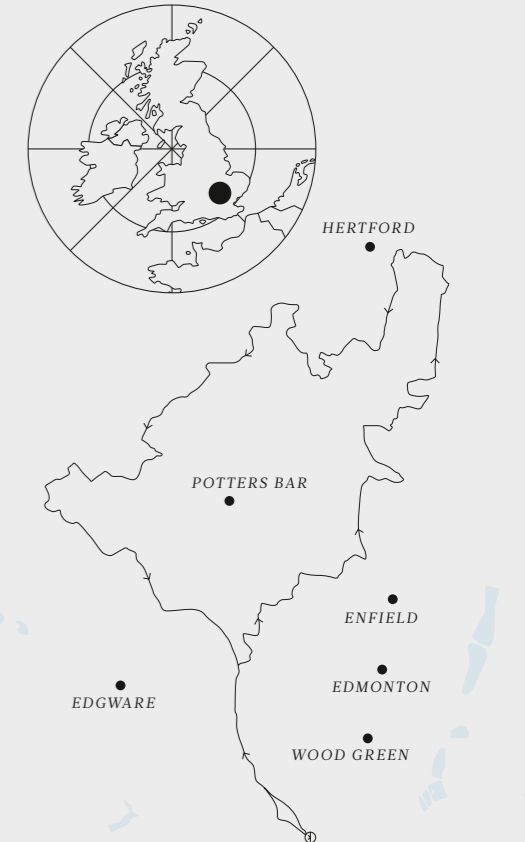
Reaching the familiar footbridge over the Barnet Bypass that is encountered on any ride out towards the Chilterns, I feel the magnetic pull of the city. From here, it's 16km of smooth, mostly downhill road – albeit with steadily crescendoing traffic. Buoyed by the promise of finish-line *frites*, I get my head down for a forgettable, if necessary, final 40 minutes.

Well-earned reward

Passing back through Rapha's HQ gates, I stop the clock at a smidge over four hours of moving time, averaging dead-on 25kph. Sitting down at a sunny bench to a hearty helping of the aforementioned chips and a cold can of Coke, I people watch as other riders trickle in. All have that slightly dazed look from a hard morning's ride but they've somehow skipped the pebbledashing of dirt. There are also plenty of big, Cheshire Cat grins; sure, the route has put us through the wringer, but the well-balanced mix of quiet country lanes and off-road sectors combined to create something of a north London gravel wonderland.

Popping inside, I see that the leaders still have 110km to go in the main event, including 20 sectors of *pavé* and the infamous Forest of Arenberg. It's been a great morning, but I'm glad it's them and not me. [PLUS](#)

Above Riders were very glad of the bike-cleaning facilities back at Rapha HQ.



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Getting there

● London is easy to reach wherever you're based in the UK, but the closest major train station to the ride's Archway start-point is King's Cross, 3 miles away.

Where to stay

● There are a whole host of hotels and B&Bs to choose from in the capital, but the Premier Inn in Archway (premierinn.com) combines affordability and proximity to Rapha's HQ. The Farmer's Boy in Brickendon (SG13 8NU) is a great spot

for coffee and lunch, and even has tools and a bicycle pump on hand for mid-ride mechanicals.

2024 dates

● A Day in Hell will take place on 7 April 2024. In the UK, rides will be taking place in Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, London, Leeds and Manchester.

How to enter

● Keep an eye on the website, events.rapha.cc for more information and details about to enter.



Distance 101.2km Elevation 1,097m

Download the full route

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