

North Sea Cycle Route – Summer 2003,
Part I: Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway

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Part I

Germany

1 Oldenburg – Wremen

It's six o'clock in the morning, and everything's as usual: Get up, take a shower, have breakfast, go to school. But something is different today. Before this day is over we will have cycled more than 160km. Today is the first day of a six week bicycle tour around the North Sea, along the world's longest signed cycle path – The North Sea Cycle Route. Months of planning lie behind us. We've been waiting for this day, impatiently, for weeks on end, and yet, this morning, we have very mixed feelings about this project...

The three lessons we have to spend in school this morning seem to stretch endlessly, our anxiety rises with every minute the clock advances to 12:00pm – our planned starting time – and with every word of encouragement we hear from friends and teachers. Incidentally, all the weeks that we spent telling people about our project (which was a vital part of our strategy – the more people know about what we're up to, we figured, the harder we'll try to live up to the newly raised expectations) we only once encountered someone who didn't give us credit in advance quite so easily: My former German teacher, who frankly told us that we weren't going to make it anyway. We'll see about that!

After we are handed our reports, we drive to the bike shop one more time. Yes, we treated ourselves to taking the car to school this morning. Johann isn't quite sure if the valve on our air-pump is actually doing its job for his Presta valves. Turns out it is. "It *has* to sound like no air is going into the tyre but everywhere else instead, that's a good sign!"

Back at home, at around 11:00am, the atmosphere's hectic. I know I promised myself to have everything packed and lying there ready for us the night before, but there's always the one or two little things you just can't pack till an hour before departure. Like the insurance documents. And of course, then you can't find them in time. Something for mum to do once we've departed.

Since we have to spend the first night camping by ourselves, the bicycles are a lot more heavily laden than they are going to be for the majority of the tour: Two rear panniers on each bike, two sleeping bags, two mats, a tent

on mine, a handlebar bag on Johann's. Oh, the rain jackets. It doesn't look the least bit like rain, but we just cannot be bothered into taking taking all the delicately balanced gear off in order to get to the bags, so we just put them on top. The pure volume of our belongings (and maybe the fact that we protect the sleeping bags and mats with garbage bags) makes us look like hobos – If it weren't for our cycling outfit, which gives an interesting twist to the overall impression we make.

As we finally pull out of the driveway at 12:12pm, with parents and grandparents present patting our backs and photographing and the German sun blazing, we feel incredible. At long last the moment we've waited for has arrived, we're on our way. The bikes feel totally different to our usual unladen riding, but this just reinforces the feeling that this isn't just another bike ride.

The first 30 km from our hometown of Oldenburg to the first city on the official route, Varel, are nothing new to us: A good part of this road constitutes our daily trip to school, the last stretch to Varel we've ridden several times visiting friends who live there. Still, the atmosphere is incomparable. As we spot the first of the route signs which are going to be our companions for the next five and a half weeks, we get almost euphoric, and, like any true tourist, we have to take a photograph of this fateful signpost. From now on, every kilometre we cycle is going to be new to us. For us, this is the true start of the tour.

We cycle little paths through the perfectly flat Frisian landscape with strong tailwinds pushing us forward and raising our mood further with every rotation of the pedal. If conditions stay like this, this is going to be a piece of cake. The route is well sign-posted, the map is accurate, our bikes roll smoothly along the evenly paved roads. We cycle up a dyke to catch our first glimpse of the North Sea. Unfortunately it is low tide. Ah well, we're bound to see it at some stage along our route...

According to our schedule, we're going to take the ferry across the Weser from Blexen to Wilhelmshaven around 7pm and arrive at our booked campsite in Wremen at 7:30. Due to the good run we have, we reach the ferry at 6. Nothing can stop us. "Ferry not operating today", a sign is trying to tell us. "Good joke", we tell ourselves. "You're not going to cross over here today", some people standing on the pier explain. "See that truck on the ferry? It weighs 80tons, they're doing an endurance test today. Isn't that fascinating?". It's not. With a vague description of how to find the closest ferry ("You just cycle 20 km upstream and take the ferry to Dedesdorf") we

get on our way again. Heck, we can almost see our campground, and now we have to do an extra 40 km? Ah well, that's not going to stop us. Or rather, if this little mishap could stop us, we needn't even hope to do the whole tour. So we try to stay cheerful, and indeed, the trip along the river is quite fun, mostly due to the tailwind. Hang on, if we have tailwinds upstream, doesn't that mean that we'll have to go against the wind on our way downstream...? Indeed, we do. And this isn't just a breeze, it's real wind. The 20 km on the opposite side of the river are frustrating, we're not yet used to distances over 100 km, it's getting chilly and the thought that we could long be at our destination if it wasn't for that endurance test does nothing to improve our mood.

We finally arrive in Bremerhaven, with the sun still above the horizon, which placates us a little. I'm cycling in front when I hear Johann calling out, in quite an aggressive tone "There's no need to go *this* fast." I'm not, yet Johann has fallen quite far behind. I'm almost ready to shout something provocative back, when he realizes it isn't due to my superior physical abilities that he cannot keep up, but rather due to a flat rear tube. We stop to mend the puncture and install a plastic band which is supposed to stop any sharp objects penetrating his tyre again, and after twenty lost minutes I just can't constrain myself and explain how unnecessary this delay was: *I* invested a vast amount of money into supposedly puncture-proof tyres while a little bit of glass is enough to hold him up. Of course I know that my little comment is of little help to the situation, and for the last ten kilometres of the first day there's an icy silence between the two of us. Still, we arrive at our campground, having cycled 160 instead of our planned easy 126 km, put up the tent, take a hot shower, eat our packed cold dinner and call our parents to give them the list of things I forgot to take along: My key for the lock, my cycling gloves, and the map for day three...

2 Wremen – Hamburg

The alarm clock we took along proves to be invaluable: If we could have, I believe we wouldn't have got up at all today. But we have no choice, so we crawl out of our tent at 8 in the morning, blinking into the bright sun, freshen up and have breakfast. We sure can feel our legs, and a bed is definitely more comfortable than our mats, but the wind blowing from the west acts as a welcome prozac. After packing up and paying we get on our way again, and

half an hour later the morning stiffness is gone – life is fun. Once again the sun is shining and the wind is pushing us forward. We travel through pitoresque little towns and actually see the Sea. What more can you ask for. Exactly 40 km down the road, we stop to have brunch – a habit that is going to stay with us for the rest of the tour. Chocolate bars mightn't be the kind of snack a nutritionist would recommend for world-class athletes such as us, but they sure taste good.

Cycling is easy again, up to the point when Johann calls for a stop in a little path again. He has another puncture. On the rear tyre again. Turns out that the plastic band we put in yesterday has pinched the tube, leaving two rather big holes. We change the tube without putting the so-called anti-puncture band in again, and vow to buy another set of the tyres I have as soon as we get the chance.

We're behind schedule again, but we still take the time to stop at a little bakery in the "Altes Land", a famous fruit growing region west of Hamburg, and have a slice of locally made apple pie. And another one. And a bread roll each. And ten kilometres down the road, we buy a bag of apples. And eat it. Then we're not quite so hungry anymore.

After a little odyssey through the suburbs of Hamburg, we eventually find the ferry crossing the Elbe. On board, we meet a cyclist who had just come back from a tour to the north cape in Norway a week earlier, and spend the whole trip exchanging experiences. It sure feels good to be accepted as serious cyclists so quickly.

At 8pm, we arrive at our aunt "Dr. Tine" 's house and pick up the key from her next door neighbour, as she is going to be home rather late that night. We spend the evening eating vast amounts of bread with different salads, watching TV and rubbing our sore legs. Then we go to sleep in the last real beds for a long time. . .

3 Hamburg – Büsum

Our aunt wakes us up to a set breakfast table and hands us the copies of the map that our parents had faxed the night before. We stock up on bread rolls and get on our way well-rested, well-fed and once again well-motivated due to Dr. Tine's hospitality.

The tour takes us along the Elbe on an excellent bike path for quite some distance and is generally well-signed, so we hardly need the copies of

the map at all. Around noon, our parents call to agree on a meeting point further along the route. They have tied up all the loose ends at home and are now on their way to join us. A look on our cycling map suggests the "Störsperwerk", a river barrier, as a "cannot-be-missed" landmark. At first glance, our parents are unable to find this monumental construction on their road map, but we tell them they're bound to find it once they get in the area. And so we set off, looking forward to getting rid of the tent, the sleeping bags and all that unnecessary weight we're carrying around with us. We arrive at the Sperrwerk an hour later, our parents estimate that they'll be there as well in about ten minutes. Perfect timing. 45 minutes later they pull into the parking lot next to the barrier. Seems the designers of cycling and road maps have different priorities about what is relevant for the traveller.

After another 20 minutes of resting, eating and unloading the bikes, we get on our way again. The difference in handling is unbelievable. It feels like we don't need to put any pressure on the pedals at all, and we're still faster than before. If only this feeling lasted. Alas, it doesn't. Of course. An hour later, riding feels just the same as before.

A message from our mum, who is already at our destination, tells us to come to the campground "Zur Perle", a little north of the town of Büsum. Riding through Büsum takes longer than expected as the locals are celebrating some kind of festival, blocking the – otherwise excellent – bike paths with little stalls and rides. And of course the visitors have no understanding whatsoever for two tired cyclists just trying to get through the busy area as fast and with as little contact as possible. Eventually we do leave the town and find the campground – or what we think is the campground. It turns out there's about five campgrounds in Büsum, all closely huddled together in one area. But the one named "Zur Perle" can't possibly be the one our mum is on. It just consists of a small property with grass and a toilet block, but the description we received on how to get to the tent is far more complicated. We cycle around the area, checking all the other campgrounds, but still we cannot find the tent. Our dad, who started to cycle at the Sperrwerk as well, arrives, and in a combined effort we spot the right site, just a little off the area where all the other campgrounds are. We shower, have dinner and fall asleep in the huge tent our mother put up all by herself, a procedure that is not going to differ much over the next five weeks.

4 Büsum – Dagebüll

We sleep in today, it's already 9am and the sun is high up in the sky when we finally pull ourselves together and crawl out of the tent to be greeted by a set breakfast table. An excellent feeling, what can go wrong now? Eating, we plan the day's ride, with the aid of an initial itinerary I had prepared at home. Dagebüll, in far northern Germany is the destination for today.

Strong headwinds for most of the day soon eradicate the morning's euphoric feeling and we start to develop a skill that is going to be invaluable for the success of the tour: apathy. Initially, we would get rather frustrated with the constant hostile winds, mutter, try to ride harder and think unproductive thoughts about how bad an idea the whole project was. But today I try a different approach, putting into practice what is so often preached: Accept the facts, put your head down and just take it easy. Works astonishingly well. The more often you look at the odometer, the more frustrating it is when there's headwinds to tackle, so the aim is to get into a state of mind where you don't even notice you're cycling. I admit, occasionally I did look at the map and wonder how slow it is possible to go, but everyday I got more adept at riding almost subconsciously.

We stop for a break in the very likeable town of Husum. The fish stall on the marketplace is just closing as we arrive, but he suggests trying at a fish shop on the other side of the road, which, incidentally, is also preparing to close at the time. However, the shopkeeper takes the trouble to fetch the last remaining sandwiches from the cooling room, something which confirms our favourable opinion of the town. We stroll around the pleasant town for a while, then get on the bikes again to cycle the last remaining kilometres to Dagebüll.

Arriving at a cosy campground with the tent set in a secluded corner, we find everything to be set for a relaxing evening. Now all we need are the coins for the showers. It turns out you get them at the bar of the adjoining hotel, not exactly the place you'd like to be at when you're wearing nothing but a towel, but after 160km with headwinds most of the way I couldn't care less.

5 Dagebüll – Esbjerg

The last 30 km on German grounds turn out to be more adventurous than expected. Approximately one kilometre leads over nothing but grass, not even a track is visible, and one of the last North Sea Cycle Route signs in Germany has been turned to point in the wrong direction, away from the Danish border. Without the aid of the map that we luckily have, we'd probably be going to Italy now. Yet we do reach the first border on the route without too much trouble. What an awesome feeling. We stop shortly after the crossing to have breakfast and to get an overview of all the differences. There aren't too many actually, the weather's the same, the landscape is identical, we still have our bikes. Hang on, there's a different currency. Although the cycle route is a European project, only two countries (Germany and the Netherlands) have the Euro, and one country (Norway) isn't even part of the European Union. After we have stomached this realisation, we get on our way again.

The excellent signage tells us to turn off the major road and points down a gravel road. Being used to what was "unsealed roads", as they're called in the map, were in Germany, we look forward to travelling on less used roads for a while. However, this changes after we have successfully left behind the first stretch of this in Denmark. The unsealed roads aren't just unsealed, they're pebbles. It's amazing that tractors can use this roads, with bicycles it's near impossible. And this wasn't going to be the last gravel road.

With the sun blazing, the wind blowing from the front and no town or petrol station to get something cold to drink, we're more than happy to finally arrive in the town of Esbjerg at the end of the day.

Part II

Denmark

6 Esbjerg – Thyboron

The day begins with another looong stretch of exhausting gravel road, the conditions almost identical to yesterday. But today, at least there are lots of occasions to take a break and buy some refreshments. We discover that the Danes are quite happy to accept Euros, at least at petrol stations and of course at their own exchange rates.

It's a long day, we are planning to cycle about 180 km so we'll be at Thyboron at night, from which a ferry will take us from the peninsula we're on now back to the mainland. The headwinds take their toll, and I'm pretty burnt out later on in the day. The last part of the day's route looks pretty scary on the map: 8 km of perfectly straight road in totally open landscape. And of course the road points *directly* into the wind. Sure enough, my fears come true: There's no tree whatsoever to break the wind, and so we creep along at about 13km/h. At some point we gather our last reserves and accelerate to 15km/h. As we arrive at the campground, we both agree that this was the most exhausting day yet.

7 Thyboron – Blokhus

Although we were so worn out the night before, as we plan the next couple of days we decide to increase our daily average to about 195 km so that we will be in Sweden one day earlier than originally planned. Today it's going to be 198 km, so we get up earlier than usual to get the 8 am ferry. We leave the campground at 7:45, and head to what we think is the jetty. After we have circled the industrial port for quite some time, getting more and more hectic, we ask a man walking his dog how to get to the ferry. He looks at us, disbelieving, and tells us quietly and slowly that we are not going to make it in time. I'm close to screaming at him, but get a grip on myself and tell him in a voice no less quiet and slow, that "we know, but we would still like to try. So could you please tell us?". He explains the route, and with every turn I get more nervous. We push ourselves to the limit and arrive at the jetty at 8:02. The ferry's still there. Wow, how lucky are we? Hang on, it's not

moving, is it? It is. I almost throw my bike off the quay in anger, Johann is laughing his head off and we return to the campground, to the astonishment of our parents and the other guests who saw us depart in the morning. We try to make the best of the situation and use the time to clean the bikes. At quarter to nine we dare a second attempt and of course we arrive with plenty of time left.

The further we cycle, the more the direction turns to the east, which means we're slowly getting rid of the annoying headwinds. Around noon we're riding at almost exactly 90 degrees to the wind, and about an hour later we get into dense woods. What a relief. How good is it going to be when we're cycling south for the last part of the route in Denmark? As I'm still thinking how much easier cycling is now than it was two hours ago, the ground changes from perfectly paved road to the by now notorious unsealed danish roads. When we arrive on the absolutely fully booked campground in Blokhus – where our parents were only able to get a tentsite by explaining in detail just how tired and frustrated the two cyclists they're expecting would be if they had to go any further – I notice that I cannot change to the smallest sprocket (which means I can't use the lowest gears) because a screw came loose and fell off on the dirt road. Not important now, as the landscape is still mostly flat, but thinking of the fjords in Norway, we'll have to get that spare part somehow.

8 Blokhus – Saeby

A few kilometres east of Blokhus, the route leads along the beach. Not just for a short stretch, but for 15 km, right on the sand. The only possible way of getting forward there is to go really close to the water, where the cars which are also permitted to drive along the beach have created something similar to a track, with the sand packed more densely than further up, but it's still hard work. Occasionally, there's little stretches of soft sand, which are ever so hard to pass without falling, and so those 15 km turn out to be harder than expected, yet they also make up some of the most interesting cycling on the whole tour.

The route passes close to the most northerly point of the Danish mainland where the North Sea and the Baltic Sea meet, a geographic point of interest we cannot possibly afford to miss, so we meet with our parents in Skagen, have a huge serving of Danish ice cream and cycle the five kilometres from

Skagen to the tip of Denmark together. A short walk along the beach leads to that magic mini-peninsula, with masses of tourists taking the opportunity to stand in two oceans at the same time. We on the other hand are thinking more about the fact that in ten days, we'll hopefully be standing on the other side of this ocean, on Norway's most southerly point.

Going south from Skagen, the route leads along an absolutely magnificent cycling path through a national park, a wide and curvy paved track, and with strong tailwinds we easily keep an average speed of almost 30 km/h. It's those times, when cycling is no work at all, that we forget all the past efforts and are truly glad to have decided to do this tour. Even as the cycling path ends and we have to cycle along a busy road, spirits are still high and we reach the campground in Saeby in as good a mood as seldom before.

9 Saeby – Grenå

Another "Last Day" lies before us. The wind pushes us forward, and although we're cycling over 200 km today, it seems almost effortless. It's getting a bit cooler, and the prospect of "finishing" another country is quite a motivation to push ourselves a bit harder than usual. Our average speed today is higher than any other day, and we even take the time to stop at the ferry terminal from which we are going to depart tomorrow morning, and have someone take a photo of us. The distance we've already travelled is starting to look good on the map, with the entire Danish west coast covered and the first of three major ferry crossings is another milestone. We take this as a reason to do a more intense checkup on the bikes after dinner, replacing the brake shoes, retightening a few loosened spokes (how on earth can that happen? Scary.) and just that annoying cleaning of all the little corners. Dark clouds are gathering, yet we are optimistic about the things still to come.

Part III

Sweden

10 Grena – Kungsbacka

The sky is still overcast as we get up at around 10 a.m. in the morning. The ferry doesn't depart until 1 p.m. so there's no point in getting up any earlier. What a luxury. Although the ferry terminal is no more than 4 km away from the campground, we get in our usual cycling gear, as we are planning to cycle about 50 km in Sweden to make the most of the time that we are ahead of schedule.

Having helped our parents packing up for the first time, we ride to the terminal with in a constant, cold drizzle of rain. Is this the rain we had feared for so long before the start of the tour, the downpour that we practiced for by cycling in any weather condition back at home, regardless of whether it would have been smarter to take the car or to stay at home? Well, if it is, that's fine with us.

We warm up at the check-in building waiting for our parents to arrive. When they finally do, we find out that one of us is going to have to put the bike onto the car instead of cycling onto the ferry because that's the cheapest fare and there is no way of getting an additional passenger onto the ferry as it's fully booked. No big deal, one might think, but to us it is. We draw straws, and I win, happily cycling to the lane with all the waiting bikers and cyclists, while Johann grudgingly gets in the car. Who knows, maybe these five hundred metres will be the distance that will make it possible for me to say that I cycled further than my brother. Then again, maybe not.

On the ferry, we put some 'real' clothes over the undoubtedly sexy, yet still not fully socially accepted lycra shorts, then treat ourselves to the buffet, although the food really isn't all that much better than what our mum prepares everyday, there's simply more of it. It's fun to discover that the truism that cycling for long distances makes you hungry really is true. . .

Although we really shouldn't be tired anymore after such a long sleep and so little activity, I can hardly keep my eyes open and find myself a cosy little corner of the floor amidst masses of other people doing the same.

Leaving the ferry after four hours after we boarded it, we find Sweden to be not all that different from the last day of Denmark, both weather- and

landscapewise. It's flat and rainy. After I meet the others in the car park, we decide on a campground which unfortunately lies about 10 km off the route, but there's no better alternative. We get on our bikes again and discover that the map we organised before the start of the tour, a free tourist cycling map, is hardly better than the little maps you find in geography textbooks. According to this map, all of Southern Sweden is yellow, with about ten cities in all, represented by red dots of identical size. The route is shown by connecting a few of these cities with straight lines – simple as that. However, after guessing the first couple of corners, we find the first route signs, which we will have to entirely rely on for the whole trip through Sweden. Luckily the Swedes did quite a good job putting up the signs.

About ten kilometres down the road, the constant, cold drizzle, turns into a constant, cold downpour. Yesterday's 200 km take an additional toll on us and we experience first-hand how quickly moods can change. Right now, all I'm feeling is frustration and fatigue. However, there's yet another moodswing to come. After having passed the first female blonde swedish cyclist of the tour, Johann and I look at each other, smiling. Today's not such a bad day after all, it seems, and if the view stays as splendid as it is now, Sweden will work its way up our "Favourite Countries of the North Sea Cycle Route" list quite quickly.

Passing the first bright red houses, finally all the children's books connotations of Sweden are called up as well, and so we actually enjoy our first day in this new country more than we should, looking at the weather. As the campground isn't marked on the map, we have to rely on our parents descriptions on how to find the day's destination, which isn't easy, seeing that they had taken a different route and can only describe which way to go from the motorway. After asking for directions at a petrol station, however, we find that we could easily have trusted in our gut feeling and just ridden on, since we were about to cross the motorway in question anyway. From there on it's just an easy five or so kilometres to the campground, which, as we find out, doesn't have a whole lot of space for tents, but the other facilities easily make up for that: The friendly old lady tending the campground comes up to us after we just arrived, telling us that there's a coin operated laundry dryer as well as an "activities room" – essentially a TV room with tables. This "activities room" is turned into our dinner room as well, and since it's not much fun to cook in the rain, we opt for porridge with about four kilos of fresh Swedish yoghurt. And since there's a TV right in front of us, why not use it. A weird feeling, watching a Hollywood movie in English,

with Swedish subtitles. A bad one it is too, "Green Card". Well, if you're tired, you're not picky about the TV program anymore.

11 Kungsbacka – Lysekil

The weather isn't much better. At least it's not raining anymore, but it looks like it could start to any minute. After breakfast, we set off, determined to find a place to purchase a decent cycling map. After about twenty or so kilometers, we lose the route and find ourselves on a huge main road, hopefully going towards Göteborg. Shouldn't there be signs here, telling us we're going in the right direction? After all, it's not very far to Göteborg. Before we end up in Finland, we decide we should take the hassle of asking for the way. Chance has it that we're right in front of a gigantic shopping center. Surely, there must be a place where we can ask for directions *and* buy a map in there somewhere. The first thing we learn, however, is that shopping center car parks weren't meant for bikes. You can see where you want to go, but somehow you never get there, the roads always take a bend just before you think you've reached the building, or there's cars coming towards you because you're going the wrong way down a one way street. Inside the building, there actually is a bike shop, but of course they don't have cycling maps. But at least they know the way to Göteborg. We receive a loong description of which way to go but are unable to remember anything but the vague bearing. Back on the main street, we still feel lost, until we finally see the first road signs confirming our way. Once inside Göteborg, there are at last some cycling signs again, an unbelievably encouraging feeling. We take a break at an internet cafe and devour some danish pastry before getting on our way again. The sun finally finds its way through the clouds and we enjoy being off the main roads for a while. Closer to Lysekil, we have to cross a few fjords on tiny car ferries in absence of any bridges. On the first of two free ferries, we meet our father, who has decided to cycle part of the route as well. On the other side, we part again, reaching the second ferry just before its departure. During the crossing, we see our dad arriving at the terminal as well. Nobody likes waiting, so we set out although it would have taken all of ten minutes to wait for the ferry to go back and forth. A couple of kilometres down the road, we arrive in a very pleasant town on the fjord on which Lysekil is also situated, with an hour to spare before the last ferry makes its crossing. About twenty minutes before departure, our father arrives and we decide to

cycle the last bit to the campground in Lysekil together. During the ferry ride, we get a stunningly beautiful view of the city, nestled comfortably on the mountainside. What a pleasant way to end the day, one might think, but unfortunately, it's not to be that easy. Finding the campground turns out to be harder than expected, and after going up and down the wrong hills for a couple of times, we once again ask for directions. Finally, we reach the overcrowded campground more tired than we really should be and are all the more irritated by the noisy party animals in the tent next to ours. Not the ideal conditions for a good night's sleep, and the fact that Johann has to fix his chain fender that has come loose somewhere along the way, dragging on his chain, does the rest.

12 Lysekil – Hoysand

A short day lies before us, with no big cities to hold us up, so we normally would depart relatively relaxed, if it wasn't for Johann's chain fender that he wasn't able to repair the night before. With a constant crunching sound, we get on our way. Some time around noon, we have enough and pull in at a petrol station with a car garage. While I buy some lunch, Johann borrows some real tools (including a hammer... and starts to apply a technique similar to the principle of "brute force". But try as we might, we are unable to fix the problem, as it's not simply a matter of bending some metal, but we would rather have to open the bottom bracket to rotate the attachment holding the fender. For that, however, we would need special tools that the car garage doesn't stock, and of course there is no bike shop to be found. Frustrated, we get into a fight and I ride off ignoring Johann's handicap. Although it does feel good to be able to ride that much faster and more relaxed, I get a guilty conscience and wait for him ten kilometres down the road in the sunshine. We sort of make up, but ride most of the way in silence, with only the now familiar crunching commenting the situation. The route follows very quiet minor roads, meandering through wooded hills, a light tailwind trying to ease the hardship Johann has to face.

We planned to spend the night on a campground on the Swedish side of the border, but the tent symbol on the map turns out to represent a youth hostel. We call our parents and find out that there does not seem to be a campsite before the border anymore, so we have to leave Sweden the same day. There really is no choice, so we get onto the main road leading up to the

Svinesund. The closer we get to the border, the heavier traffic becomes. As we come around the final bend on Swedish soil, we are overwhelmed by the view expecting us: The Svinesund bridge constituting the border to Norway is huge, wide and does not have a bike path. We get into the middle of the right lane to deter any motorist thinking about overtaking us in our lane and start pedalling. There is a constant descent and with a velocity of over 65 kph, we fly out of one country, over a breathtakingly picturesque fjord and into the next. Behind the bridge, signs indicate for cyclist to leave the motorway, an order we gladly follow. It takes us all of the last remaining kilometres on the quiet road to recover from the frightening yet unforgettable experience, and although we only cycled about 180 kilometres, we are dead tired as we arrive on the nice campsite in Hoysand.

Part IV

Norway

13 Hoysand – Stavern

Good morning Norway. So we've really made it to the country we'd been fearing most all through our preparations. In our minds, Norway was all rugged, steep fjells, constant rain and reindeer blocking the road around every other corner. However, waking up with the first sunbeams warming up the tent on a quiet fjord just north of the border, there is not much of a difference to be noticed to the previous days: We're cruising over gently undulating terrain, the water never far away and there's a light cloud cover overhead. There aren't more North Sea Cycle Route signs either. In fact, there are none. And although we were always fascinated and intimidated by the prospect of cycling Norway, looking at height charts and pictures of bridges without railings, we did not put so much effort into the preparations as to organise proper maps beforehand. What we did have was a road map and a little picture out of some brochure in which the cycle route was marked. Not much. So once inside Sarpsborg, a city we would not have entered had we had more information on the route, Johann decides to stop by a bike shop and have his bike fixed at any price, while I take the time to pay the local tourist information office a visit to purchase the official North Sea Cycle Route Map of Norway, Part I. This relatively expensive piece of paper is going to last about four days, then we will have to have been able to get hold of Part II as well. Why worry now?

Getting out of Sarpsborg turns out to be much harder than getting in. We try to take a short cut back to the official route by crossing a river via a huge bridge we find on the map. Unfortunately, the map seems to assume that all cyclists strictly keep to the route, which probably is why there is no note to be found informing us that this bridge is strictly motorists only. And seriously, it is. Of course there's the obligatory sign at the ramp, with the crossed out bicycle. In this case, and this is unusual, they could probably have done without the sign. No sane cyclist would consider cycling this steep, heavily trafficked and unbelievably long bridge. Beaten, we go all the way back through Sarpsborg, past the tourist information and the cycle shop that actually managed to repair Johann's bike. But the map turns out not to be

the most reliable so far. Of course, a small scale makes the distances look much less discouraging, but it makes navigation really hard in built-up areas, which is why we lose our way several times before we get to the ferry taking us over the Oslofjord.

When we get back onto solid ground after a very relaxing ferry trip, we can hardly believe our eyes as we spot the first North Sea Cycle Route sign. And there's another! Wow! It's almost too good to be true. But only almost. For the rest of the Norwegian part of our journey, the signage is excellent, comparable to that in Denmark, sometimes even better and definitely more consistent in style. Every sign we see makes our hearts jump, and there's a lot of signs today, making it easy for us to find our way to today's destination, Stavern.

14 Stavern – Holt

In the afternoon, we arrive in Kragero, a charming little town on a peninsula from where we have to take a ferry, that, for a change, does not operate every twenty minutes, but only five times a day. Knowing that missing one ferry by only a few minutes means waiting for a couple of hours, we get more and more nervous the closer we get to the ferry terminal. For no sensible reason, as we find out, as the last ferry left half an hour ago and the next is due to depart in two. If we can read the timetable right; after all, Norwegian is not as closely related to German as it might sound to English ears. At first, we decide to just bear it and wait, then get edgy as we see a boat docking on "our" quay. It can't be ours yet, can it? Well, why shouldn't it be? It's summer, they probably have a few additional services today. So we board the ferry along with about ten cars and twenty other cyclists, purchase our ticket and enjoy the ride. I follow the trip on the map. Hang on, why is that island on our right and not our left? A short inquiry reveals that we did board the wrong ferry. No, this boat does not go to Stabbestad. Yes, we go straight back to Kragero once we reach Langoy. Yes, we'll be back in time for the last ferry to Stabbestad. No, you won't have to pay again. Strike! So instead of boring ourselves to death in Kragero, we get a free round-trip ferry ride.

Still, the delay is quite annoying. There's no way we can make it to the day's last ferry in time, so we are forced to leave the official route, skipping about 40 km of supposedly beautiful terrain. The first 20 km of our alter-

native route lead through beautiful forests, along a quiet road in excellent condition. Halfway along the way, however, the scenery changes dramatically. The trees make way for rocky fjells and we have to tackle our first serious climb of the tour without being mentally prepared for it, and, incidentally, without having any food left over. Panting and sweating, we do somehow reach the top and are rewarded with a magnificent view of the fjord we just cycled along, but also have to experience what running out of carbohydrates means. Although the next couple of kilometres are really not very hard, we move at a sickeningly slow pace. Finally, there's a little town with a shop that – fortunately – is still open. While I go inside to buy all the chocolate in stock, Johann stays with the bicycles. As I come back, I find him in a conversation with an elderly, yet fit-looking man. Coming closer, it becomes obvious they are talking about our ride. The man noticed that the bikes are German by looking at the hub dynamos and recognised the North Sea Cycle Route logo on Johann's vest. He tells us that he himself is an avid road cyclist and saw the first group of rider's on the tour, wearing the same vests as us. He too would be cycling the route in one go, if only his wife would let him. We ask him for the easiest way to get to Holt, where our parents have already put up the tent. He thinks for a while, looks at us conspicuously, then lowers his voice and tells us: "Well, the way I always take when cycling is straight down this motorway. There's a sign prohibiting cycling about five kilometres from here, but really, no one cares."

Trust the locals, the motorway is excellent to cycle, there's a wide shoulder and the route is almost perfectly flat. Up to the aforementioned sign. A few hundred metres down the road, the wide shoulder becomes uncomfortably narrow, and instead of lawn on our right-hand side, there now is a low concrete wall and behind it a sharp drop. We tense up immediately, trying desperately not to sway to either side, and after a while actually get accustomed to this precise style of riding. But lack of space is of course not bad enough, it gets worse. Around a curve, we look into the mouth of a dark tunnel. I don't know about Johann, but I believe I did not take a single breath all the way through the admittedly short tunnel. There was no shoulder at all, just bare rock to our right with signs poking out and truck overtaking on our left. Coming out, the narrow shoulder actually constitutes a relief, and some kilometres later we can finally see the signs pointing to our campground.

15 Holt – Aros

The first half of the day passes by with relatively few surprises, just the omnipresent breathtaking scenery posing a welcome distraction. About 50 km into the day, however, a change is about to happen. While we have gotten used to the well-paved roads and the sometimes long, yet hardly too challenging, climbs, for nine kilometres the route follows what is called "the Old King's Road", an "undulating earth-road". This "earth-road" turns out to be an old track, supposedly the main road in western Norway for centuries, that has recently been refurbished with fresh gravel. In many parts, this track is so steep that there is no way of getting up the climbs with a bicycle. It's physically impossible, for the gravel does not provide any grip whatsoever, and frequently we seriously wondered how in the old days, people travelled this road with horse-drawn carts. But the hardship is partly compensated for by the tremendous landscape, the peace and quiet and the excitement connected to off-road cycling. After having navigated this stretch of the Old King's Road, we definitely have to take a break, and while we're sitting there taking in the sunshine, I start to read ahead in the second Norwegian map. A mixture of thrill, fear and frustration creeps up on me as I discover that there are several more stretches of the Old King's Road waiting for us in the future...

The remaining part of the day can almost be called relaxing, compared to the stretch of gravel road that now lies behind us. Cycling along the Tovdalselva River, there are no steep climbs anymore, and vast stretches of strawberry fields beckon for us to stop and save the hassle of buying lunch. After this idyllic nature episode, we have to fight our way through a larger town once more. Although frequently, detailed maps of the city centres are provided in the maps, it is still almost impossible to get through a city of, say, 50,000 inhabitants without getting lost at least once. Kristiansand is no different in that respect, but the rectangular streets make it easy to find a way back onto the right way. A few kilometres out of Kristiansand, we turn down another track, this time called the "Post Road". This dirt road is much easier to ride, although there is one very hard climb to master. From there on, it's only some 15 km before we arrive on an idyllic campground right by the sea. We go for a swim in the ocean, and since we're on the very south coast of Norway, we imagine being able to see Skagen in Denmark, the point from which we looked north just a few days but many kilometres earlier.

16 Aros – Flekkefjord

For the first 30 km of the day, the sky is overcast, always threatening to unload its wet cargo upon us any minute. And just as we once more leave a perfectly fine sealed road to experience another stretch of the Old King's Road, the clouds decide that the time is right to cool us off and give us and our bikes a thorough cleaning at the same time. It's literally pouring down, and it's not just a shower, it's getting worse all the time. The gravel road is no easier to cycle when it's wet, quite the opposite is the case, and even the otherwise rather euphemistic cycle guide calls the climb we're tackling "somewhat strenuous". Somehow, we survive the steep and narrow stretch of dirt road and come into Vigeland, where we take a rest under the first cover we can find, a cinema's canopy. An elderly lady too finds refuge here, looks at our bikes, looks at us, smiles and then releases a gush of words that must mean something nice and encouraging, the way grandmothers all over the world talk to young and inexperienced people, but it is Norwegian, and so we have to admit that we're the kind of annoying tourists that do not bother to learn the language of the country they're travelling in. She understands and repeats all of the nice things in English, wishes us best of luck, then trots out into the now receding rain.

We too decide that we've had enough of a forced break, after all we only just departed. We go out of Vigeland the wrong way, but this time we turn around before we go on the motorway. Incidentally, just as we turn back, our parents pass us in the car, coming from the motorway. We wave frantically, but they show no reaction at all. It makes you think: We wear a red and a yellow jacket, neon yellow vests and both our lights are on. If our parents don't see us, what about the other motorists? Are we that camouflaged? Going through Vigeland again, we see the car parked in the main street, a supermarket on the one side, a bakery on the other. "I bet they're doing the shopping." "Nah, they wouldn't shop in a supermarket this small. They're probably just buying bread in the bakery." We try the supermarket first, and of course there's no trace of them. In the small, cosy bakery we find them drinking coffee and enjoying pastry. After we too warm up a bit, we get on our way again, at last without rain again. Up to now we've been obscenely lucky concerning the weather, the sunburn on arms and lower legs has already turned into a solid tan and my hair has become as blonde as it was when I was five, so we'll be forgiving about this rainfall as long as it doesn't happen again.

The ride is quite possibly the most strenuous so far, there are a lot of hard, steep climbs, but each one is made up for by the inevitable descent to follow. Speeds of 50 kph to 60 kph are becoming routine to us, we're surely not going to brake just because there's a tight curve in front of us. After all, every metre we're rolling down is the result of hard work, so we just hope that there's no cars cutting corners and take turns going down first. The person following always keeps a great deal of distance, and if the person in front makes it down alive, so will the one trailing: Everything set for a thrilling downhill bike ride. Until we get to the next mountain...

There are some relatively flat stretches, but a few kilometres before we reach the campground, we have to cycle around a classical long U-shaped glacial valley: The 12 km on the southern bank are nothing but downhill, from a height of 220 metres down to almost sea level. 12 kilometres without pedalling while still maintaining a velocity of 30 kph to 40 kph – a cyclists dream. There are three more hard climbs before we finally reach the campground in Flekkefjord and our muscles feel as sore as on day one.

17 Flekkefjord – Olberg

Today is the day we are going to reach the highest altitude on the whole tour (at least that's what we thought at the time. Turns out that there's an even higher point in Scotland, but it's not as impressive) and at the same time tackle two of the hardest climbs of the North Sea Cycle Route: Going from sea level in Ana-Sida to a height of 275 m over a distance of 5 km, then going back to zero and climbing to 180 m in about 3 km. It would be a lie to say that we are not intimidated by this prospect. We take the expected hardship as an excuse to have an extra long breakfast and then set out to get it behind us. The long climb turns out to be not as hard as feared, but it is still a long way to go. On the summit, we are glad to find an official sign with the altitude on it and with a great deal of effort manage to take a picture of the two of us with the sign using the automatic release. The second climb is much more strenuous than the first, but the view to be had is absolutely unforgettable.

More climbs and descents follow, and we're finally getting used to it – no longer trying to keep close together but rather splitting up, each of us going up at his own pace and then meeting on the summit – when, behind another long stretch of the Old King's Road, the landscape suddenly changes. The

land is perfectly flat and we automatically think of Northern Germany, where a height difference of ten metres is called a hill. At first we are grateful for these new conditions, especially as there's a light tailwind so cycling could hardly be easier, but after a while we realise that we are getting bored. No doubt about it, cycling in flat country is easier and more effective, but mountainous areas are just more exciting to tackle. Sixty uneventful kilometres later, we arrive on the campground in Olberg, deeply satisfied with having put behind us the hardest parts of the Norwegian North Sea Cycle Route.

18 Olberg – Moster

We are scheduled to meet the coordinator of the Norwegian part of the route, Eli Viten, in Haugesund, some sixty kilometres north of our campground early in the afternoon, with one ferry and the large town of Stavanger to master, so we get going relatively quickly. Going into Stavanger turns out to be even harder than expected, although again there is a relatively detailed map of the inner city in our guide book. We still get lost twice in the suburbs and at least four times in Stavanger itself, although there are signs everywhere. Although Stavanger is a charming town, it's a relief to get out of it. The delay means that we have to rush in order to reach the ferry which only operates four times a day. It's starting to drizzle again, and with about twenty minutes to spare we reach the quay, shivering.

On the other side of the Boknafjord, the sun is shining brightly again, with no clouds in sight. The closer we get to Haugesund, however, the more dark clouds build up. As we meet Eli, whom we find to be an absolutely charming person, the sky is completely overcast. Eli takes a few pictures for the local newspaper, and then invites us to lunch in a great restaurant nearby. We talk intensely for much over an hour, before we pull ourselves together and get going again. About ten minutes after our departure, it starts to drizzle again, turning into rain and finally into a torrential downpour. In minutes, we are soaked to the bones, the heavy drops hurting the eyes. It's too late now to look for cover, what good is it going to do except make us go cold, so we just keep going apathically. After half an hour or so, the rain stops as suddenly as it started and the sun peers out the now lightening clouds as if nothing happened. The bikes are squeaking, we are relieved and revitalised, and only the sandflies on our campground lower the euphoric mood that has developed unnoticed due to the fact that we are nearing Bergen, the end of

the Norwegian part of our journey...

19 Moster – Bergen

Not the slightest trace of a cloud can be found in the sky, only the large puddles on the ground are silent witnesses of the previous day's apocalyptic rainfall. We begin the day by riding over two huge suspension bridges providing once more a panoramic view of the beautiful Norwegian coastal landscape. We're going to miss this country, that much is clear although we still have to ride 100 km with a climb described as "the hardest climb since Jossingfjord", which does sound quite intimidating to anyone who has been to Jossingfjord. Halfway through the day, we have to take a ferry ride of about 50 minutes, and with each minute, we get more excited. The last kilometres are again quite hilly, and the final climb really is strenuous, but somehow we are magically attracted to Bergen, which helps a lot. We take a rest on top of the 230 m high hill 25 km south of Bergen, before we go for our final Norwegian descent. Hard to believe, but we really cycled all of the southern Norwegian coast.