

Travelling the seasons

*A tour around the Scandinavian Peninsula.
Travel report of a recumbent cyclist.*

Walter Hoogerbeets



Landscape



























































Story

To the north, again

It is just before seven 'o clock in the morning when my house mate Ward knocks on my open door. I am packing the last stuff in my rear bag. A cup of coffee is half empty on the window-sill. Ward shakes my hand and wishes me a good journey. He is the only one, my other house mates have promised to wave me goodbye but it seems it's too early for them. At a quarter past seven my bicycle is loaded, sandwiches are made and the Camelbak is filled. From the stair wells comes the soft sound of showers, the house

wakes up. I lift my bicycle from the front door onto the street. It has started.

Or actually, it started four months earlier, with a break-up. Suddenly I needed an alternative plan for my vacation. A journey which would help me forget the sorrows of the months before. I had been thinking about a trip to Grense Jakobselv and back before, but this would be a long and tough journey. Not to be done unprepared. A tour around *La douce France* seemed more reasonable.

Reasonable, reasonable... At the Spezi Bike Show I talked for two days about my trip to the North Cape, saw my own pictures again and again. Slowly the longing for the far north

returned. On the second afternoon it became too much and I made my decision. I would go to the north, again. But further, to an even more remote location. And back again.

Training sessions and the six hours race at Cycle Vision proved my shape far from mediocre. The route would be flatter on average than the coastal route, with a higher chance of tail winds. My new tent was over a kilogram lighter and in other gear I managed to save some mass too. It should be possible.

But I had to work for it. Just a few months were left to plan the route and to optimize my gear. Scissors, hacksaw and drill were always within arm's reach to shave off the last grams. The 12th of August would be the date of departure, so I could return the last weekend of September.

What's wrong with Germany?

The first night I spend on the German border. Fellow recumbent cyclist Miranda and her husband Patrick accommodate me in their house in Glanerbrug. It is an enjoyable evening and breakfast takes just a little longer than planned. I lie down on my bicycle and ride into Germany.

I am not instantly accustomed to this country. Finding my way initially takes a lot of time and unnecessary kilometres. But even when I am a little further and my average speed goes up, I feel a little lost amidst the fields, pastures and small towns. Not until I pitch my tent on the bank of the Elbe river do I feel at home in the landscape.



The beginning. Delfgauw, early in the morning.

The feeling disappears quickly when I leave the Elbe behind next day. The land just doesn't inspire me. What is wrong? I have been in Germany numerous times and enjoyed it every time. Was the preparation of the journey not good enough after all? Is it loneliness, or remaining grief?



Lunch near Lüneburger Heide.

Near Ratzeburg I ride alongside a lake. A big church overlooks it; on the water sailing vessels are racing. The view touches me. Suddenly I realise what I have been missing. Middle-Germany has few waters. I don't feel good in such a landscape. I want to see rivers, lakes and the sea.

Finding my way through Lübeck to the ferry isn't a great pleasure either, and at the terminal in Travemünde there is little to do but wait until boarding. On the ship I enjoy a large buffet while a thunderstorm rages outside. With mixed feelings I say goodbye to Germany.

In Sweden

Sweden is a new world for me. Grain fields roll onto the horizon. Later on, woods shelter



Approaching Sweden.

me from the wind. Villages and farms look friendly, built from dark red painted wood. The first evening my tent overlooks the shore of a great lake. Life is good here. I feel at home where I never was before.

One cannot take this for granted. Numerous are the stories of cyclists getting depressed along the endless roads through the dark Swedish woods. I had some fear this would

happen to me as well. I can feel lonely. Considering my personal situation of the moment, gloomy feelings could surface at any moment. They could even defeat me. What should I do if it happens? Could I talk



Camping near Lake Bolmen.

about it, with anyone other than my diary? Should I call somebody at home?

But the woods were not dark. Roads were never straight and boring. Lakes, rivers, swamps and agriculture alternated with the wood. Gloominess was a notion from a distant past. I was too busy looking around to feel lonely.



The other side of Sweden.

People living here do seem to suffer from gloominess, so it seems. At a first glance, nothing seems wrong. Life moves on orderly, there is no visible poverty. But I can't detect much happiness either. Many people look a little slovenly, showing signs of an unhealthy lifestyle. Young women who want to be pretty put on sunglasses, light up a cigarette and wait until they get fat. Young men speed around in tuned up bangers without license plates while trying to look cool. Boredom is pastime number one.

Northerly

On a late, sunny afternoon I reach Lapland. The landscape becomes more friendly, more open. The woods grow on top of slightly rolling hills. The road leads along great lakes and swamps. Civilisation gets more and more diluted. Wearing warmer clothes, I approach autumn. The first yellow leaves appear in the trees.

After 15 days on the road I cross the Finnish border. I am tired. The last few days I did a lot of kilometers on the E4, a road with relatively heavy traffic. Weather wasn't always nice on the E4. It was a hard ride.

About 30 km into Finland I settle down on a small camping in Kemi. My tent is placed on the shore of a beautiful bay of the Gulf of Bothnia. Looking out over the water with my binoculars is a great pastime, but it needs to be done in warm clothes. The rest of my day off is filled with laundry, eating and writing in my diary. Until the end of the afternoon I feel deeply tired with pangs of hunger. Just around the time I start to look for a restaurant

I feel fit again. In Sweden I reached the limits of my abilities, but clearly I didn't go too far.

Two cyclists

My stage through Finland begins with a ride through the lowlands of the Kemijoki river. The road follows the Kemijoki upriver through woods and agricultural fields. It is flat and well-maintained. North of Rovaniemi I leave the river behind and follow the E75 to the north. The land is a little more uneven here. Again I camp near the water. The camp site

of Korvala is situated next to a small lake. Before dinner I explore it with a rowing boat.

The second day after a rest day is always hardest. The effect of resting has faded a little, but I haven't found back the ideal rhythm. This time the difficulty comes in the form of a struggle between the two cyclists in me: the traveller and the time trialist. The first one is always thinking about the long term, the rhythm of days and weeks. Getting up and going to bed on time, shopping late in the afternoon but not too late. The right moment for a coffee break, to pitch the tent



Autumn in Lapland.

and to take a rest day. Making sure I can ride the next day, the next week and the week after that.

The other cyclist is obsessed with the rhythm of the pedals. The legs must grind in one mighty pace. Between the leg muscles and the thumb at the shifter runs a direct nerve, bypassing the brain. Anything which could disturb the cadence needs to be rooted out or else ignored.

Usually it is the traveller who is in command. From time to time the time-trialist is allowed to go ahead for a few hours. It's wonderful. I enter the time-trialist's trance, endorphins start to flow and the kilometres are adding up fast. But the traveller keeps an eye on the long term. Tomorrow there will be another day of cycling, and the day after as well.

This morning, as progress was better than expected, the time trialist saw his opportunity. Speed went up and became constant. Scarily constant. During two hours I passed the 10-km signs at :18, :38, :58. At CycleVision I have never been able to ride this rigidly.



After the time trial. Spending the night in a cheap cabin.

All good and well, until rain approached. Halting to put on my raincoat seemed unavoidable. The very idea of halting was pure horror for the time trialist. Halting! Interrupting the pace! It felt like the most awful thing that could ever happen to me. Riding completely soaked for hours at 67 degrees north seemed preferable to standing still for three minutes. All the while, the traveller kept warning about getting ill and riding next day.



Sunny but cold. Finland.

In the end, the struggle was undecided. The raincoat was put on, but only after 230 km and a sneaky mountain did I get off my bicycle. I was more tired from the mental fight than the physical effort. I'll never do this again.

I learned my lesson poorly, however. The final day in Finland leads me through a beautiful autumn landscape, along the great Lake Inari. The sun is shining, the air is fresh and there's a soft tail wind. So few people live here, my first chance at a coffee break comes at half past four. I'm close to the Norwegian border by now. The fjords are calling me. I



Finnish-Norwegian border.

get on my bicycle knowing I will not be able to resist.

Crossing the border

At the horizon lies Norway. Unmistakable. Mountains peak above the more level Finland. Suddenly it seems I rode for days through a wasteland of flatness. At the border the difference is even more apparent. At the Finnish side of the gate the ground is flat and wooded with pine. On the Norwegian side it is rocky, with birches. Two totally different landscapes, the transition on a scale of metres.

It is a beautiful evening. While the sun sets I ride along the coast to Kirkenes. Very soon I need the 39 chain ring, serious climbing at last. And it is so good to see the sea again, a real salty sea with tides.

I ask myself whether it was worth the effort, these first weeks. Would it have been better to ride the entire journey through Norway? It's easy to think everything pales in comparison to this country. Ride along the fjords once and you are spoiled for life. On the other



The Norwegian coast.

hand, my curiosity regarding Sweden and Finland needed to be satisfied. The Landscapes were pretty and peaceful. I did a lot of kilometres relatively easy. I set the discussion about the greenness of the grass aside and enjoy my first evening in Norway.

At the Barents Sea

The most extreme point of my journey is near. Grense Jakobselv is the name of the place, at the mouth of the river dividing Norway and Russia. I ride with only a day's luggage, the tent stays at the camp site. Without the big panniers it is still hard. In several places, the road consists of holes rather than tarmac. My back hurts when I reach the end of the 886. Funny thing that a road like this has its own number.

The sky is blue and sunny, but it's freezing. The Barents Sea lies in front of me. I have arrived, at the farthest place of my journey. Never was I this far from home, I can hardly comprehend it. The most remote hamlet of western Europe. On the other side of the little river lies Russia. The enormous country with



Grense Jakobselv. Het verste punt van de reis.

it's utterly sad history and great poetry. The country a Dutchman like me will never understand.

I am standing on the small beach and stare at the sea and the rocks. Put my hand into the water, stroke the sand. There is a barn and this is the yachting club. Day-trippers come here, but there is no café or kiosk. A few people are having a picnic. They enjoy the sun.

That evening I ride to Kirkenes and celebrate I reached the farthest point. But I also celebrate the fact that the most beautiful part of my journey has just begun.

Finnmark in September

September begins. The tourist season is over. I ride in winter clothes and wear a woolly hat as I take a walk in the evening. Accommodation is sparse in this part of the Finnmark. I need to plan my day rides carefully to spread the kilometres evenly over the days. Despite a lot of staring at the map,



At the Barents Sea.

a long day under quite harsh conditions is inevitable.

The day begins at six 'o'clock with packing my stuff in some drizzle. Standing in the little kitchen of the camp site I have breakfast, I even allow myself a cup of coffee. You never know whether there will be a kiosk on the road. All through the night the wind has been blowing hard.

The first few hours it doesn't seem too bad after all. The rain stops and the wind calms down. The road follows the Tana, here a wide river with sand banks and even dunes here and there. A good thing I didn't let myself be discouraged by the weather. The route makes a sharp corner to the left and leads inland.

Today I need to pass the neck of a large peninsula twice. The first is the peninsula of Gamvik. This mountain pass is closed in winter, probably for a reason. I smile at the barrier near the start of the climb. This will be fun.

However, the part I can see is only a tiny beginning. Soon I am at height and the road



Finnmark.

levels. Not long after I leave the forest and I see the real climb ahead. Two mountain peaks, with the road in between, like the decor for an ambush in a war movie. I also see large, threatening clouds, unravelled by wind. I won't stay dry. And it will be windy up there.

I pass a sign "Ifjordfjellet 370 m". Not much of a climb it seems. It isn't very steep. With relatively large gears I reach the place between the peaks. Then I get the full load.

The rain isn't that bad. A few fat drops, not enough to put on rain trousers. But the wind is hard and freezing. It seems to slow me

down more than the slope. The rain cover of the top pannier almost gets blown off.

Beyond the peaks, the road keeps on ascending. Except for grass, nothing grows here. Just as often as it rains, the sun is shining and it shines fiercely. The wind even increases in strength and gustiness.

I find myself on a plateau that is far from level. The road is getting worse and worse, almost like the 886 to Grense Jakobselv. All the time I am steering around big holes, now and then looking in the mirror to check for cars while I am somewhere on the middle of the road.

It continues like this for several dozens of kilometres. I feel like I am crawling over the fjellet. Ifjord, the first and probably only chance for coffee, doesn't seem to get any closer. Such a low mountain, and yet so hard.

A sign tells me the road is being renewed. A minute later I ride on perfect tarmac, slick as a billiard-table. Will I gain speed at last?

For a few kilometres I enjoy the illusion, until I reach the point where the work on the road is actually going on. From this moment on it is a lot of broken tarmac, loose gravel and chicanery around large machines. Progress slows down even more, even when the road is descending a little.

When I reach the descent on normal tarmac at last, I really need coffee. I fear there won't be a café in Ifjord. Wouldn't be the first time. But I see a sign telling me there is food available, and nearby. I cross the road and let myself roll down the drive.

I see something that looks like a youth hostel with a pile of living containers, very likely for the road workers. At the back of the building some women are smoking in the sun. An old sheep dog comes to me and tries to sit on my lap. The women show me the door and try to pull away the happy animal.

I step inside. It is a beautiful old mountain hotel, with wood stoves, old fashioned sinks and bronze deers on the tables. One of the women appears behind the counter and makes me a large omelette. In the meantime I take my first cup of coffee and think about the ride of this morning. It was hard, but my average speed was much better than I

feared. This afternoon I will cross the second peninsula, followed by a long road to the south, to Lakselv. But then I will be at a place where I can have a well deserved rest day.

A rest day, how I need it. The last five days I did over 900 kilometres, today will be more than 200. One shouldn't feel too guilty about having a day off after such a stretch. I look out the window, look around in the dining room. What a quiet place. I could have a rest day here, no doubt. How I could rest here. Lovely it would be.

But soon my legs start to get restless again, so I move on. Back on my bicycle I am glad I resisted the temptation. One last effort and I

will be in something that looks almost like a small city. More so than on my last journey, I feel the need to be among other people.

I feel a little worried about this. An evening like the one in Korvala, alone in an totally quiet environment is refreshing. It helps me process my thoughts. To relax, to open my mind for new impressions. And suddenly I am a little scared of it and want to be among people. Do I fear hard feelings coming back? Am I afraid that loneliness will stir up unresolved grief, or give resolved grief a second chance?

Do I catch myself here avoiding feelings? The one thing I was determined not to do?

Soon I will have a lonely evening to find out. But now I need to cross the second peninsula. I'm here to ride!

The landscape distracts me quickly. In all of Scandinavia I never saw something like this. It's a plain covered with pebbles without much vegetation, like a Mediterranean karst region. I see small lakes, streams and patches of swamp, but it looks totally barren. Around the plains are flat, grey mountains without glaciers. I can't find an explanation for this landscape.

It is wide too. It takes long before the grey mountains get closer. Will these mark the long awaited descent into the Porsangerfjord, where I will get some tail wind to the place of my well deserved rest day? Before I reach the descent I need to ride some kilometres with a lot of little climbs, disturbing my rhythm. In the distance I see a road leading to the top of a hill. I ask myself whether this is a side road, or the main road leading over such a high point for mysterious reasons.

Of course it is a side road. But when I pass by it, I have a hard time not taking it to have a view from the top.

Did I just go mad? This is my sixth day in a row, I rode like crazy through Finland, I'm doing far over 200 km today, fought a difficult mountain and now I want to do unnecessary steep climb over gravel, just for fun?

Probably it's the endorphins.

Trees return, the landscape becomes friendly again. The descent begins. It is long, now and then interrupted by flat sections or even small climbs. A few buildings appear along



Ifjordfjellet.



Resting in Alta.

the road. Through the trees I get a first glance at the fjord. My bicycle rolls a little more down the hill before I get the full view. It is breath-taking.

The evening sun pushes through the clouds and reflects brightly on the water. I see little islands of bleak grey rocks. Blue-grey mountains rise out of the sea on the other side of the fjord. Pebble beaches lie half drowned before me, tide is not very high.

For this I rode 190 kilometres.

For more than 30 kilometres I ride along this scenery. Once in awhile I try to take pictures, but soon I realise I will never manage to record a fraction of what my eyes see now. I will never be able to describe it nor share it with others. My memory will fail to reproduce this beauty. It exists only here and now.

Tired but deeply satisfied I arrive in Lakselv. Where the camping is closed. As is the youth hostel. Where late at night jet fighters practise at full throttle. Where the bread for breakfast in the pricey hotel is mouldy. I postpone my rest day and continue to Alta.

A bird beneath a glass roof

Some two thousand kilometres I'm riding almost continuously on the E6. I'm fine with this. Despite the name it is a quiet road. Sometimes there is no centre stripe. Twice I see sheep ruminating on the road, refusing to move aside, not even for big trucks.

The idea was, by following the E6 instead of the coast, the climbing would be less strenuous. I observed last year that the roads through the valleys inland are flatter. What I forgot was the fact that north of the Polar Circle, the E6 is a coastal road too. Many times I find myself on a narrow section full of hairpins leading from the fjord into the mountains. Heavy trucks creep along in a low gear, their roaring engines producing hundreds of kilowatts while the cooling system has to work without wind. They're moving hardly faster than I.



The last days of the Nordic summer. Rognan.

I'm riding to meet the summer. At the latitude of Narvik gloves and overshoes are back in the panniers, jacket and the second layer of underwear are no longer needed. Narvik! I remember very well from my first visit to Norway how far north this city seemed to be.

Now it feels like the sunny south. Some 70 kilometres north of the Polar Circle I have a rest day. Wearing short sleeves I stroll in Rognan and enjoy an Indian summer.

However, the weather might feel like summer, but the tourist season is definitely over. Bars and restaurants run on few clients. Camp site receptions and tourist infos are barely manned. The Polarsirkelsenteret was still open, but I had to drink a paper cup of coffee standing in the gift shop. One day I ride almost 240 kilometers, looking for bread and an open campsite.

This ride hits like a hammer. Just like after the time trial for the ferry last year, I feel the need to slow down. But this time I don't. One day I ride a shorter distance, but the crossing of Saltfjellet is another day of 190 kilometres. It feels good, gives me the hope that I have enough room in my schedule for a detour in the last week over Sognefjell, the highest mountain pass of Scandinavia.

A day later I observe myself eating 30% more than normal. Again I conclude I really need to slow down. One day I am able to take it easy, it makes me feel fit again and Sognefjell comes back into my mind. So it is full speed again until I break down. In Trondheim I'm sitting ill in a coffeebar with the unpleasant sensation of failure. I call some friends. One of them tells me I talk like someone who just lost a big game, while in reality I made quite an achievement. It is time to feel proud about what I have done.

He is right, but it takes a full day of recovery to feel the way I should. And all the time I hope for favourable weather and a few days



Trondheimfjord.

play in my schedule so I can do the great col. I'm like a bird bouncing against a glass roof. Now and then I realise I cannot fly through, and I lower my flight a little. Then I try to fly higher and higher again until I hurt my head another time. I want to conquer Sognefjell so badly.

In Oppdal I'm sitting in a cabin, staring at the map once again. At the tunnels off limits for cyclists and the ferry which sails only once a day. I cannot keep up the courage. But I have no motivation to take the simple straight route to Oslo. Suddenly I see route 51. A road over East-Jotunheimen. Closed in winter, reaches 1100 meters at least.

No more doubts. No more worries over ferries, health and snow, and still a beautiful mountain ride at the end of the Norwegian part of my journey. I look out of the window, it's dark outside. Alone in a small Norwegian

cabin, thousands of kilometres behind me. I am the happiest man alive.

Valdresflya

Now I've made my peace, I fully enjoy Dovrefjell and Jotunheimen, two of the great Norwegian mountain areas. The ride on the 51 is unforgettable. I climb out of the autumn forest with free grazing cows. Beautiful lakes lie under a deep grey sky. I feel the urge to post about this great ride. Contrary to my normal cycling discipline I take several small breaks to send a text message to my microblog. The pinnacle of my journey deserves more intensive reporting.

The snowy giants of Jotunheimen are getting closer. Birches at the side of the roads dwarf with increasing height. I can't get enough of climbing. At every corner I am glad as the

road ascends even more. Plants become smaller and smaller, species disappear until only moss and some stubborn grass remains.

A small cabin marks the highest point. Valdresflya, 1389 meter. Only 45 meter lower than Sognefjell. Now I can ride home satisfied. Two days later I arrive in Oslo and say goodbye to Norway. Dog-tired I board the ferry to Kiel.

Back home

Four days are left to reach home, enough time to take it easy. But I have hardly left the harbour when it starts all over again. For some reason I get the idea to visit two friends near Enschede. To do this, I need to ride over 400 kilometres in two days. My body is so exhausted it doesn't even produce endorphins in detectable quantities anymore.



Valdresflya.

But I must, I shall and I do succeed. The result is a pleasant evening in Boekelo, and a breakfast during which I wonder how to get on the bike again. I cannot go on like this much longer.

Riding my bicycle for awhile makes me feel better. At the small city of Doesburg I enter the region of the great Dutch rivers. Riding over the dikes along the outer marches is a beautiful experience. I am still able to enjoy my journey, but only because of the pretty landscape. The effort of cycling itself doesn't give me pleasure anymore.

The friend who supported me on the telephone in Trondheim sends a text



Leaving Norway.

message. Would I mind a visit this evening? He will bring his tent, beer and tonic water. I totally lighten up from this plan. But where will we celebrate the last night of my journey? It has to be a nice village, with a sociable and warm café.

On the map I see the small town of Culemborg. Too far away. But pretty. However, it is not a good thing to exhaust myself when someone comes to visit me on this very last evening. I lie down on the Fujin again and notice my high speed. Half an hour later I send a text message: "Culemborg".



Along the great rivers.

The sun is setting as Hugo pitches his tent. It's cold, autumn has begun. Wearing all my Icebreakers and tuque I sit down on a chair, Hugo passes the tonic. The picture is like the beginning of a film, as the spectator gets acquainted with the leading characters. The man with the woolly hat has done something special, the spectator will soon learn what it is.

This is the moment I realise I achieved something special.

About the gear

The bicycle is the same Challenge Fujin SL I used on my trip to the North Cape. Some parts are changed. The bike has the following components:

- Carbon front boom.
- FSA carbon crankset, triple 30-39-53.
- BB7 disk brake front, rim brake rear.
- SRAM X.0 rear dérailleur, Microshift front dérailleur.
- SRAM PC990 cassette, 11-32.
- The bicycle has the new adjustable racing tiller.
- Gripshifts are replaced by SRAM DoubleTap shifters, actuated by thumb. With the new tiller this makes a very comfortable and aerodynamic body position possible.
- The rear wheel has an XTR hub. This seemed lightest hub durable enough for these adventures and it did well during the tour. However, after some 10.000 km it was wasted. There will be a new rear wheel soon. In the front wheel the light Challenge SL hub suffices.
- The head lamp is now a 'matchbox' from Owleye. USB-charged and enough light for less than 40 grams.
- Bebop Ti pedals.
- Kojak 35 mm tyres.
- Fenders, rack, mirror.

Configured like this, the bicycle weighs no more than 11,7 kg.

Other gear:

- Vaude rain clothing with e-Vent membrane, watertight overshoes.
- My tent is a very light 1 person Terra Nova Laser Competition. For the guy ropes I use shortened aluminium V-pegs for sandy grounds.
- MSR whisperlite stove with 1+1,5 liter titanium pans.
- Summer cycling clothes with leg warmers, long sleeve jersey by Reverse Gear, Winter cycling trousers by Assos.

- Mountain Equipment sleeping bag, 3-season Therm-a-rest.
- Set thin outdoor clothes. Combined with 3 thin Icebreakers, long underpants and a woolly hat this was always warm enough in the evening.
- Sidi Dragon MTB-shoes and light Salomon GTX hiking shoes.
- Radical design recumbent panniers size M plus Haglöfs Tight S daypack as top pannier.
- Telephone and mp3-player integrated in the Nokia N900, which also gave me internet access now and then.
- Leica D-lux 2 digital pocketcamera plus binoculars.



Colophon

This journey started on August 12 2010, at 7:15. I reached Grense Jakobselv on August 31, at 13:30. The 25th of September at 16:00 I was back in Delft.

Text and photography: Walter Hoogerbeets.

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