

# Hefty Cycling

up the right hand side of Sweden



**Saturday 15th May 2004**

I woke early, about 6.30am, and remembered where I'd left my digital diary—in my car. I retrieved it, then wandered up and down the house collecting bits and things, backed up my scores and documents to a Zip disc, let Danu out into the garden, made some tea, had a shower and finally packed my stuff into the panniers, the little black backpack and a large plastic bag by 8.30, when we were due to leave. I dithered over what warm top to bring; the hoody was too bulky, so I opted for a light jumper. Jenny drove me to Michael's and on the way I remembered that I had forgotten to pack my pump; no matter, Michael's pump fits both kinds of valve.

Our bikes were already strung up on the carrier frame on Michael's car, so after a breakfast of hot croissants and coffee we said our goodbyes, drove down to Dún Laoghaire and checked in for the Sea Cat. I used Michael's phone to call Jenny and tell her that I'd left my phone in our car. She found me at the Royal Irish Yacht Club by 10.30; I had misdirected her to the Royal St George thinking they were the same, and she had found me by ringing Michael. A suitably Mercier & Camier start to our adventure.

The weather was fine and the sea calm. The crossing was only 90 minutes, rendered painless by some rather good fish and chips with a pint of bitter. We drove off in Holyhead and were on the road to Cambridge by 1.15pm. I read the map and suggested going the shorter route by the A5 rather than the quicker one by the motorway, so we drove through the dramatic valleys of Snowdonia, and passed through Betws-y-Coed where, Michael said, Pop and Gran spent their honeymoon in 1909 or 1910.

We phoned ahead to Dougie and Bonnie as we approached Cambridge and by 6.30pm we found their house on Hills Road. Tom answered the door and welcomed us in; we put our stuff in our rooms and sat in the garden with Dougie and Bonnie, Tom, and Lauren and her boyfriend Stuart, drinking wine and gin-and-tonic until Bonnie produced a feast of chicken and mushrooms and peppers and potatoes and salad and, yes, it looks like another gastronomic journal is underway. Bonnie talked about her primary-school teaching and I talked about my various h2g2 hobbyhorses. The rest all got words in now and again. Stuart and Lauren are

both accountants, she gets sent around the world doing interesting-sounding audits, he works in the accounts department of a stationery firm. *The Office?*—yes, he said, and he keeps several David Brent quotes on his desk. Tom is interested in film but hasn't decided what to do about it yet. Oh all right: the pud was yummy marzipan cake and fresh strawberries. We turned in fairly early as Michael had been up since 5am. That's how keyed up we are.

## Sunday 16th May

I woke around 8.30am and had a shower, then I turned out all my packing and redistributed it. To my delight it all went into my panniers except for the cycling shoes and sandals, and the waterproofs which will go on the back carrier. I was as proud as if I had squared the circle. I turned on the radio just before 9 and heard some vintage Alistair



Cooke, the news (Robin Cook pushing to have the British troops withdrawn from Iraq) and a bit of BBC4's history of the British involvement in Bush's bash-Iraq fiasco. At a quarter past nine I joined Dougie, Bonnie and Michael for breakfast in the garden.

Dougie took Michael and me into town to look at the sights. He parked in Trinity where he is Senior Tutor (which meant that we could walk on the grass; we carefully kept close beside him), and showed us the river where the punters were punting in increasing numbers. A pair of swans with cygnets attracted the attention of the many visitors.

We looked into the chapel, where some people were just beginning to rehearse some Purcell; then the dining hall and Dougie's rooms, and the wonderful library with manuscripts of Wittgenstein, Russell, Moore, Swift, Milton, Byron and Longfellow on display. Russell's was like a fair copy, immaculate and uncorrected, but then Russell was always incorrigible. The Swift was a page of the *Directions to Servants* and was accompanied in the case by a first edition open at the same page. There was also a First Folio of Shakespeare from 1623, and a famous letter from Newton to Hooke with a diagram of a stone falling to the centre of the earth. The stone's path is not directly to the centre, it spirals in at the end; apparently Hooke's reply, pointing out the error in that picture, provoked Newton into writing his *Principia*. Trinity has a great mathematical tradition, from Newton to Hawking, and there were manuscripts of Hardy, Maxwell, Hamilton and others that Michael or Dougie could tell us about.



Dougie showed us the Fellows' bowling green, and the pre-college building at its end, built in 1482. He told us that the Trinity quadrangle was the site of the original challenge dramatised in *Chariots of Fire* and re-enacted each year by students. In order to dissuade them from running it at midnight when they

are drunk and liable to break their ankles, the college sets it up at noon, with prizes and fun-runners such as camels on stilts. A previous Master, one of the Huxleys, had timed the chiming of the clock and found that it varied from day to day, depending how recently it had been wound; so when they got Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett to run it, they had optimised the conditions. They managed to circle the quad just about within the twelve strokes, not quite if you watched the simultaneous recording of the clapper hitting the bell; but they weren't running flat out on the treacherous cobblestones. Michael said "These fellows are like prime racehorses"; I wondered did he mean 'expensive to replace'...can't be having them put down, I suppose.

After looking into the dining hall we went out into Trinity Street which was busy with tourists and cyclists and the occasional jogger. I bowed my head to the window of Wittgenstein's rooms, where he gave all his lectures. We wandered along, comparing the architecture of the various colleges. Dougie brought us into Queens', closed to the public but opened by the power of Dougie's Trinity staff card. Founded by Margaret of Anjou, Henry VI's queen, in 1448, it was re-founded in 1465 by Edward IV's queen Elizabeth Woodville—hence Queens', not Queen's. Nevertheless the portrait that dominates the tiny dining hall is unmistakably Henry VIII's, newly cleaned up. It is a gorgeously ornate room with red and black decorated beams in the ceiling. Queens' still has a medieval-size cloister rather than the spacious quadrangles of the later colleges. Dougie said that the college men lived like monks until comparatively recently. Fellows had to be ordained and unmarried up till the 1870s; and when they did marry they would move out into the many livings in the gift of the colleges. One of Dougie's duties in his various councils and committees is deciding what to do with the livings Trinity still holds. Another question is whether to put up street lighting in the avenue to the back of Trinity; traditionalists want to leave the beech trees uninterrupted, but female students going to their living quarters at night are vulnerable to lurkers. There have been incidents in other colleges, not in Trinity yet, but Dougie would like to act before rather than after it happens.

We were given another fine spread by Bonnie when we got back; added to the marzipan cake for afters was freshly baked Bishop's Bread, not bread at all, they let themselves eat cake, with hot chocolate chips in it. At 2pm we collected our bits, forgetting my towel, and got on the road by half past. Dougie and Bonnie invited us to stay the night again on our way home, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, which we couldn't turn down.

The drive to Harwich was pleasant and smooth; the A14 is virtually a motorway, two carriageways with gently branching exits, everything except a wide hard shoulder (cyclists notice these things). As we passed



a small rise we saw a crowd of kites in the air, and soon a sign told us it was an International Kite Festival, 15-16 May. On the road we passed a vintage open-topped car with a pointed back and wheels like a mountain bike's; it turned up again at Harwich and travelled on the ferry with us.

We arrived in Harwich with two hours to spare. Peter rang to say that Sarah was going to have her baby by caesarean; we sent our good wishes, she must have been through the wars, having been in labour for ten hours or so. We had got the essentials of the message when my phone battery ran out; efforts to reach Peter by Michael's phone failed, it may have run short

of credit.

We drove onto the ferry along with the wide and the tall (vans & SUVs). We were directed to our comfy cabin with two low beds, not even folded-away upper bunks. We adjusted our watches and changed a 500DK note into smaller notes at the reception desk, then settled in the bar and had a pint of Carlsberg—seven-eighths of a pint that is to say, half a litre. We sailed at six on the dot, seven by Danish time; at half-past the shop opened and I bought a plug adaptor for charging up the phones, and some toothpaste. We booked a table in the restaurant for 9pm and read *Pinker* until then; we had each brought a copy of *The*

*Blank Slate.* The weather was incredibly calm and beautifully sunny, we sailed out through the fairway surrounded by yachts and other boats; as we progressed into the open sea we noticed a tall cruiser apparently going parallel to us, but it gradually diminished in size while maintaining its position; not parallel after all.

Our dinner (we went for the à la carte menu) was really quite imaginative, stupendous even. We both had venison (roebeek) which was served with roasted garlic (a whole head each), asparagus and a sort of potato soufflé and a red chilli pepper that got increasingly macho with every bite. The effect of that in the end was to make our house-red wine (a Béziers Grenache-Syrah-Merlot) taste like blackberry juice through our buzzing lips. Not unpleasant at all. And so to bed, by eleven or so.

## **Monday 17<sup>th</sup> May**

We walked on the stern deck until the restaurant opened for breakfast at 8am, then went in and had flokken, juice and coffee, sausages and scrambled eggs, and nice fresh rolls. We went back on deck and wandered round until the Sirena docked at Esbjerg, and drove off shortly after noon. The vintage car had some trouble with the stop-start progress to the passport control and at last we saw it being energetically pushed. We got onto the motorway very easily and made fast tracks across the map. A message from Jenny told us Sam MacPherson had been born by caesarean and all was well, so I phoned Peter at Emily's number and left a message. David Griffith phoned and estimated that we would be at his house well before him, and told us to pick up a key from his neighbour Maria. Seeing we had plenty of time we diverted off the motorway into Odense to post Michael's package (a tin whistle with book and CD) to Rosy, and to buy some Black Bush for David. Odense is a pretty town with a small old centre and evidently some connection with Hans Christian Anderson.

Back on the motorway we heard strange prickling sounds from the engine; at first we thought it might be loose chippings, but there weren't any on the road. We pulled in to the hard shoulder, and when the sound persisted we thought the engine was boiling; but it wasn't. The drive belt for the alternator and power steering pump was ripping itself apart; it was about half its original width in places, and a long whippy strip was flailing about making the interesting noise. So we cut off the loose bit with a penknife and set off again gingerly. I phoned David to ask about local Volvo dealers, and we made it uneventfully to Vedbaek, arriving at 6.30pm. We reassembled the bikes first, before getting the key, and David arrived before we were finished, to let us in and revive us with gin and tonic.



He showed us how to get to his local Volvo garage and then drove us down to the restaurant on the beach at Vedbaek where we stood him a meal—rather tasty lamb cutlets and Italian red wine. Back home David showed us bits of his video of yesterday's Danish royal wedding, with evident enthusiastic approval for the Ozzie bride; and so to bed.

## **Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> May**

We had boiled eggs and coffee around 8am; David rang the garage and was put through to the workshop who said they'd ring back, but didn't. At 8.30 he went off to work and we drove the Volvo up to Naerum, taking note of the turnings for the way back. A nice young man called Kenneth said he could get it done but not immediately; he asked us our movements and offered to keep the car there until we picked it up on our way home. A mechanic drove us back to Vedbaek, we repacked our stuff, wrote a note to David, locked up, posted the keys through the letterbox and set out for the station at 10.10am. A bright sunny day with clouds scudding through the sky.

The Visa machine, which David had stepped us through last night, sold us one ticket and thereafter drew blanks; so having missed the first Malmö train we got on the second at 10.51 and bought the other tickets from the lady inspector (a bargain as it turned out. Bikes are half fare, the same as children, but we mysteriously made a saving somehow). I pumped my front tyre as we went; not without a certain frisson, as the pump refused to generate any pressure until Michael discovered that its barrel was simply coming unscrewed. Calmness of mind required to operate machinery.



You have to admire the space they make for bikes on Danish trains. We crossed the tremendous bridge to Sweden and at Malmö South we got off, brought the bikes up in the lift and headed south. Our plan was to take the 101 to the south coast, and at 12.05 by good guesswork (steering by the sun) we hit the 101 and were boosted along beautifully by a fresh north-easterly breeze.

We bought the makings of a roadside lunch in a petrol-station shop: two tins of mackerel in tomato sauce, beetroot salad, pâté, salami, a jar of gherkins, six very small rolls, two buns with sugar on the top, two green apples and two tins of Pripps Blå Swedie-beer. We couldn't find an off-road spot to eat, some benches in a well-kept field turned out to be by a golf green, so we sat by a grassy bank in a little lay-by and had our lunch there—not everything we bought, but a good spread none the less.

Moving on, the wind wafted us painlessly through Anderslöv and on towards Ystad. We consulted the map in the camping booklet I'd got from the Swedish Embassy in Dublin and decided to go south to Abbeås where there seemed to be some place to stay. We reached the sea side at Abbeås at 3.15 and sat there for a while; we looked at a large local map on a notice board and kept going for Ystad, where we located a hostel and booked in. Most of the other guests at the hostel were groups of small children who politely said hello in Swedish: "Hej", which sounds just like "Hi". A lot of Swedes emigrated to the States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and over the following weeks we found plenty of American characteristics here; mainly the generous helpfulness and sensible self-sufficiency of pioneers. Though when they don't want to be helpful, as we will discover, the shutters come straight down and are impervious to all assault.



Michael measured our path out on the maps and estimated that we could make it to the Arctic Circle if we keep our fifty miles a day; which should be possible, unless the wind goes hard against us, since today our total was forty-six, only really getting started a little before noon.



### Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> May

We woke early—Michael was astir at 6.30—but we took it easy as we wanted to find out information on the East Coast Cycle Route from the Tourist Information Office in Ystad, and we suspected that it wouldn't open till 10. I had a leisurely shower while Michael worked out our route and mileage more exactly; he now estimates we can do it just in the available time, if we average fifty-five miles a day.

We went into the kitchen and breakfasted on what was left from yesterday's lunch: liver pâté, crispbread, gherkins, apples and salami. The only other guests in our block, two German girls, were chatting away nineteen to the

dozen, in contrast to our laconic observations. At 9.30am we packed up, handed back our key and cycled back the two-and-a-half miles into Ystad. The Information Office was open and a girl found the very guidebook we wanted, and its English translation, so our wait was vindicated. Rather than go back past the hostel, to do the whole complete and entire track as marked in the book, we took a shortcut by going to St Herrestad by the main road. There we saw the first blue “Cykelspåret” signpost and followed it to Svenstorp, Tosterup, Bollerup where I photographed a sixteenth-century-looking building, Hannas and Hammenhög where we stopped for coffee and a pastry in a Gästgifvaregård. This word seems to imply a rather superior inn; this one was not so upmarket as the first one we experienced, last September in Skanör, but it was old-fashioned and welcoming, and they gave us a big pot of good coffee and some warmed spiral-shaped fruit pastries. In a small room like a study there was an old Underwood typewriter and a wind-up 78rpm record player, sorry, gramophone. There was also a large TV, and a book of stunning photographs of Sweden, which I leafed through while Michael compared his calculations with the guidebook.



The guide set out daily journeys of 70-80 miles a day, to get the trip into 21 days; and it gave details of places to stay all along, in order as we pass them, which is great.

By now the weather was windy and cloudy, with a few drops of rain. We put on rain gear, which was good to have even though the rain didn't materialise, because it was quite cold. We called in at Glimmingehus where there is a famous castle built around 1500 with walls eight feet thick; we bought postcards and photographed the castle. A car had followed us in from the road, and it held a photographer who asked could he take our picture for a book he was doing. We sat still and cycled along for him and he took dozens of pictures very quickly; we gave him our name and address and email, and took his: Bernt-Ola Flack at hotmail dot com. He processes his own pictures in black and white, so it won't be visible till August or September.



The route then turned north and the wind was more side-on, but we made good speed over some rolling countryside with apple orchards still in blossom, past fields of bright yellow rape, and fields of corn grown to three to six inches, and other stuff just appearing out of the ground. At Rörum there were great wild flowers in the banks and tulips still blooming in the front gardens. From there we had another steep climb and a flying descent into Kivik, where we stopped in the Pomona Pub for a late but satisfying lunch. Michael had steak and mash, I had a local speciality: egg cake (åggekakken), a sort of omelette with corn flour or something in it, and five rashers atop. The barman had excellent English but couldn't think of the

words for “I hope that fills you up”, the Swedish traditional wish. It all went down splendidly with a half-litre of Pripp’s Blå, so we told him that it hit the spot, and that he might consider wishing his Anglophone customers that.

The clouds started breaking up and the sun breaking through after that—we started again at quarter to four or so—so I left off the rain gear but kept my jumper on. Our course brought us north-west, right into the teeth of the wind that was becoming a gale, so much so that we could hardly freewheel downhill but had to keep pushing. The road went inland again, and over more hills; and as it was a fairly major road without a hard shoulder we were buffeted by the wind of passing cars and lorries. So when we got to Brösarp and saw a welcoming Gästgifvaregård we decided to cut our day short at 5.30 and book in for the night. We had done only 47-odd miles, but at least the weather forecast was for lighter winds tomorrow, even if they are still from the north-west. After a rest, a phone call home to Jenny and a check for a weather forecast on TV we went down to the bar and had a bottle of Mariestad, which the barman recommended as the best-selling Swedish beer. A fairly well-stocked bar, with Jameson as well as the ubiquitous Tullamore Dew.

## Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> May

Michael was up when I awoke at 6am and had my shower (he showers in the evening). We were the first down to breakfast at 7, followed shortly by a table of six or so fellows, possibly on a fishing trip. The breakfast was outstanding, beating even the Skanör one: hot sausages, rashers and scrambled eggs, cold meat of all kinds, cheese and salads, and very fine muesli that looked like broken-up Tracker bars, with raisins and chopped apricots and seeds and fruit salad and dried bananas to pile on, plus several kinds of yoghurt and juice. There was a copper kettle full of coffee and a steel one of excellent tea. We retrieved our bikes from the workshop where we’d locked them and paid our bill, and were on the road at five to eight. The wind was still fresh but very much less than yesterday, and after a few miles we turned right, to the northeast, and the wind was no longer against us. The cloud cover was a lot thinner too, it was more sunny than shady, and I did without rain gear though still kept my jumper. We were taken by the sight of many smallish but beautiful horses, and by a field full of dandelions.



Our uphill effort was rewarded by a glorious descent into Degeberga, and at Vittskövle we read about the famous castle, built in 1553 and visited by Linnaeus whose portrait appears on the 100SeK note. He said nice things about the garden of (as he called it) Hvitsköfle; a notice said it is originally Widtsköfle and there has been a castle there from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Its walled garden is still apparently used as a market garden. We bypassed Åhus and stopped in Rinkaby to stretch and drink water, and Michael oiled his chain and started looking for the source of a mysterious click in his pedals.

We zigzagged east and north, the wind helping us in the easterly direction; at Nymölla we saw the sea again and followed the coast to Sölvesborg where we stopped at 1.20pm for lunch. The restaurang (as they spell it here) was really a pizzeria with Oprah (silently) on a TV and pop music on a radio, but they had nice things like salmon in béarnaise sauce with boiled spuds on the menu, so we had that, with a pint and a half (50+33cl) of strong beer, and coffee and coconut cakes afterwards. Well fortified we set off north again, alongside the railway, mostly on very quiet roads though occasionally on a fast main road; and at six we

stopped in Karlshamn, after trying for an ATM and a supermarket, neither of which was functional. I went to find out prices at the First Hotel, but a chap told Michael that it was very expensive, but that he had a hostel just across the street, newly opened; so I went up the town and got some crowns from a bankomat and we checked in with him. Michael did some more click-hunting, I wrote up this, and the chap disappeared without hiring us any sheets; but we have a room...

The chap (Jocke), never came back but another two came in to stay, and one of them tried phoning him but got no reply. I sent him a text message but got no response either. So we just went to bed as we were. I used a yellow cover that was hanging around as an under-and-over sheet, and covered the pillow with my sweater. I slept grand and didn't sweat at all, so no great pollution was made.

## Friday 21<sup>st</sup> May

We got up around 6am and washed and packed up immediately. We bought rolls and a litre of juice and an almond cake (the almonds on top made it look muesli-ish) and set out before 7. We backtracked a bit, missing the place where we left the Cykelspåret on the way in; but by 7.30 we got to a clearing with a stack



of logs inviting us to sit down and have a leisurely breakfast. We still had salami and gherkins which we put in our rolls, and we polished off the juice and cake and felt ready for the road. It was fine but cold, especially on the hands. Soon we came to a collection of holiday huts, and I called in at the reception and bought a date stamp for the camping card I had sent away for before we left; so now we were set up to rent a Swedish cottage.

The Cykelspåret brought us east, then north, then east, then south to the coast again: definitely the scenic route. When we made our second water stop at 10.30am on a hilly road through a forest, it suddenly started to hail, then it eased into light rain which followed us for an

hour. We stopped at Ronneby Hamn (harbour) for a longish stretch, the feet getting a little numb; and the sun came out again, with just a few showers up to lunch.

The wind was light but generally in our favour. We headed up into Ronneby town to find a restaurant and post office: as Michael said, imagine going 37 miles anywhere in Ireland without passing a single pub. There were pubs in Ronneby, but not open; we landed on a Chinese restaurant that gave us lots of sticky rice and bland and shiny chicken with bean shoots and pork chow mein; with 40cl glasses of light beer. Feeling expansive we had pud: I had fourteen lychees in syrup and Michael had various fritters with ice cream. Unfortunately I left my U2 shades there. The post office was in a supermarket, so we picked up some more breakfast meat, tea bags and dried tomatoes, and needles and strong thread for Michael to mend his money belt.

We hit the road again 2.30pm and got back efficiently to where we had left the cycle track. The track took us inland, through beautiful foresty farmland, often along the single railway track, we saw one train and all, then south to the sea again, and north into Nättréby where we tried an ATM without success.



All day we crossed and recrossed the E22—ten times altogether—and at the end we were channelled alongside it, in a cycle track outside the fence, to bring us into the big city of Karlskrona. Although the cities look very spread-out on the map, when we entered the brown area it was often still countryside; we



were ushered through the suburbs and avoided the (quite small) centres. So at Karlskrona we stocked up some more in a little supermarket—bread and fruit and juice—and looked out a place to aim for. We settled on Trummenäs, where the guidebook said we could rent a cabin; and at something near seven we wheeled in to the reception, flashed our current camping card and got the last of the Stugas.

It had two rooms, one with kitchen fittings, a table and a sofa, the other with two double bunks. Showers and loo were in a building a few steps across the grass. The campsite was

quite busy; it is near a golf course, and near a city, and Friday.

We unpacked and I went back to the reception to hire sheets and buy two cans of light beer, and we broke our tradition by eating a little supper with our beer. At eight the man arrived with the bedding and towels; the campsite doesn't supply them officially, but he does unofficially. He lives in a nearby house and works in the reception. Michael mended his money-belt and went for a shower, I made the beds and wrote the story.

## Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> May

Woke and showered before 6am—incredibly quiet, only birdsong to be heard. We breakfasted on tuna and dried tomatoes on bread, and juice; we cleaned up comprehensively and packed and left at 7.40. By 9.15 we reached the East coast at Klackebäck; at 10 we stopped at the harbour of Kristianopel to try for a coffee, but the café didn't open until 11. At 11.30 we stopped on a forest road, and I photographed a dry stone wall, just in case there are no more to be seen. After that the land became flatter again with enormous cornfields and fields of oilseed rape.



At 12.40 we arrived in Torsås and heard a little band mostly of accordions playing folk music (including



Whiskey in the Jar) and I bought some lengths of cotton/polyester for sheets. The girl who sold it to me told me how to pronounce Cykelspåret: "sooshel-spaw-ret". Later we were told that it was "sookel-spaw-ret"; the Swedes themselves have some uncertainty over when their k becomes soft.

We had lunch in the only place in town, a pizzeria, who did a pleasant rödspätte (cod?) in batter with béarnaise, mayonnaise and chips, with a half-litre of Falcon at 5.2% alcohol rather than Mariestad Export at 7.4%. Michael got some money in a bank and we moved on at about 2pm.

At 3.30 we stopped in Voxtorp and I photographed the round church. After that it got cloudier and windier, and our fingers went white with the cold. At the next water stop we put on rain gear and we looked at the map and guide to see where we might stay; we settled on the four-star campsite in Strensö, near Kalmar. As we entered Ljungbyholm it started to rain, but it didn't last long; we left the Cykelspåret and took the local cycle track to Kalmar. This turned out to be an incredibly long straight path dedicated to cycles, though there were also some joggers and some urban skiers on in-line roller blades with ski poles. We surmised that it was an old road, replaced rather than widened for cars.



When we got to Strensö there was nobody at the campsite reception. I went up to a restaurant on the hill and asked a cheerful waitress did she know who was in charge? She said his name was Kent and his number was on a sign at the door. We had seen the sign but thought it referred to the shop; I rang it and got a phone company message saying what seemed like "leave a message after the tone" so I left a message. After a while I went back to the restaurant and got the waitress to ring him too; she couldn't get through to the number at all, but said her boss would come and help me. I sat down and after a while she came and said her boss had rung and Kent said he was full, but here is the number of a B&B. I thanked her and went back to Michael who was talking to a German chap in a car. They both said the cabins couldn't be full, it was already evening and there were about ten of them empty; but the German had already recommended the same B&B to Michael. He now offered to show us the way there, by driving slowly ahead of us, which he did. It was a hostel-cum-hotel, and also full.

The German undertook to check out another hotel (the reception girl rang it and got no answer) and came back fulminating that it was closed for Saturday, opening again on Sunday. But by this time somebody had cancelled a room in the hostel/hotel where we were, and we got that. We thanked the German and he left; we locked the bikes to a bench and moved all our stuff upstairs, settled in and went down for a beer. We are just beside the beginning of the four-mile bridge to the island, so we might go and check it on our way out of town tomorrow. Kalmar is a historic place with a medieval castle; we may or may not see that.



## Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May

We both slept well and didn't wake before 6am. Breakfast started at 7.30, very fine too, not crowded; the Danish party that had been singing and speechifying last night didn't appear for breakfast. We headed south after looking at a local map and seeing that the island we were on, the Ångö, is close to the old town, and we soon found the cathedral and the castle.

We caught a distant glimpse of the 4-mile bridge to the island of Öland, it is another like the Malmö bridge, one tall part and the rest fairly low. As we headed north out of town we expected to see more of it, but didn't. At one point we stopped to consult our map and an old couple recrossed the road to help us. He was dressed like Michael Palin as a lumberjack. They had no English but said encouraging things; we got back to our path fairly easily and had our first water stop at 10.30 at Lindsdal. Michael went off to find a tree and I leaned my bike against a rubbish bin which was not well attached to its pole, so we had some bin re-engineering to do. All part of the fun. We took the German's advice and ate more frequently, as well as drinking plenty of water; we had a decent second

breakfast finishing up all the meat we had bought, and the bread and tomatoes, and some of the Ryvita. The

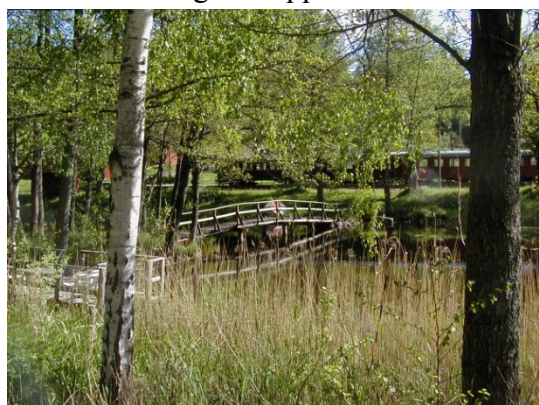
day started out with a blue sky, but quickly the cloud built up and at 11.30 we put on rain gear. It didn't rain much, not to wet you, but the rain gear kept out the cold. I had given in and worn long trousers today.

Our course brought us fairly directly up the coast, sometimes very close to the sea even though we didn't always see it. We stopped after 36 miles for lunch in a pizzeria in Timmernabben; it was 2.10pm (on account of our early sightseeing) and we were glad to find an open restaurant, the towns had a closed Sunday look; but there it was, first building in Timmernabben, and they gave us terrific steaks. Michael considered changing his habitual order from medium to rare because my rare was medium and his medium was bien ruiné...but highly edible, with chips and a light beer.



We cycled mainly through forests, and noticed a sign that surprised Michael (to think that it was needed) and delighted me (to see how much Swedish has in common with English): "All tipping absolut förbuden".

As we passed through Mönsterås I noticed a tourist-information office that looked open, and went in to see about a cabin or a room for the night. Michael estimated that we should reach Oskarshamn, so I asked the lady about places there; she said the stugas were closed, but she rang a few places. No answer from the Vandrarm, or another hostel; but a positive result from a hotel that wasn't too expensive. They gave me a number to ring as I approached Oskarshamn, so that there would be someone there to let us in. This we did,



after a long forest path, a road without markings and very little traffic where we could go side by side, bringing us up to Emfors; then the old E22 alongside the new E22.

Like most towns, the city sign is a long way out of Oskarshamn; we got to the centre by following the signs, then had to find the bus station which we did by asking about six people along the way, and there was Åsa Nilsson waiting for us out outside the Forum hotel and conference centre. She gave us a key, showed us our room, and a place to put the bikes, and the breakfast room where we were to take a prepared plate from the fridge, press a button for coffee, help ourselves to muesli and juice and bread

and the rest—because there would be no staff on duty! She then left us to it. Everywhere we walked the lights went on automatically. Hotel of the future.

We had a beer we had bought in the previous town, sent messages home, watched some Sky News and hemmed our sheets; and so to bed.

## Monday 24th May

The day started cloudy, but the clouds were high and striped, not the sort that rain on you. Later they turned to cumulus and threatened a few drops, but by mid-day it was clear and by evening it was definitely hot with a clear sky except for a few mackerel clouds away to the north.

We got up at six and out by 8am. We weren't alone in the hotel after all, some chaps had come in around 10pm and were there at breakfast; they appeared to be builders (some of them English) working on the other end of the building; it's fairly enormous.



As we left Oskarshamn (pronounced Oscar-sham) we saw a lot of children going to school on bikes. It's a pretty big town, and attractive; for the first time we noticed numbers of detached houses of the same pattern; usually they are one-offs. A few were plastered, though most were of wood, vertical planks with outside studs.

Most of the day we travelled through forests, and mainly on deserted roads so we could go abreast, taking both sides of the road. Our first stop at 9.15 was on a dirt track. My back tyre felt less than resilient so I



pumped all four of our tyres up to 40 psi; all were down to quite low pressure. The bikes felt perkier for that. We had a second breakfast at our 20-mile stop, at 10.35: bread and tomato-oil and a few biscuits.

I took some pictures of the fir trees; they seem to have lost most of their bark above a certain height, and yet their top branches seem perfectly healthy.

Our 30-mile stop was at 12.15, and close to 1pm we diverted off the Cykelspåret one kilometre into Blankaholm where we found an old-fashioned inn, a gästgiveri,



which gave us an excellent lunch of fish and boiled potatoes with a sprig of salad and a bottle of medium beer (3.5%). The walls and doors were adorned with pictures and wooden sculptures by Gösta Holmer, the husband of our hostess, as we found by picking up a leaflet as we left. We were once again the only people there, except for an old lady who also seemed involved in the place; our hostess Shuly appeared from the shop next door as we approached, and wandered in and out as we ate. The Swedish influence is starting to tell on us, we didn't lock our bikes at all, and hardly looked at them through the window.

We moved on at two, after Shuly had rung the bus company for us to find out about buses back from the north, without success. She suggested that the Tapanis bus company might be the one to take as far as Stockholm, but they weren't answering the phone just now.

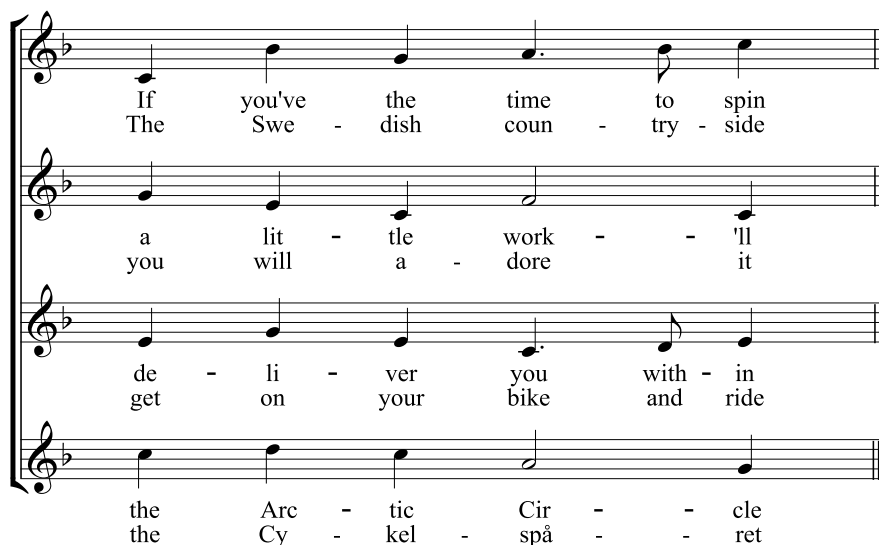
We stopped promptly ten miles on, at 46 miles on the clock. The terrain is hilly, with bottom-gear rises and



exhilarating whooshes down, cautious of skidding and listening out for any approaching traffic. We met very few cars and lorries all day, except for the short stretches on busy roads. At one point a hare bounded across the road, then a squirrel, dark grey and very bushy, scrambled up a tree, and later a young deer dashed into the undergrowth. We heard a good few cuckoos and saw a good many butterflies—also ants and the dreaded mosquitoes.

At the last water-stop in Gunnebo we looked at the camping list and phoned ahead to Lysingsbadets, a five-star campground in Västervik. They said they had stugas to rent and stayed open till 9pm. By now it was definitely shorts weather again, but I kept my

longs on and felt warm. I photographed an old wooden bridge and some kids on bikes at Vadebäck; later I caught a classic pile of logs in the evening sunlight. For the last two hours or so I rode ahead of Michael and wrote a round in my head; I thought I might call it “a spin”:



The first bit of Västervik we came to was a set of hypermarkets where we bought towels, then we followed signs and asked directions when the signs ran out to Lysingsbadets—at the coast near the town centre, just beyond the Electrolux headquarters. A girl booked us in to a luxury stuga with shower and toilet as well as TV and kitchen; we even had separate bedrooms, and yet it was about the same cost as our first more basic stuga, and half the cost of a gästgiverigård room. We made a cup of tea, and another, and had our

apples from breakfast and the last of our biscuits; we also started the almonds we had bought a week ago. I went back to the reception to use their free net access; I left a message for a Swedish net-forum friend called Archangel Titania, but couldn't actually log on to h2g2 as the computer was set to refuse cookies.

## Tuesday 25th May

Our breakfast was a tin of matjes on bread and a carton of beetroot salad, with almonds on the side. It was a little rainy so we dawdled a bit, I wrote some postcards, and by 8.30am it cleared up and we left, sweeping and mopping up behind us like good Swedes. We went straight to the drawbridge missing the centre of town, which we read later is called the jewel of the east coast. The drawbridge was raised for a motor cruiser like a small passenger ferry to go through. The rain started again but not for long; as we travelled north up the long spit of land it looked as though we were heading into a thunderstorm, but we turned east in time to miss it and we headed for blue skies. Once again the day improved steadily to finish clear and warm, despite a weak northerly breeze. Our second breakfast was bread and almonds; supplies were running low.

We saw more dramatic cliffs than before, of pinkish granite; in one place the mountain rose from the plain like the Kerry mountains after Barraduff. We heard more cuckoos, and saw a hare quite near the road, that gave up fleeing and froze; I reassured it that we couldn't see it at all, in the three-inch corn. Michael recited Christy Moore's *The Brendan Voyage* as we cycled side by side. We stopped early for lunch, in a pizzeria in sunny Loftahammer: we had their salmon with boiled potatoes, not bad at all.



We stayed for coffee and pastries and talked about the Beatles and how George Martin got on so well with them; once they heard that he had produced the Goon records he could do no wrong. This conversation was prompted perhaps by the news of the collapse of EMI—the company that recorded both The Beatles and St Sepulchres. We moved on at 1.50pm, posting our cards and a letter at the post box in the petrol station.

Shortly after three, in another series of hills and drops, we left the province of Småland and entered east Götland. On a smooth bit of road I became aware of a thump in my wheel, and we checked to find a lump growing in my back tyre. We decided to make a short day of it, partly because Michael is shaking off a cold and finding his energy low—though I blame his exhaustion on his bike, which was noisy before but is noisier now with its fairing reflecting the sound. I called it a wurzel mangle which is rather rude of me; but it is true that it has a high coefficient of inefficiency. On our first French trip two years ago Michael left me

behind quite often, on his upright model, but now I outrun him most of the time. The fairing helps but only once you are already going fast, which means downhill.

As we hoped, there was a shop in Valdemarsvik that could sell us two new tyres (my front tyre was worn smooth, my back one coming apart in its lining) but not the right inner tubes. The inner tube on my back wheel was healthy but a bad fit, so we put on Michael's spare and kept the old one as a spare for emergencies. Close to the shop we found a "Bed & Breakfast" where the owner Kjell rented us a big room with breakfast at seven. He runs a Thai restaurant downstairs. It was six o'clock by then, and we went down the town to raid an ATM, and called in at a pub for a pint of Pripp's Blå on tap (the strong version) with peanuts. We looked at the boats at the pier and had an ice cream, then returned to our room and watched some news. Michael sewed his sheet into a sleeping bag, that is to say all the way up one side and half way up the other. Nice place, Valdemarsvik.

## Wednesday 26th May

We had a small breakfast and left at 8am. My back tyre went flat pretty soon; the valve was leaking but when I tweaked the valve pin with a fingernail it stopped leaking and it behaved well after that. We got back on the Cykelspåret and set out for Nyköping in order to be able to reach Stockholm tomorrow. A long day; 75 miles altogether including two strange detours, occasioned

in different ways by changes to the road signs that weren't on our map. First we bought provisions at a supermarket: kippers, chutney, tomatoes, avocados, cake and biscuits, apples, oranges, salami, pâté and four French rolls. After twenty miles we stopped, at 10.53, and had ate some of that. The day was cloudy but



after we started the rain held off. It was cool but not too cold, as the wind was light or none. Mostly we went through forests, on fairly deserted roads. My new tyres with their Farmer John studs made a noise on smooth roads like a 1950s electric bread van. We heard a woodpecker doing drum rolls on very resonant trees. We also saw and heard woodpigeons, for the first time. Cuckoos still shouting themselves hoarse.

At one we stopped for lunch in a very neat pizzeria in Söderköping, called "Vi & Ni" (a quasi-Viennese flavour?). Michael had a Snitzel, which here means pork, with chips, and I had an enormous and tasty lasagne.

While we were eating two twelve-year-old boys, full of

street cred, sat down near us waiting for a take-away and one of them asked were we twins, and where we were from. He said his mother's people were from Dublin. When we went to pay, we were only billed for the food; when I went back to pay for the beer the waitress looked almost annoyed, and only took 50SeK instead of 90. We got away at 2pm but were thrown off our equilibrium by the Cykelspåret signs pointing us down the canal, while the map showed us crossing it above the town. We turned back and asked in a tourist information office; the girl there said we could go either way, but there were locks further down where we could cross and reach a road on our route. Rather than mix with busy traffic following the map route, we went back and persisted with the canalside track, and found that the blue Cykelspåret signs now bring you all the way that way. We were surprised at the disagreement with the map, because up to now both map and roadside signs have been wonderfully reliable; wherever we have had trouble it has been more or less our own fault. From there we got away our spirits never failing, but worse was to come: after crossing the fjord by ferry from Skenäs (seven-minute crossing, free, room for 24 cars, only five today) we found the signs brought us by such a roundabout long cut that we took fifty-three minutes covering three miles on the direct road, which was the route on the map. It was a little galling as we had a long run anyway, and the way we were brought was not particularly spectacular at all. Michael was bothered by a squeak in his pedals, sounding as though the lubrication had dried up or run out; tomorrow we must look for a garage with a grease gun.

We pushed manfully on, checking every sign against the map, and made it to the environs of Nyköping around seven-thirty. We looked in at a motel, but it was shut though the lights were on in the restaurant; so we carried on till we were about a mile outside the town, and tried an Ibis hotel. The first door we tried was another shut restaurant, but round the back we got into the hotel and a very helpful girl let our bikes have the

conference room and booked us in on the third floor. We ate some cake and I tried ringing Titania; the number I have is a hotel company she works for, (Scandic as it turns out) so I must try again in working hours. We sent messages home, watched Porto beating Monaco and went to bed.

### Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> May

Breakfast later than usual, at 7.15am; about ten other people there, all men except for one woman of indeterminate age. We wrote more postcards, and I replied to messages from Jenny and Aoife, and we left at 8.30. We found we were close to the centre of Nyköping, which I found out in the Tourist Information Byrö is pronounced “Knee shopping”. The girl in the

Information was very helpful, and showed us the location of the library, an Internet Café, and Jack’s Cycle Shop. I went to try and get internet access, Michael went to try and get rid of his squeak. The library wouldn’t be open until 10am and the Internet Café until 11, but Jack was very helpful and gave Michael some grease from his own grease gun, and that did remove the squeaks.

At 9.30am we moved on through the delightful town of Nyköping and out into the fields and forests. The sun shone and the breeze was behind us for part of the way as we headed south-east for a while, close to the coast. At 10.20 we stopped for a ten-mile rest, at which time I tightened up my left cleat a little. I like them set for easy release, but this one had been letting my foot off when I wanted to keep it attached, while pulling hard up a hill. Michael applied some of Aoife’s citronella mixture to his ankles and neck, as the mosquitoes had homed in on us and started to attack. It seemed to work.

At 11.35 we stopped for our twenty-miler and second breakfast: bread, pâté and mango chutney. Around 1pm we reached the historic town of Trosa, called “the world’s end”, Trosa meaning knickers. We decided not to stop there for lunch; we had enough food to feed ourselves, which needed to be finished up. Instead we stopped at a supermarket for bread, beer, juice, jam and fruit. Going out of Trosa

we photographed three rune stones and copied down their inscriptions. This one says “Härmond lat hugga efter Bergvid, sin broder”—possibly “Hermann carved this in memory of his brother Bergwit.”

Before we knew it it was 3pm and we hadn’t had lunch yet. We pulled up in a small wood and hauled up our bikes onto the bank under the trees. Mosquitoes began to assemble, but it started to rain which seemed to send them away. We had our salami and bread, half a melon each and the rest of our lemon cake, with a can of beer. Changing to rain gear we moved on, the weather gradually improving again until we reached the ferry at Sandviken, from the island of Mörkö which we entered by a bridge. It was on that island that we



saw our first and only elk, in a cornfield, too far away for a decent photo, but unmistakeable in their uniqueness. We wondered at first were they very dark deer, but then they started to move, and though the big one looked the size of a donkey its mode of locomotion was totally not donkeyish, or horseish, or deerish, or anything else. We could just make out the characteristic moose-like snout as it first walked and then trotted, proud and unhurried, towards the forest cover. Magic.

After the ferry trip we had a fairly direct run up to Stockholm. Stopping for water under trees near a lake we had an intense cloud of mosquitoes gathering around us so we didn't hang about.



We took note of how close we could get to Stockholm before it became evident that we were in the environs of a major city. Twelve miles out we hit Vårsta, which was instant suburbia, out of farmland totally indistinguishable from the rest of the countryside (apart from the fact that the hills were longer than before); but it didn't last, we were back to forest again until we were in Tumba, and again for considerable swathes after that; and right through the genuine suburbs of Stockholm there were clumps of forest and rough grassland. We planned to stay in one of the preliminary towns, perhaps Tumba; we phoned the Vandrarhem number given in the Cykelspåret literature, but got a

message giving an alternative number in Swedish and English. Ringing that we got a message giving a further alternative number in Swedish only, so we gave up. We left the Cykelspåret to try and find the centre of Tumba, but only found the railway and bus station. There we talked to a Hungarian taxi driver who told us several useful things: that Hågelby, the Vandrarhem house, a historic house in its own park, was being used for a rock festival and therefore closed to guests; that there was nowhere else until about seven miles closer in to Stockholm; and that there (he pointed out the position on our map) we would find an Ibis and a Formula 1 hotel.

We steeled ourselves for what was turning out to be another long day and returned to our Cykelspåret. We passed Hågelby, where indeed an amplified song could be heard, and rode along the more wiggly road that paralleled the motorway, until we were deep in suburbia. Here the Cykelspåret became heroic; it wound us through back roads, behind people's back gardens, through the parks round high-rise housing estates, under underpasses and over wooded hills, so that we rode through the city as though we were locals.

After eight we stopped for some bread and chocolate, and I sent a message to Jenny; then we decided at a complicated motorway underpass that we were close enough to start asking the way to the Ibis hotel. The first two chaps we asked didn't know the Ibis but said there was a Scandic nearby, so remembering the Copenhagen Scandic from our previous trip we went for that. It was at Kungens Kurva, it was friendly and welcoming, and the reception girl let us put our bikes in the luggage room. Exhausted and exhilarated we took off our cycling shoes, lay down on the beds and watched a few moments of TV, then went down to the bar for a beer. The contrast with the Copenhagen Scandic with its zero atmosphere was startling; this place was buzzing, with the bar full of interesting-looking people. We read our maps and Michael looked out the window and saw a gigantic Ikea sign across the road. He said he'd heard of that, what was it? I told him the suppository furniture joke (you put it up yourself) and we got quite helpless with the giggles.



There was a public computer in the hallway so I queued up after two Indian or Japanese girls and finally logged on to h2g2. I left a message for Titania, whom we couldn't reach by phone, and an entry in my own journal, and a message for Anto in his space; then it was ridiculously late and we stumbled up to bed.



## Friday 28<sup>th</sup> May

We slept in, not surprisingly, until after 7am! Around 8 we had breakfast, when there were quite a few people about, including many young folks and kids. A truly five-star breakfast, with a machine brewing fresh-ground coffee, muesli with not only raisins, sunflower seeds and dried bananas but fruit salad, numerous varieties of yoghurt, ground rye, linseeds, cinnamon, and other things we didn't read the labels of but just ladled on; and then scrambled eggs, little sausages and beans. Also meat balls had we felt inclined. And of course various kinds of bread and jam and marmalade. Well breakfast is important and it's nice to have it taken seriously.

At 9.35am we moved out; Kungens Kurva is obviously a famous twirl in the road to Stockholm. Cykelspåret signs came thankfully thick and fast, we only lost the track twice for a moment but soon found it again. Strange to say, it brought us directly past both the Ibis and the Formula 1 hotels; but they couldn't have been a patch on the Scandic, and were

3 to 5 miles further in. Michael had got advice at the reception desk on how to get to the centre of the city, so we left the Cykelspåret at the start of a bridge and cycled along the waterfront to cross another bridge into Stockholm itself, a tiny island they also call "Gamla stan", the old city. There we wandered into a square where we leant our bikes against a hoarding and had a beer and an espresso sitting out in the square.

Many people looked interestedly at the bikes—we still haven't seen any other bents in Sweden—and one grey-haired chap took in the IRL sticker, spotted us and came over to talk. His name is Norrie Pravin, he's Scottish and claims despite his youthful vigour to be seventy years old. He is also a cycle tourer, and he told us where he'd been and where he'd recommend (Slovenia particularly) and how cheap he'd got everything including a Reynolds 351 frame for £25. We quickly gathered that he was not

interested in where we'd been or what we thought so we said no more than politeness required. "I'll tell you this boys," he said, "the thing I dread is getting out of big cities." We have the Cykelspåret but he's heading west, for Bergen, and considering the twists we had, with signs to guide us, I don't know how he got out at all (maybe he's still there). The trouble is that all the road signs tend to point you to the motorways, which



are worse than useless to cyclists.

We walked on through old Stockholm and my eye was caught by a sign for "Jenny's Silk Shop" where I bought a silk dressing gown for Jenny.

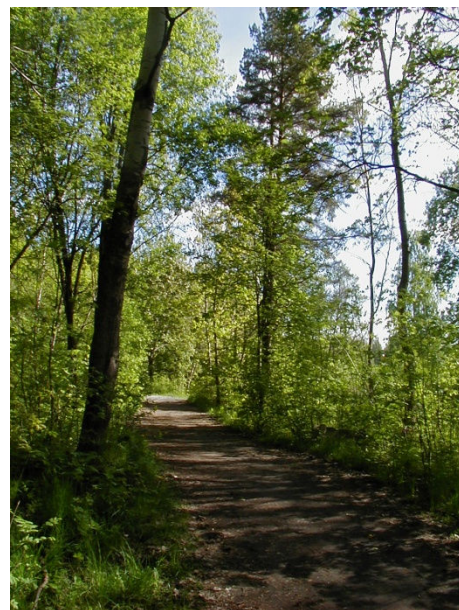
Silk is a good present for cyclists to buy, it packs very small. We found a bookshop near the castle where I got a Berlitz Engelsk-Svensk dictionary. Michael asked for a book, "Holes", that Bonnie had expressed an interest in, and was directed to a bigger bookshop at NK. We crossed another bridge and asked the way; most people were tourists and couldn't help, so we asked a couple pushing a pram and they told us. NK turned out to be a sign on a



building housing a multi-storey carp ark (sorry, that's another joke, about Noah getting a second call, this time to build a ten-decker stocked entirely with fish), but some men at a restaurant door pointed us round the corner to the Akademi bokhandeln, and Michael bought the book and got wrapping paper with it. While he was inside I found where we were on our city map from the hotel, and we had some lunch sitting outside a deli—Indian style chicken Jaipur with rice and bread, with crunchy fresh carrots and mange-touts and salad. Then we got straight down to the railway station where Michael found out useful information on bringing bikes on trains—the railway company won't handle them but there is a freight company that will, and you can nearly always be sure the bike goes on the same train as you. This is useful because the train journey will be a lot shorter—15 hours from the north to Stockholm—as well as more comfortable than the bus.

Near the station was the general post office and I went there to get stamps for Bonnie's book and the postcard to Nick and Mary in New York, and some extra stamps. A greater contrast to the Dublin GPO could hardly be imagined: one service window in a below-ground mall, with the air of a sorting office, one helpful attendant, no other customers. The postage to the USA was the same as to Ireland, and the packet to England was given a sticker I could write the address on, and off it went. When I came out it had started raining, so we geared up and set out to find our Cykelspåret again. One false move had a man beeping insistently at us: we were on the slip road entering the motorway. Gratefully we hauled our bikes back and looked for a suitable bridge to take us back to the waterfront we had cycled along in the morning, and in the end we found it and made our way to the same bridge we had left. From here on we greeted each Cykelspåret sign with smiles of relief, as the way out of the city to the north was quite a maze with U-turns and surprising alleys that came to dead ends for all traffic bigger than bicycles.

At Freskati, just before another bridge, we stopped at a petrol station to ask where we were and where we might find a hotel, as we meant to make this one at least a short day. A father and his daughters helped us; his response was "you want to stop for the night already?" so we pointed to our bikes; the girls' response was nicer, "cool bikes". (I had heard a guy leaning out of a slowly-passing car saying something I had heard another young fellow say, "häftig cykel". It sounds like "hefty sookel" and was said in approving tones; when I looked it up later I was delighted to find häftig translated as "violent, severe, intense, fierce". Evidently a Viking word of approbation.) The father said there was a Scandic in Täby, so we set our sights for that, and over an hour and maybe ten miles later (the spåret added a few new detours to bring us along the waterside, not as on the map) we turned left for the centre of Täby and soon saw rising up before us like a vision of the promised land a large Scandic. The girl took some cajoling to let us put our bikes indoors, but she eventually let them into a back room used for storing chairs, and we settled in at about 6.30 to catch up on writing and take an early night.



## Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> May

Despite the sun streaming in the window we didn't wake until 6.33am; we showered and had breakfast at 7.30. Another excellent breakfast; I noticed you could have varieties of milk on your muesli as well: soured, skimmed, and two others I don't remember, and ecological coffee. We left Täby at 8.35am and found a quick way back to the Cykelspåret. Again it brought us over little hills, round the waterfront by some very desirable residences, each one no doubt owning its boat, and through some forest track that I had to photograph to show alongside its location on the map, still in the urban area.

We looked in at a shopping centre, thinking of pillowslips, but it wasn't opening until 10am; we stopped there because we had missed or misread a sign for the Cykelspåret (I looked up spår and it means track; no doubt the same word as spoor) because we weren't expecting to go onto the road it showed. Finally we worked out, by dint of asking, which road was which on the map, and got on to the eastward section. It was hot and windless and we rode in our shirtsleeves; the rises and falls were longer than before. We shopped in

Åkersberga: bread, beer, fish in a jar, dried tomatoes, gherkins, olives, potato salad, apples, bananas and four little cakes, then on we went. The clouds were on the move though we couldn't feel or see the effect of any wind at ground level: so far there has been at least one change of weather every day. On one long downhill run we hit 40mph.

We stopped around 12.30 at a grassy clearing near the top of a hill on a fast but unbusy road, after 21 miles. Michael laid out his washing to dry and set to cleaning his chain and cogs which had become clogged up with sandy dust from the dirt roads. I did some writing and reading and played a few devastating games of backgammon against my digital diary. We had lunch when he was finished, sitting on a handy metal box that also served as a table. It was clouded but still dry when we moved on. We stopped in Riala to look at the 13th century church, but a note on it said that the door was alarmed. We dumped our rubbish bag in a bin there, so we got some service from the church at least. I took a photo of the wooden bell tower, a very traditional design.



At Penningby we decided to stay on the big road rather than do the detour marked by the Cykelspåret; the road wasn't too busy. There were a number of cyclists out, and quite a few motorbikes, going extremely fast. With good steady going we arrived in Norrtälje shortly after 6pm, having covered 51 miles with a late start and long cleaning/lunch break. We meant to give ourselves an easy day after a couple of unintended long hauls, but it was not to be. We rang ahead at our last water stop to the Vandrarhem, and got a message that it would be opening on the 14th of June; and from the campsite we got a message in Swedish that could have said anything.

As we rode into Norrtälje we spotted a "bed" sign and turned up to the Roslagen Hotel, but they had a big wedding party in and no room. The receptionist gave me the name and number of the Grandparken hotel, but they were full too. We had done a tour of the town and even phoned a campsite miles out on the coast in Kapellskär; they were going off duty but would leave a key in the door of stuga no.11 for us; though the girl wouldn't be around in the morning until noon. We thanked her and accepted her offer, then set out to find the road; we asked in a kiosk opposite a (closed) petrol station, and the kiosk girl phoned the local campsite for us to interpret its message. She got an answer, but the answer was that they were also full. So she showed us how to get on the road to Kapellskär; it appeared to be the E18 motorway, but she thought about it and said no, it had speed limits and crossings, it was the continuation of the motorway but no longer motorway. We thanked her muchly and put on our raingear and set off at 7.15.

As we reached the top of the entry slip-road the "end-of-motorway" sign was displayed. The rain was cold on the hands, but they didn't get too stiff; we cycled on the hard shoulder as cars and lorries zoomed past at speeds very much over the limit. After a while to my surprise my phone rang and we stopped to answer it. Was that Recumbentman? Yes indeed. It was Archangel Titania replying to my message in her h2g2 page, regretting that she had been away for the last few days, and that we had already passed through Stockholm. I spoke briefly to her, explaining that we were on a busy road and my battery was just about running out. She wished us luck and a good journey to the north.

We saw a sign saying that Kapellskär was twenty kilometres away, and cycled boldly on in the rain and fading light. As we approached, the setting sun shone out under the clouds behind us, and I looked out for the rainbow. For a while it was not to be seen, then suddenly it was there, bright and enormous, first the left leg, then the right, then the connection between. Amazing that though



its apparent position is fixed relative to the eye of the observer, the rainbow is as steady as anything in the landscape, no matter how you turn or shake your head. Your mental fix on the things in your field of vision



is steadier than your body is. I sang rainbow songs at the top of my voice, *Somewhere over the Rainbow* then *What a wonderful World*. Soon we were at Kapellskär, and turning back on the dirt road to the campsite, there was stuga number 11 with a light on outside it and a key in the door. Wonderful people the Swedes, Michael said. I agree: a lot of the things you like about Americans, the Midwestern plains folk, seems to come from people like the ones we met here.

We unpacked and ate some fish and gherkins on bread, then jam on bread and the last two cakes, and we went to bed in our tiny shack, just four walls and a door and two windows, a table and stools and a fridge and two pairs of bunks, and a heater and a waste paper basket and sweeping-up brush and pan. And of course plug sockets, a fuse box, a light in the ceiling, a roof and a floor, that completes the inventory, thank you and good night.

### Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> May

We had a leisurely breakfast of an odd mixture of things: apples, bread with dried tomatoes and gherkins, bread and jam, Ryvita and jam, then a cup of tea and later another. As I was washing up a message came from Jenny saying that her concert with Laoise and Kamala had gone well, and that Lucy played beautifully. I phoned her back and we had a seven-minute conversation. Meanwhile Michael was reading Pinker. We get little enough reading done as we are so whacked in the evenings and so eager to get off in the mornings. We paid the girl when she arrived in the kiosk at noon, and set off back along the E18 to Norrtälje, as there appears to be no alternative route.

The weather was fine, and we stopped at the bridge where the rainbow had appeared the previous night, and took a picture of the water. The road to Kapellskär is very high quality, next to motorway, because Kapellskär is an important ferry terminal for Helsinki. As we left we saw a van with an LT registration—Latvia or Lithuania?—having trouble starting. You do see old cars in Sweden, Volvos never die, but this was our first genuine wreck. They were proudly sporting their one-month-old EU number plate. We smiled to think that *we* could be their first impression of normal Swedes. Still haven't seen another bent here.



Near Norrtälje we pulled into a grill for lunch; it was run by a fat man who seemed Turkish; his English was almost as bad as our Swedish so we spoke in German. He recommended his *filé mignon* so we had two of those, with some light beer. On a TV on the wall the Grand Prix was just beginning, and we watched as we ate, up to the point where Hakkunen's Mercedes engine belched forth clouds of black smoke. Michael said this was a great embarrassment to Mercedes who haven't been having success with their cars for the past few years. I made a point of saying "nyah nyah" to any Mercedes we met along the road after that.

Back in Norrtälje we had a little trouble finding the Cykelspåret; we found it by chance more than design, and even then we were sent wandering for a while

after one of the signs had been turned around on its post. We left Norrtälje at 4.10pm, twenty-two hours after arriving there, and apart from the helpful ladies of the kiosk we were not desperately pushed about meeting any Norrtäljers from here on.

Realising that we had had similar problems the previous Saturday and Sunday, we chose a place to stay and phoned ahead to book a hotel. The same arrangement as Oskarshamn was the result: we would arrive in Hallstavik around 8pm, there would be no staff in the hotel, but the owner gave us a number to key into the pad at the door and we would find an envelope inside with the key of our room. The day remained mainly sunny but clouded over for a few hours; we cycled through forest roads and farmland, some fairly rough, some tilled, with one field of corn well ahead of the general growth we had seen. The road rose and fell in long hills, with some short ones for variety. At one point I saw what must have been a woodpecker—totally black with a dark red crest. He flew up and attached himself to a tree for a moment in classic woodpecker upright pose, before flying into the woods. We also saw two traffic-accident victims, a badger and a partridge. Towards the end of the day I saw a small field or pen with three or four woolly llamas in it, mostly chocolate brown, but one white. Kids in the towns we passed through gave us some more comments of “Häftige cyklar” and older kids on motorbikes gave us waves and thumbs up.

At about 8.40pm we rolled into Hallstavik and asked for the hotel, let ourselves in and found our key to a splendid room. A can of beer that we bought on the way out of Norrtälje along with other necessities had cracked in my bag, and wetted the jars but thankfully not the tea bags; we sorted that out and washed the jars, then drank the remaining one and a half cans of beer, and the litre of juice, and had some bread and chocolate and olives and tomatoes. The bread and tomatoes were entirely unsquashed as I have found a method of slinging a plastic shopping bag’s handles over the tops of my seat poles, so that the bag rests lightly on top of my carrier baggage, and stays put. From now on the beer goes with the crushables. I have also found a way to prevent my hat blowing off: I fold up the front of the brim into a sou-wester, and that seems to cancel the lift it otherwise undergoes. It has blown off many times on thrilling descents, but Lucy’s excellent rope has saved it from getting swept away.



After our meal in the hotel we heard sounds and I went downstairs to find the owner with his two young sons. He had no objection to our putting the bikes under the stairs, they were admiring their strangeness.

## Monday 31<sup>st</sup> May

Our hotel owner, Andesh by the sound, had breakfast ready for us at 7am, all the normal stuff, and I paid him by Visa (the swipe goes through instantly) in his office which is also his kitchen. I asked was the hotel new, he said it had been built as flats but no tenants had been found so the town had turned it into a hotel, which he has run since 1998. Mostly it is workers in the paper factory that live there during the week. We had read about the paper factory—the biggest in Europe, with the biggest paper machine in the world. As we left Hallstavik we saw the factory, with plumes of clean-looking steam coming from its many chimneys and fading into invisibility. No workers were seen hurrying to their jobs, no kids going to school either; the whole place seemed asleep except for two leisurely walkers we asked directions from, and a lady sitting in her garden who waved to us energetically. Amazingly there was no smell at all from the factory, and no noise until we went downwind of it across the bridge to the west and heard the deep throbbing hum of the world’s biggest etc. The morning was bright and sunny, the few clouds dispersed and we had a brilliant day throughout. Almost all the way we rode abreast as the roads, some dirt, some narrow and some wide enough to have a line down the middle, were very quiet. At our first water stop we heard a strange noise interrupt

the birdsong, and soon a highway skier clattered past, pushing himself powerfully up and down hill on two narrow skateboard-skis. At our second stop, for second breakfast which we had sitting on a convenient pile of logs, we were visited by a dragonfly and a grey beetle that may have flown or may have hopped—too swift to discern. There we heard a very strange noise, a kind of bellowing that sounded like the sinister laugh of a troll or an orc—perhaps a warg or a wolverine—Michael thought it was like sudden bursts of a chainsaw, but without the intermittent idling of an engine. Nothing appeared however to put a face on the voice. We had seen a young deer sprinting easily across the road to gain the forest cover, and a brilliantly glossy red squirrel.

At our thirty-mile stop we heard the thump of a techno drum machine, and as we passed on we saw the source: a small pickup van with its doors open and a young guy working around it. We have seen a few of these pickups—they have an old-fashioned cab and bonnet, with a ridiculously tiny box on the back, maybe a metre square, over a back axle moved suitably close to the cab. The other cars we have noticed particularly are sixties American cars, Chevrolets and Lincolns and Dodges and the rest; and also VW beetles, not one modern one among them but all flat-windscreen, tiny-rear-lights veterans.

Shortly after 40 miles were up, at 2pm, we arrived in Österbybruk where we planned to stop early and spend the night. We had lunch in the first restaurant we saw, a pizzeria/bar, which advertised lunch till two but were more than ready to feed us at five past, and in ways it was our best meal yet: Biff med Lök (onions) and lots of small chunks of sautéed potatoes, and decent pints of beer and help-yourself coffee. Some regulars helped the proprietor out with the translation and they asked us about our journey and wished us well. One old girl came round to our table and told us the way to the campsite, which we found directly: a pleasant site on a lake specially set up for swimming.

The reception lady was out on a veranda and we called up to her, to ask was the reception open. She said “I am the reception”; they were full up, but she offered to phone the Vandrarhem in town. After a minute she came out of her office saying she could give us a stuga after all. They are normally let out to workers during the week, she must have arranged that the Vandrarhem would take someone else in there. So we got a grand little stuga, bigger than our last one which was only about 9 feet square—only one set of bunks here, so plenty of space otherwise, and a covered veranda to sit out on in the evening sun. Also, as the bar customer had said, there was a place to wash our clothes: for an extra 30 crowns (about €4) we got a key to the



laundry. I asked could we buy some washing powder, the receptionperson said she would give me some of hers, which she did, choosing a programme and starting the machine for me. I went back several times in the afternoon to see if it had finished, each time it was just starting another rinse until finally at nearly seven I got the clothes out and into the drier. In the meantime we drank tea, read Pinker, discussed this and that, drank beer, and enjoyed the idyllic setting. A pair of geese with their goslings posed for a photograph.

## **Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> June**

Michael woke at 5am, I struggled out of bed at six. We breakfasted on tinned matjes, dried tomatoes, gherkins and bread, then bread and jam, and finally we finished up the Ryvita with more jam. Michael washed up and pumped our tyres while I got my various bags packed; the reception was up and about, we gave her the key and left just before eight.

It was a cloudless morning and we made good progress north, passing another bruk place-name: Lövestabruk, where you enter an ornate gateway of wrought iron over tall pillars, and pass through an estate laid out on a dead straight road to a similar gateway at the other end. On the right are large farm buildings, and a fine but unpretentious Big House; on the left are a row of identical one-storey semi-detached cottages on exactly the same pattern as the ones we had seen in two places before. One was the first place we had seen a big clock

tower with a one-handed clock on four faces, keeping pretty good time; can't be sure, but it may have been Hargshamn. The other was Österbybruk itself, the woman in the bar had directed us to the campsite by the "big bell" and the yellow cottages.



We stopped for second breakfast in Karlholmsbruk, where there is a lot of industrial archaeology about, and the same kind of clock tower but with two-handed dials. We looked up "bruk" in the dictionary and found it unhelpfully translated as "custom". But the verb "bruka" means "use, employ, cultivate". So these were the factory estates of the Industrial revolution: Karlholmsbruk was an iron works from the eighteenth century. And our hotel in Hallstavik had been the "Bruks Hotellet"—for the workers at the paper factory. Higher echelon workers we guessed; management. But you never know.

Our second breakfast at a table-bench by the pond with its fountain was pleasant if rather repetitive; that is to say identical to our first breakfast. We moved on after an hour or so, still in brilliant sunshine, through forests and later fields of five, ten, twenty, fifty acres of young corn. We made good progress as we were on well-surfaced roads, that weren't busy. All the same our mood was sleepy and we zombied on in a haze of warmth. By 2pm we were at Skutskär and the roads were suddenly much busier. It suddenly started raining (we had seen the rain clouds as we approached) so heavily that we took shelter under a petrol station canopy. When it eased we moved on and found a restaurant for lunch: a bar with tables outside—the rain had stopped by now—where we had pork noisettes (beaten out like minute steaks) with terrific helpings of chips and béarnaise sauce, and beer of course. We phoned ahead to a camping site in Engesberg, but they were full of children, and to a Vandrarhem at Engeltofta just north of Gävle. They gave us a booking, so we moved on, still dressed for rain as it looked uncertain.



We hadn't far to go to Gävle which is another busy industrial town with more huge buildings with chimneys blowing out very clean-looking steam and no smell or noise. The Cykelspåret brought us through incredible back ways out of town, through lumber yards and railway sidings, and some instances of casual dumping; yes, it does happen in Sweden too. Engeltofta is not a town but a house, a magnificent summer residence built by some shipping magnate of the 19th century; it is now a restaurant and conference centre, and the Vandrarhem is a new building just beside it. We got a bigish room, with two double bunks and a single bed in it. We had a beer that we had bought along with breakfast supplies in Gävle, and I sewed one side of my long sheet into the beginnings of a sleeping bag while Michael did some bridge quizzes on his digital diary. While I wrote this diary up Michael crashed out on his bed, prior to doing the teeth and going to bed officially.

## Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> June

Quite a small breakfast for once, in our room; and on the road by 7.45am. At our first two stops the mozzies swarmed around us, so we put on some citronella mixture, and they didn't bite us very much all things

considered. All the same it boded ill for our mental state; though it was a lovely day and once we were moving on the bikes all was well. We rode abreast and talked about this and that, Pinker's books and *The Emperor's New Mind* by Penrose which didn't convince Michael. At 1pm we saw a sign for a restaurant (the official roadside sign here is, curiously, a crossed fork and spoon) at Axmarbruk and decided to give it a try. It was down a little side track, at a pier on a bay full of beautiful wooded rocky islands reminiscent of Kerry; and it was a find. It was large, and less than quarter full; just about all the other customers came on a bus, a business or a club perhaps. We chatted to some of them at the door on our way out.

A nicely-spoken waiter called Johan looked after us and gave us some wonderful sirloin steaks with a green sauce on top and a crafty composition of onions and potato on the side and various tasty things all round, with a bottle of Spanish red and a jug of iced water. We plumped for a chocolate "manjari" mousse with subtle sorbet and left feeling distinctly revived, and promising to send Johan a postcard on completing the Cykelspåret, a feat he considered undertaking, though perhaps not on his first choice of transport, in-line skates. He's from Gävle.



Greatly fortified (wine is infinitely better cycling fuel than beer) we zoomed along under a blue sky and at Ljusne or Sandame we made up our mind to do the additional "Hälsingesvängen", an optional detour given in the Cykelspåret as a scenic treat. We phoned ahead to the Ohlanders Vandrarhem at Glössbo, halfway inland to Bollnäs, and steeled ourselves for a long and possibly twisty road. It turned out almost exactly as long as Michael had estimated—a trip of 83 miles for the day—but on straightish roads with hills at first small and then big. The scenery did change dramatically: north of Söderhamn the land acquired a tilt, so we had rising land to our right, falling away to our left, and a view of small mountains in the distance for the first time.

At 6.40pm, at a church in a place called Arklo we saw the expected sign (it's also marked in the map) for the halfway point on the Cykelspåret; so we set up a photograph with the camera across the road on its little bendy-legged tripod.



Our mileage was 965 since Malmö; but 200 of that is accounted for by our starting day and various diversions. A little later we saw the sign for the choice of ways—East Coast or Hälsingesvängen—and struck out for the hills. The land was exceptionally lush, just as our lawn at home was, as Sam had told us in a text message. Our legs were in better shape for the hills than before, and at 8.25pm we rolled in to the Vandrarhem which stands away from the road in a group of farm buildings. A few dozen people were standing around the grass in front of the buildings, admiring their collection of old

cars, from a Bentley to a Cadillac to a split-windscreen Saab. They were (as they told Michael) a club, and they must have had a meeting with afternoon tea in the café.

The Vandrarnhem is housed in what must have once been a barn, beautifully done up with oodles of character: the only place we had been in to match it at all was the Gästgiveri in Hammenhög, but this was somehow more Scandinavian yet. The manageress struck me as belonging to the place, so, having seen a list of Ohlanders associated with the house since 1643 on the wall, I asked her was she one of that family.



She was; she said some of the family had moved away to where she was born, and she had just moved back here, exactly a month ago. We had coffee and little cakes in the café and retired to our gorgeous little room on the ground floor. In the morning we would examine the wool-processing tools and jigs, including a spinning wheel.

### Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> June

The day was hot from the start; unlike yesterday we had to take our jumpers off straight after setting out. Our hostess's husband came and took pictures of our bikes, and I took pictures of the house; and we were on the road before 8am. Our path took us through varied scenery with

plenty of lakes; hard to get into a photograph because of the scale, but we tried. The roads were good with very little traffic and we managed the hills elegantly.

This part of Sweden is regarded as particularly scenic, and they seem to keep it low-tech as if to accentuate that; many houses and barns are slightly crooked, and the road repairs in one place were most unSwedish, tarry slack piled on top of potholes in the hope that it would be pushed in rather than out by the traffic.

Perhaps the greatest contrast with Ireland was the fact that in the whole of the Ring of Hälsingland, yesterday and today, we saw no pubs at all, and the only restaurant we saw was the café in our hostel. The upshot of that was that we had no sit-down lunch, just second and third breakfasts along the road. Our second breakfast was beside a new bridge just off the Cykelspåret at Hänsätter, bridging the narrow water between the lakes Orsjön and Kyrksjön. Amazingly no mosquitoes bothered us (and there had been none at the Ohlanders Vandrarnhem either).



After midday Michael hailed me on the way up a long hill to tell me that we had reached our thousand miles on this trip, so we stopped for a photograph of the toast in water, rang our bells and moved on. Rejoining



the east-coast strand of the Cykelspåret we turned north onto a dirt road with quite hefty hills; and finding no prospect of food in Sörfosa other than a hamburger stall and a greasy-looking pizzeria (could our expectations have been elevated by yesterday's feast?) we stopped on another dirt road out of the town for a third breakfast: beer I had bought yesterday, bread and olives. Here the mozzies did swarm around us, and it started to rain. The blue skies of the morning had been filling with clouds in the afternoon, and one in particular became black and threatening. Several times we thought we had outrun it (the wind coming round to the south-west was blowing us gently

along) but it finally caught up on us, though it hardly wet us really.

We cut a piece off a sturdy cut branch lying beside the road to try and make a jig to counteract the tendency Michael's bike has developed to overshoot the lowest chain ring when changing down. We whittled a ring around the branch and stamped on it against a rock, and it cracked spot on. We put it away to work on later and moved along into the big busy town of Hudiksvall, where we left the Cykelspåret once more to find the three-star camping ground of Malnbadet where the Yellow Page accompanying our Cykelspåret literature told us we would find both a Vandrarhem and stugas. We were given our choice, and having inspected both we went for a four-bed stuga with its own sink, hotplates and fridge. By this time the clouds had parted, though still in the sky, and the day finished up hotter than it had begun, very hot in fact. We settled ourselves in and put on a cup of tea which we had with bread and jam and some lemon buns we had bought on the way from Hudiksvall. 60 miles altogether; yesterday we did 83.

### Friday 4<sup>th</sup> June

Set out at 8.30 so as not to be at the station too early for some train information; but the sign outside said they were open from 05.30 to 21.15! I stayed with the bikes while Michael got some very good help from a girl who said we could indeed put our bikes on the same train



we travel down on from the north, it would cost us but we could take them as far as Stockholm or Göteborg but not Malmö as a different company runs the Stockholm-Malmö trains. So the plan is to leave the Cykelspåret at Piteå and head north-west into the Arctic Circle, cycle back to Boden and take the train from there. A chap with no English came and talked to us, Michael guessed some of his questions, otherwise we just answered whatever he might have been asking but it was grand communication none the less. He said “Haparanda! Phew!” just as two women at the Axmar restaurant had said “Haparanda? Jesus!” We still say Haparanda as it is an easy answer; as we cycled along I came up with this:

Haaaap! -aranda where the wind comes whistling down the glacier  
 Where the penguins feet are turned out neat  
 And the Northern Lights could not be classier,  
 Haaaap! -aranda you're the place I see in every dream  
 Where the bears and seals all turn cartwheels  
 And the ground is covered in ice-cream!  
 We know we are on Cykelspåret  
 And that when we get off it we're for it  
 So when we saaay, “Hap!  
 -aranda you're OK”  
 We're really saying we're going to find Haparanda  
 If we keep on this way!

Michael provided the last two lines as I ran out of steam there.

It was another scorcher so this time I put lotion on my legs and went back to shorts. Jenny had sent me off with a tube of Factor 50—Max Factor as I called it, but it was like cement to put on and didn't spread at all, so I had bought some nicer stuff, high UVA protection, Australian standard, which worked very well on my arms, even if it was only Factor 6. We took a while getting off the main road out of Hudiksvall, calling in at a shopping centre for food and again stopping for directions, but then it was on to nice back roads, if fairly hilly. At one church we passed a Swedish flag was flying at half-mast and we wondered had some national personage died; but other flags along the way were at full height. The Swedes are fond of flying the flag in

their gardens, a thing we had noticed about the Norwegians 23 years ago when we sailed there in Pangur Bán.

We stopped for a twenty-miler at 11.30am and had our second breakfast in a little forest clearing by the road, amazingly free of mosquitoes, as in fact our stuga had been the night before: though we had kept the windows tight shut, when we opened them in the morning hardly any mozzies came in. We discovered that the pear juice we had bought was concentrated, so we mixed it into our 1.25-litre water bottles. We ate fresh loaves and dried tomatoes and finished up our olives, or Oliver as they are called in Swedish. Bananas finished the meal and we went on under the blistering sun. At 1pm we passed through Strömsbruk with its pink eighteenth-century-looking church on the hill; but there was no restaurant to be found and after a while we stopped for pear-flavoured water and mooted a third breakfast (two days in a row?) but the place we stopped was high in mozzie-count so we moved on and suddenly at Mellanfjärden, where we stopped to look at the harbour, there was a restaurant, large and empty (only one couple in a very large outdoor space on the wooden pier) where they were glad of our custom even though it was 3.15.



Another great find: we had salmon in almost too much sauce (béarnaise or something close) with boiled potatoes and mange-touts and a nice carafe of their house red (Corbières). This waiter also expressed an interest in doing the Cykelspåret one day; the restaurant also houses the local theatre which was preparing for a summer season of *Charleys Tant*. We stayed for coffee even though they don't do espresso; and we accepted cookies, tiny and elaborate creations of high sugariness. We sat on until 4.30 and Michael told me of his trip to East Africa in 1961 where he met the Leakys and was greatly tempted to stay behind to work on their archaeological dig. We had been talking while cycling about statistics and the research into mitochondrial Eve and how close the latest female and male universal ancestors had to be to one another.

As we ate we could see the bay full of islands, and Michael admired the boatmanship of a man who brought out a 30-foot yacht single handed and moved it quietly about the bay and almost sailed it right back into its mooring by a marina-type pier; but he started up a motor for the last few yards, which to Michael is sacrilege, even *having* an outboard on a lovely yacht like that. We went back to the harbour after lunch and photographed the boat, but the owner was not about.



The next part of the track was advertised as special for its following the coastline, but you had to make detours down to each village if you wanted to see the sea, and we didn't bother. The road was good but narrow, with cut saplings stuck into the ground by the edge every now and again. We wondered were they to show the edge of the

carriageway in deep snow; and Michael finally worked out the meaning of the frequent M signs on these roads that are too narrow for a centre line: the mark all the places where the road gets even a foot wider, so that cars or tractors can pass.

Once again the clouds collected in the afternoon, though this time it didn't rain; but it did get quite cold on the hands (the legs generate their own heat, even in shorts). We phoned ahead and booked a stuga in Bergfjärden, near Njurundabommer. Four-and-a-half miles of the road from Galtström were extremely rough dirt track; quite often it is smooth but this was covered with loose stones, some fairly big, and often deepish gravel. My original PDQ tyres would have foundered completely, but my new Farmer Johns bounced me along pretty well.

Around 8pm we arrived in the Bergfjärden campsite and checked in to our stuga—one pair of bunks, but loads of space and cooking facilities. First thing was a cup of tea, then I went to buy bread. The reception man hadn't any in his shop but he said he could make me some: so by nine o'clock we had hot baguette rolls for our supper. One nice thing about this campsite is that we have a view of the sea! With a horizon!

## Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> June

The notice on the shower house door said it was open from 7.00 to 22.00 but it was open at 6.30am when I went for my shower. I was almost but not quite the only person stirring: one woman was out on a bike and another was out walking with the aid of ski poles. You see a lot of people using them, both old folks and younger ones presumably going for long bracing walks for their constitution. Cycling into Sundsvall we met a girl skiing up quite a steep hill on the road on skateboard skis. I encouraged her with a cheery "come on, you good thing".

The day started very hot and sunny again, and though I had put on my Factor 6 in good time I felt a burn starting in my forearms after a while, so I stopped and added some Factor 50 on top. That seems to have done the trick. We took a long time finding the way into and out of Sundsvall; the Cykelspåret signs let us down several times. We took notes to pass on to the organisers; but they never were sent.

When we got to the central railway station Michael went in to book our tickets back south from Boden, but being Saturday the ticket office was shut all day. We remembered our Saturday problems from the first two weeks and looked out for a Tourist Information Office to book our room for tonight. There wasn't an office where it was shown on the station map, so we looked for a bankomat instead. The first one drew blanks, so we headed for the city centre which curiously had us crossing the river and then recrossing to the south bank a little way up. This certainly looked central, the Grafton Street of Sundsvall; and we found the good bank, SEB, whose ATM came up trumps for both of us. We also found a Tourist Bureau (spelt Byrö) and Michael got them to ring a Vandrarhem in Rö, just north of Härnösand and book us in. I spotted a sunglasses shop and bought some old-fashioned aviator-style Polaroids, and shortly after twelve noon we crossed the river for the third time and got back eventually to the Cykelspåret, by heading north, looking round, and asking a chap buying petrol "Excuse me, can you help us, we want—" "Some beer?". He helped us out, then asked where we were from. "Ireland? Then you will want some beer. You are beer people." Whatever you're having yourself.

Just north of Sundsvall, which has some gigantic industry including the Nobel plant and a huge cement (betong) works, is the joined-on town of Timrå where we looked out for some lunch. We settled on a pizzeria where the main man didn't speak English, and the guy he called out couldn't read, so instead of telling us about the specials he called out the ingredients

of the pizzas of whatever number of special we asked about—so for kebab he described Margherita and for Entrecote he said it was mostly cheese; we solved it by asking for biffsteak which is good Swedish; and it was good nosh too, plenty of it with pitta bread and chips and vegges and salad and onions, and we felt much the better for it. Back on the Cykelspåret with only a few more minor ambiguities to sort out, we made good speed for Härnösand, which we needed to do as we had not clocked up many miles since the way into Sundsvall had been so full of false leads.

The road now led us up over some hills. Hills had suddenly entered the landscape, more than in Hälsingland; last night they appeared on our northern horizon, and today they ringed the city of Sundsvall. Now it was time to cross them. A long climb followed by a short dip and another long climb, repeated many times, brought us onto a top which we could never be sure was the top of the pass, as it continued dipping



and rising, until it fell away in a long descent followed by another, and when we thought we had reached the bottom because we ran alongside a lake we found that another long fall followed that. The road surface was sometimes well-metalled, sometimes smooth dirt with the odd blip, sometimes loose chippings or gravel. The spåret signs were reliable once again, and though we had a long way to go Michael estimated we should get to our Vandrarhem by the original estimate of 9pm. Shortly after six on an empty road we met a man driving a four-wheeled buggy pulled by a young and frisky pony. The pony shied when he saw us, turned the whole rig in its length and bolted. The driver calmed him down and stopped him at the side of the road, and we walked past while the driver talked incessantly to the horse, telling him that it was all bra, which is pronounced just the same as breá in Irish, and clearly means much the same, fine. After a while we saw him drive off again, but the pony shied again for a car. New to the job, we guessed.

Michael's estimate that we should arrive at our Vandrarhem in Rö by 9pm turned out spot on; though we would have arrived a little earlier had it not been for the state of the roads. Our last section of road, from Härnösand to Rö, was partly metalled but large patches of it were dirt. Now the dirt road in Sweden can be excellent; you can see the attraction of it, since the snow and ice do such terrible things to tarred roads, visible when you go on an old road that has been superseded by a nearby new one, as you do a lot on bicycles; the tarred surface becomes scarred and broken up. The dirt road on the other hand needs smoothing but not rebuilding after the winter, and generally they are very conscientious about smoothing them. They get pitted and gravelly in places, but a well-packed dirt surface can be luxurious... This one was not. It was stripped down for resurfacing, and what was left was like the teeth of hell, gnarled and knobbly with embedded sharp stones. I could take the bouncing, distributing my weight between my pedals and the back of my seat, bracing myself against the bumps, but my poor back-carrier could do nothing and eventually it shook itself loose from its bolts, the entire contraption fell back through ninety degrees around the fulcrum of my back axle, and my rear reflector hit the ground and started ploughing a furrow in the road (which the road could not possibly notice) bringing me to a smooth but definite halt. Fortunately the reflector on its metal extension had acted as a spring and nothing on the back carrier was broken; the little black backpack containing both phones, both digital diaries, the camera and my glasses never hit the ground. We picked up the bits and cobbled it back together quickly; luckily there was a spare bolt attached under my frame that fitted in the good side, and



Michael tied the front of the carrier to the back of the seat to prevent its falling backwards again, and on we went.

We arrived in Rö just at nine, and started looking for a sign saying "Vandrarhem". The road alongside the water was very picturesque but the evening was grey and a bit cold and we weren't in scenery-appreciation mood. I was so cross with the Swedish roads doing damage to my beautiful bike that I stormed ahead, but as we passed through the long-drawn-out hamlet of Rö I slowed down until Michael caught up. As we passed a house advertising itself as a Conference Centre two grey-haired ladies called out, apparently to us, from a car as they came out through the gate. They were telling us that this was the place, though the words



Vandrar or Hem were nowhere evident. Up we went, and lo and behold we were expected; and the owner gave us a suite of rooms, a whole building, all to ourselves. The rooms were let during the week to the men working on the road; the rest of the place was taken by a conference. In the morning we met the conferrers: they were playing golf for the weekend, here today, elsewhere tomorrow. For the present we made our cup of tea and ate some comforting food, and stumbled into bed around 11pm. A weird feature: the wiring in the house. The plug for the kettle was immediately over the sink, the wire had to cross the sink to the drainer where the kettle sat; and the shower was of the type that sprayed all over the room, and directly opposite it was an electric radiator and the wall light switch.



## Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June

I woke instantly at 6am but couldn't get moving until 6.30; reading the list of abbreviations in the Swedish dictionary helped to reassemble my brains. We had a late breakfast with the golf conference, at 7.30 (the earliest on offer) and Michael did some improvements on my carrier repair, fixing the bad side, where the



bolt had popped out complete with the spud it bolted into, with Gafa tape, and redoing the blue string arrangement. He also made some progress with the section of sapling, which turned out to be very hard wood, earmarked as a chain-fall-off-stopper for his bike. I pumped up the tyres, mine had lost some pressure with the jolting, and we got away at 8.45am. The sky was so cloudy I had debated whether or not to apply any Factor 6; I did in the end, and the clouds gradually dispersed until it was another brilliant day. At our first water stop I phoned ahead to a Vandrarhem in Köpmanholmen near Bjästa, and the lady took our reservation. I said we might arrive around 8pm; she would be going off duty at 6 but would leave a key in an envelope with our name on it, in the letterbox on the long wall towards the sea, and we could let ourselves in. We were getting used to Swedish Sunday arrangements and did not bat an eyelid.

We followed the coast, seeing the famous High Coast Bridge that we would soon cycle over. What a bridge, over a mile long and the tallest structure in Sweden. When we had cycled across for what seemed plenty of time, through a stiff breeze from the left, the parabola of the suspension cables reached the road level and we were half way. What got me were the handrails above the cables, with bolted gates part of the way up; somebody has to walk that tightrope every now and then. At the far side we took the first exit and rode up the hill to the viewing eminence, and further up to the hotel and gift shop, where there was no food to be had, but a wonderful children's playground, with thick plaited rope swings on wooden cross-pieces that twirled slowly round, and imaginative climbing and sliding structures, and fountains that squirt out of the ground one after another like unpredictable Old Faithfuls. After forty minutes we came away with only a few postcards and the news that Ronald Reagan had died leaving Nancy in tears, we gathered from a

newspaper (one that underlines everything on the front page for emphasis). How did I read what Nancy was in? Why, from the old Swedish song—

Vem kan segle forutan vind?  
Vem kan ro utan årar?  
Vem kan skiljas fra väninn' sind  
Utan at fallit tårer?

—of course, how else? Learnt in York, *Europa Cantat* course, Summer of Love, 1968. It means:

Who can sail without wind?  
Who can row without oars?  
Who can part from his own true love  
Without bawls and roars?

—well it really means “without tears falling” but poetic licence and all that. I digress.

We got back on the road and moved on to where we could stop for a second breakfast, near the top of a hill, opposite a forest but free of mosquitoes, and after a modest feast, as things were running short, Michael perfected his device to prevent his bike chain from falling over the side of the small front chain-ring when changing down. The stick of wood had been whittled down to the correct dimensions, and now it was finally fitted and the problem was to fix it in place. It seemed sensible to tie it with thread wound round many times, but the stout black thread we had bought was disappointingly weak, and the final attachment was made with good old Gafa tape; and it worked.

The High Coast is spectacularly beautiful and our track took us along the coast again a few times, most notably after Ullånger where we were on the E4 in one of its non-motorway moments, with generous hard shoulders for cycling. At one place, not on the main road, we saw a deer with two young ones running along ahead of us. After a while she stopped, as if caught in the glare of headlights, or pondering whether it was time to teach the youngsters how to jump. She made up her mind, and did a balletic leap over the ditch, followed by the others in turn; and they immediately vanished in the forest. We also saw some more of the small plump grey birds with black crests; and what may have been a cuckoo, flying along the road away from us.

There were no restaurants on our route, and no open shops, so we eked out the supplies we had and saved our bananas for third breakfast before setting out over the high-looking pass north of Docksta. Michael went gingerly at the climb, his knees had been hurting after yesterday's climbs, but I was getting into training and Bullseye went like the wind. The steepest part was dirt road, but of the best kind, and the slope was not impossibly steep. When I reached a temporary top (surprised to find myself going alongside a lake) I had the idea of starting a letter to Jenny in my little red notebook, but I only had about six lines written when Michael came up. We had another few climbs before we crossed the pass, and after the last, straight and



smooth, I continued the letter, but again got very little done before Michael was with me and we started the thrilling descents.

There were no houses up the mountain, except for a holiday village by the lake, and very few cars passed. Descent followed descent, quite speedy with good visibility and few corners, though I did burn up a certain amount of brake rubber. When we thought we were down, and rejoined a metalled road, there was as much descent to do again, before we floated into another section of E4. We were enticed into a roadside restaurant promising local salmon, but it closed at 18.30 on Sundays, and it was 18.50 when we reached it. I'm sure it was dreadful salmon anyway. We got off the E4 onto the old road it had replaced, and noticed the ravages of winter snow and ice on a road that is no longer maintained: big splits and cracks in the surface, and also deep scouring—from sleds, or tyres with chains doing long skids? We found a petrol-station shop open at Bjästa and stocked up for breakfast and lunch tomorrow. The evening was sunny and the six kilometres to Köpmanholmen flowed easily; Michael said he was feeling great, much better than yesterday.

We reached Köpmanholmen and carried right on down to the sea, and there was our Vandrarhem right on the pier, and our key in a bag in the little green letter box. There was a wooded peninsula opposite our window and a view of a section of horizon out to the right, which made Michael's day. We cooked up some spaghetti bolognese we had bought wrapped in plastic like a sausage, with a cup of tea and some toast and choc, checked out the shower arrangements, rang ahead to warn Doreen Burke of our arrival in five days' time, texted home and did the usual homework (this), and so to bed.

### **Monday 7<sup>th</sup> June**

We woke lateish and got on the road by 9.30. It was cloudy and cold, but it didn't rain, and in the afternoon it got quite sunny. We stopped by a lake for our ten-miler. I went into the woods and found—a latrine. I looked inside and saw on the wall a poster for an Elvis Presley museum. Michael lay down on a raft by the waterside and I felt the temperature—not too cold. As we moved on we realised that though it looked like a lake it was in fact an inlet of the sea. Michael recalled (à propos of nothing in particular) an old saying of Uncle Jack's: "Your kindness is only exceeded by



your personal beauty, which although not apparent to the naked eye is none the less present."

Pretty soon we were in Örnsköldsvik where we saw a sign for a Tourist Information Bureau. We followed the signposts and asked for maps of the Jokkmokk area, which they were able to give us; and I logged on to h2g2 and saw there were six replies to my entry from Stockholm. By this time it was noon and I suggested an early lunch. We went to an outdoor restaurant we had passed earlier and had the daily special which was salmon with potatoes and yellow sauce, with salads on the side. Michael looked on the maps for possible places to stay up north; the puzzle is not clear yet.

Fortified but with only 16 miles done we went on with a long trek to Nordmaling ahead. Michael's knees were dodgy and he had to nurse them along. My front mudguard, which had worked itself free from one of its forward stays, suddenly broke in two with the whole front section hanging off at a drunken angle, so I removed its forward stays and wondered why I hadn't cut off the front part earlier, it is much more functional and less in the way now. It always threatened to catch on my shoe in any extreme cornering.

As we went up a hill near Banafjäl I spotted a grey-bearded man sitting in front of his house, so I gave him a big wave, as I do to most people we pass, and most of them wave back. This chap waved back energetically and when Michael came up after me he engaged him in some question and answer, so I turned back, His

wife came out and they invited us in for coffee, which became coffee and frankfurters and biscuits—all with no common language.

A young woman came in and translated for a while. She seemed to be picking up a child they were baby-sitting; she said “You’ve come to the right place—this is the friendliest house in the village”. She said her best friend has moved to Cork and would like to learn some trad music—she plays polkas and the like on fiddle. We gave her Bertie’s number and also Anne’s; and we took a picture of Karin and Göste and they took a picture of us on our bikes. Göste gave us presents of round-the-neck keyrings from the local club. This episode cheered us on the long road.

One piece of dirt track seemed too long so we checked the map and found we were way off our route. We asked at a house with several cars outside for directions to Skademark and were told to continue a little further and turn right. When we got to the Skademark road we saw—a Cykelspåret sign! which meant we hadn’t missed a turning after all, they had changed the signs again to send us on a scenic detour.

The dirt road we had come up was smooth, and incredibly, had street lights along it for a good distance. The one going down to Skademark was lumpy and covered in loose stones, which made us doubt the value of the scenic route, but it was gently downhill which was a help. We wondered what these dirt roads became in wet weather; at a few places the road was wet, perhaps it had been raining or perhaps it was poorly drained; but the effect was to make it more like soggy sand than cloggy mud. We finally, after a thrilling descent on a metalled road, rejoined the E4 for a short while; lorries whizzed past but the hard shoulder was wide enough



to keep us away from their slipstream. We phoned ahead again to the campsite to confirm our stuga and say we’d be late, and spoke to a girl with less English than the original one; but she said she’d be there. The sun was setting and the cold became intense, so that even though it wasn’t windy or wet our fingers and feet became numb. It reminded me of sailing.

We made good speed on good roads, but had another unintended detour when the road was blocked off. We followed the marked detour and it brought us through a works yard full of huge road-making lorries and machinery. Finally we were in Nordmaling, and looked out but saw no signs to the campsite. There were very few people about, the two that I asked knew nothing, some kids laughed very loudly and ran after us, and we rang again but were only told to go down to the sea. Heading downhill at every chance, we asked a man who could direct us, and two kilometres later we entered the large and opulent Rödviik campsite; 77 miles for the day, almost 10pm when we arrived. The girl was there and checked us in, and two teenaged girls who Michael thought had been some of the laughy lot asked could they try our

bikes. They both had a go on Michael’s and incredibly managed very well. Our stuga was large and warm so we thawed out and had a cup of tea and some tuna and gherkins on bread. We sent messages to Bertie and Anne to tell them to expect a call from Åsa Jansson in Cork, watched some of a Bogart and Bacall

movie on TV! And wrote this up. And so to bed, at 1am; it was still bright outside and not going to get any darker.

The stuga was in fact one of the most luxurious we've had; but one feature flabbergasted us. The shower splashed directly onto the side of a large electric heating cabinet, possibly a clothes dryer, though it looks more like a fridge. I added "Swedish wiring" to Dad's traditional toast: "To hell with poverty, temperance, chastity, English cooking, Spanish driving ..."

## Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> June

Woke at 6am; the light was just the same. We got on the road faster, by 8.30, and pressed forward with determination to reach Umeå by lunchtime, an estimated 42 miles. Short breaks every ten miles, once for water, once for water and to fix my front mudguard which is now only half a mudguard but still needed trimming. The third stop was for second breakfast, at which we manfully finished the enormous frankfurters we had bought at the campsite store and had started for first breakfast. We also had some fresh fruit (including a little melon) that we bought along the way. The going was not hard, some good metalled road, some good dirt track, hardly any traffic to contend with. The sky was cloudy with good sunny breaks; rain never materialised. The wind was still from the north though, not strong, but quite chilly. At about 2pm we got to Umeå and left the Cykelspåret to find the railway station. Michael went in, queued up for a while and bought our tickets from Boden to Göteborg for the 18<sup>th</sup>, leaving at about 6pm, with beds booked but not bike places. It's a different company that transports the bikes and the girl, though otherwise helpful, didn't know anything about them and wouldn't get in touch with them. She gave us to believe that she had never heard of them, and had no idea that it was possible to put a bike on this train at all. Meanwhile outside I chatted with a young chap who looked like a student (Umeå is a university town) but in fact runs a second-hand shop. When he left I wrote a few postcards, still using up pictures of Stockholm. There was a really bike-friendly feeling about this town; plenty of bikes in use everywhere.

We consulted a town map on a board, and helped ourselves to copies from the pull-off pad provided, and made our way to the Tourist Information Office in the city centre, very close by. The girl there was marvellously professional and helpful, rang the company (Godskompaniet) who do the bikes-on-trains, and told us that it would be fine, all we had to do was turn up an hour in advance and talk to them there. Greatly relieved we went for lunch in a kebab restaurant where the man behind the bar talked to us, asked about the trip, made us extra big helpings of spicy kebabs with chips, and gave us an extra beer each, on the house. We decided to go no further today, so locating the Umeå campsite on our city maps we cycled up there by what turned out to be the scenic route, round the city forest on its steep little hill. We secured the last two-bed stuga, which was very much less luxurious than last night's, more like a ship's cabin, but welcome rest for tired legs none the less. A cup of tea with chocolate digey bars, a bit of fiddling with the electrics to



silence the incessant working of the extractor fan in the bathroom, a look at the weather on TV, some more route planning, story writing and postcard stamping and we are well set up. Only 47 miles today, we'll do more tomorrow.

## Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> June

Our early night and early start just got us out by 8.20 and onto the E4 by 8.30. We decided to abandon the Cykelspåret for the first while, partly because it would have meant going backwards, and partly to make good time to reach Robertsfors in time for lunch. Clear blue skies but not warm; a slight easterly breeze kept us chilly enough. After a quick blast up the E4 we resumed the back

ways of the Spåret; our second breakfast was at the harbour of Ratan, opposite the island that used to be the main port for the north. We sat at a bench-table near a little yellow ochre building that was put there in 1892 to measure the change in sea level. Sweden is still rising nine millimetres a year out of the sea since being ducked by the Ice Age.

Back inland it got a little warmer, and we had the wind behind us for a while, though a weak one. We made it to Robertsfors by shortly after 2pm and noticing a bike shop I called in and bought a reflector to replace the broken one. He had one almost identical, and I was able to use the same screw and it fitted in the same fitting. We stopped for lunch in the first pizzeria we saw, they are the only places that keep serving all afternoon it seems; I had what I expected to be a kebab but it turned out to be an enormous pizza. Michael had a lamb curry with rice, which came with a pizza base on its own on another plate. We said hello to a couple across at the opposite table, and after a few pleasantries they invited us to stay the night in their house, about ten miles up the road.



They are Leif Jonsson and Berit Pettersson, and they live on a farm where his father and grandfather and ancestors have lived since the 1600s. He is not a farmer though, he is a retired engineer who worked for Volvo in Göteborg and Stockholm, and for the bus company in Umeå; and now he has come home. We cycled up to their house where they were waiting to meet us; they gave us coffee and beer and cakes, and introduced us to their dog. He was a large black half-Rottweiler which they placated in advance by bringing him in to meet us in the kitchen with a bunch of sausages in his mouth. In fact he was only dying to make friends, and they were a little rough in telling him not to bother us.

Leif (which rhymes with safe) drove us round the local beauty spots in his red Volvo, taking in the local high-grade campsite, and a ski-slope with lifts, and a famous café on a lakeside where he wanted to buy us ice-creams but they were shut; and then back home he put on a barbecue while I sat in the kitchen and did some writing up. I made a few attempts to say things in Swedish with the help of my dictionary, but Berit was quite happy to remain incommunicado; in fact she is profoundly deaf. Leif and Michael grilled up some sausages and we had them in the kitchen as it was too cold to eat outside. I couldn't eat all they offered us as we had got quite out of the way of eating in the evening; besides, I had had an enormous lunch and only a short cycle after it. Michael made most of the conversation and also ate more enthusiastically than I did.

Leif offered to stoke up the wood furnace to heat water for a shower in the morning, and asked what time we would like breakfast. We opted for 7.30 which surprised them I think, they expected us to want to get on the road *really* early. We had a room with one bed and one mattress on the floor, up the wide stairs. The house was early 20th century, built with tall ceilings—apparently a measure against TB. We settled down early, before 9pm, and Michael read some Pinker but I fell asleep almost immediately.



## Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> June

I went down first for a shower and Leif and Berit were already very much up and about. Berit showed me the shower and insisted I use their towel, not mine. I dressed in my long trousers again, enough of these shorts, this is the frozen north!—and I also put on two T-shirts. We had a pretty huge breakfast, two hard-boiled eggs and endless toast and sardines and pink meat and tomatoes and cucumbers and cheese and cakes, with coffee and fizzy water. I noted that Leif ate his egg spread on toast and topped with a generous squeeze of caviar from a tube; so I tried that and it is not bad. In the end he offered us an umpteenth piece of toast and we refused, of which he would not hear, so we ate it and thanked them both profusely and packed up and left, not before giving them Jimmy Willis's phone number, as they are going to Tenerife for Leif's 60th birthday on the 19th of January next.



Out on the road by 8am, despite the leisurely breakfast, which did indeed start well before 7.30. The sky was grey and slightly threatening, but beyond a few warning drops it stayed dry all day. We headed for the E4 after Ånäset, to speed us along rather than do two sides of a triangle going round by Vebomark. When we got to Lövvånger we found that there was a folk museum to be seen at Vebomark. But there was plenty to see at Lövvånger itself: it has one of the first “Church villages”, perhaps the original of them all—a collection of over a hundred stugas built in the early 19th century to house people coming a long distance to church. I

take them to be the original of all “holiday cottages”; the journey was too long for many families to make to church and back on one day, so they spent Saturday night in their church cottage just across the road from the big church. Attendance was compulsory, and no excuses were accepted.

We looked into the church—it was open for certain hours all week—and found it restful and airy, with lovely vaulting and attractive decoration. New Testaments and Psalters were stacked up near the door, in Swedish, English and Russian. There is a large modern organ in the gallery, and a smaller one in a side gallery over the chancel, and a piano behind the pulpit.

Leaving there we resumed the Spåret, even though its first move was south to Gammelbyn. As we expected the wind got colder there, and we put on our coats. We came back inland before having our second breakfast, and were sheltered from the wind by the forest, so we took off the coats. The wind had now shifted round to the south, so it helped us on our way for the rest of the day, and moving with it we were pleasantly warm. Once again the road varied from dirt to smooth asphalt; we surmised the sandy texture of the dirt roads in their smooth sections came from years of gritting when snowed under. The rough sections could result from the action of the grader evening out ruts, dragging up the loose stones and simply leaving them there. In one place we met a heavy bulldozer with a side plough attachment, digging out the ditches into a uniform groove.

Shortly before Bureå we found ourselves emerging from the forest onto the brow of a hill giving a wide panorama of low hills all round. The road zigzagged down the hillside at a gentle slope giving us an exhilarating but not scarifying ride to the bottom. Bureå by the way is pronounced as the French say “bureau” and Piteå sounds like “pitcho”. We reached Bureå for a late lunch at 3pm, and found as in many other towns that the only open restaurant was run by immigrants. We had “biff” of a near-hamburger-



reconstituted consistency, with a good feed of chips and side things, and chatted to the two young men running the pizzeria. They were Kurds, originally from Iran but they had lived for sixteen years in Iraq and then in Sweden for the last six years. They have Swedish passports, and would like to go to Ireland, or Australia, or Canada; they found the Swedish people cold and selfish, despite their generosity with passports. I should say it was the elder cousin gave all these opinions; the younger one, who may be in his teens, was less voluble but perhaps more thoughtful; he had better English and translated quite a bit. Their grandfather was a rich man with five wives, and consequently they have aunts in many countries of the world. The elder is only prevented from leaving Sweden straight away by the fact that he is needed there to work the pizza dough. It seems they can't just sell up and leave; they must (Michael guessed) pass the business on to other family members. We asked them what they thought of what is happening in Iraq now: they were delighted with it. The Kurds got terrible treatment under Saddam. Still, it still doesn't seem likely they will get a country of their own for a while.

From there it was a relatively short run to Skellefteå where we planned to stay the night. We rang the Tourist Information Bureau there to ask if there was anywhere to stay further on in Kåge, but there is not; so we rang and booked a stuga in Skellefteå's campground. They would be closing the reception at six, but would leave the key for us at the Statoil station by the roundabout. They are obviously used to this as the Statoil girl accepted payment for the stuga; we also bought some supplies there. The stuga was cosy and

well-designed, tall bunks and a cooker with fridge and sink, and a loo and shower, and a TV. We watched a little Time Team, I made some improvements to my pannier fixture and talked to a rather drunk and boring man called Anders Lundström in the neighbouring stuga, who admired our stamina in cycling all this way. He worked in the electrical business, as a traveller, and I told him of our misgivings about Swedish wiring. He reassured us that all Swedish wiring must have a circuit breaker that trips if there is a difference of 30 milliamps over earth; which means you could safely turn a hose on your electric heater. Yeah right.

Michael rang Bobby who said that Wendy was better, and able to go home from hospital. We

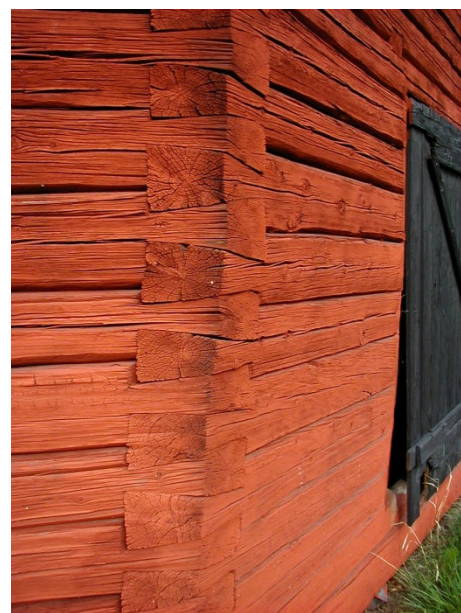


had a little snack and a cup of tea, and Anders came by to advise us of a good Gästgiveri to have lunch in tomorrow; unfortunately it will be too close to our start, so a picnic would be the best thing. He also told us of the difficulties of driving in Norway, and how on account of these the lorries going to Oslo from the north of Norway all go through Sweden. He told us a lot more, including the advice to do some walking trips instead of cycling; but finally we both stood up, and he took the hint, also stood up and left with a few final words of advice. I do not remember either of them.

## Friday 11<sup>th</sup> June

It had rained in the night and a few drops were still falling from the eaves of our stuga—one of the prettier ones, built on the log cabin model, with solid unlined walls of horizontal logs, squared and notched to sit tight on top of one another. Further on we saw an octagonal barn with dovetailed log-ends so that it remained stable (no, *barn*!) despite leaning drunkenly.

We set out in a light drizzle at 8.30am and kept to the E4 for the first



while rather than go the long way back to the Spåret, which we caught up with in Kåge. We rang Doreen Burke from there and she gave us directions to her house; we estimated that we might arrive at 7pm. The E4 is under reconstruction to convert it to motorway in this part; at present it is no bigger than an ordinary two-



lane road with a hard shoulder of about two feet, one foot of it the same rough road surface and one foot outside that, that we rode on, of smooth tar. They are clearing enough width to build a dual carriageway with a separate cycle-track and possibly even a local-access road parallel to it as well. Usually they leave the old road and build the motorway somewhere else, which meant that we had nice wide empty old roads to cycle on a lot of the time. Today we came upon places where the E4 reduced to a stony dirt road, and other places where great

bites had been taken out of one side of the road to build an underpass; it looks as if they mean to build a bridge in two halves without ever closing the road. We also saw enormous boulders thrown up by the widening clearance. We fantasised that they would smash up the rocks and use them in the road-building. Yes (sigh) we've got quite fond of the old E4.

Our second breakfast was infested with mosquitoes; Michael spent some time afterwards rejigging his gears, which were not changing smoothly. Our lunch at forty miles, also a picnic, was in a more moszzy-free place, up on a mountain. We reached a hilltop, expecting a view as we approached, but long vistas are rare on account of the constant forest. The weather gradually cleared, so that we weren't getting wet, though I kept on the full rain gear for warmth. It never got sunny until the evening as we approached Piteå. The wind had shifted round to the south, which was a pleasant help.

At Piteå we crossed a special cycling and walking bridge, and passed a huge paper factory which belched out such clouds of smoke and steam that we were shaded as



though by clouds when we passed. In Piteå proper (it is surrounded by suburbs) we found the Spåret sending us straight out to the north, so we asked at a Pizzeria and a customer came out and showed us a direct way to Doreen's street, Källvägen, across another cycling bridge and through the hospital.

Just before 7pm we rang on Doreen Burke's bell and she led us to a lock-up basement to park our bikes. We brought our stuff up to her large airy apartment and she showed us to our room and bathroom and started cooking up a meal. It seems we took the wind out of her sails as she was expecting us to come from the other direction and



pass by the petrol station, where she could spot us and wave a large Irish flag from her balcony. Ah well.

Doreen has been living most of her life in Sweden, so now she even talks Swedish to an American friend. Her husband was an anaesthetist in the hospital just up the road, and their four children were all brought up here though they apparently don't regard themselves as Swedish. Doreen's niece Jane lives in Dublin, and Jenny teaches her daughter Wendy the flute, which is how we come to have this oasis in Piteå; when Jenny told Jane of our mad caper up the right hand side of Sweden, she said "I have an aunt in Piteå, she would love to put them up!" and then warned Doreen of our possible arrival on her doorstep, hungry and bedraggled. She fed us royally and we talked of Dublin and how it has changed. Doreen is an old Alex girl, like Jenny and indeed like Anne and Lucy; the very best people to know. At about 10pm we hit the sack and slept soundly, despite the occasional shouts and roars of the secondary school children of Piteå who finished school today.

## Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> June

We awoke and came to in a leisurely fashion, and after breakfast Doreen lent us some warm coats to go down town to the Tourist Information Bureau, where a helpful girl showed us the Accommodation options on the way to Jokkmokk and booked us into a stuga for Sunday night. We ambled back to Doreen's looking in at a bookshop on the way; we



considered buying a road atlas of Sweden but decided that it was too heavy and had little extra to tell us at this stage. Doreen went to put our clothes to the wash when we got back, and we invited her out to lunch; at first she demurred but then accepted—a sandwich, but later. First we had coffee, then we took the bikes out of the Fort Knox basement (built as a fallout shelter) and brought them across the road to a car park to clean and oil the chains. We pulled loads of gunge out from between the sprockets, where sand from the dirt roads had formed a paste with the oil, leaving our chains utterly dry. I cleaned each link of my chain, a job I have never done before, but which I did not begrudge my trusty Bullseye. Michael did more gear research and greatly improved his front changer. At about 3pm we went in, washed our hands and drove out with Doreen to her favourite lunch café near the walking streets we had cycled along earlier. We had open sandwiches and weak coffee—Swedish coffee may be famous, but I'm afraid only among the Swedes. Then Doreen brought us around some of her favourite places around Piteå: first Öjebyn, where Captain Cook's botanist, Daniel Solander, was born, and where some old houses had been moved to, from their original spots in Piteå. A group of people were listening to a talk about Dr Solander when we arrived, and we were invited into one of the old houses to view a Solander exhibition. We also went into the big church with its altar in the centre and its eighteenth-century naive style carved triptych; this is where Doreen's family used to come on Christmas morning. I had a feeling she was also saying goodbye to these places, as she is moving at the end of the month to Stockholm, where three of her children live. She then drove us to a seaside place with a big campsite and adventure swimming pool and a pier and beach. There we walked for a while and said our own farewell to the Gulf of Bothnia where the water is almost fresh and the tide doesn't rise or fall. There was a little sea horizon to be seen between islands, and a yacht running before a fresh breeze. We drove home over a bridge by some highly desirable residences, owned by football and ice-hockey stars; what Doreen called "The Swedish Riviera". We put in another 45 minutes finishing up the bikes, then had another slap-up dinner; this time it featured kassel, yummy Swedish-style smoked pork. We talked about Ireland and Sweden; Doreen would never give up her Irish identity, though she probably wouldn't move

back home. It came out that Shackleton had lived in my house as a boy: and lo and behold Doreen produced a book with a photograph of my house in it, and a short spiel about Shackleton, so we talked about him for a while. We retired early enough so that we could get an early start; and Michael said he felt Bobby would like him to come home quickly, though she hadn't asked him to; the news of Wendy was not good. So we decided to go straight to Boden tomorrow and see if we could get ourselves and the bikes onto a train on either Sunday or Monday.

## Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June

We packed up and put the bags on the bikes before breakfast, which meant we got away by 7.40; and sticking to the E4 until Ersnäs where we had our last run of Cykelspåret to Alvik, we headed north-west to Boden and made such good time that we arrived at the station at 2pm, a run of 50 miles. The weather was perfect, sunny with clouds but no rain to speak of, a breeze to prevent us getting too hot in our jumpers, but a warm breeze from the south-west. Along the road several times birds of different sorts flew ahead of us, making ten or twenty swoops, then landing and waiting for us to catch up, then flitting on ahead again. At our 40-mile stop we disturbed a pair of curlews who flew around and around giving out their plaintive pipings.



At Boden we bought supplies for the journey and looked into the office of the elusive Godskompiert, who were to manage the bike transport. Nobody was around (well, it was Sunday) so we called the mobile number Michael had been given in the Hundiksvall information centre. A girl answered and told us to call again in two minutes; we did and she said she was driving down to the station. She arrived in a van, rang her boss and handed her phone to Michael, and the boss said he would send a guy down at 16.30 to do it all for us. So we had an hour and a half for lunch in the nearest immigrant pizzeria: two “kebabs” namely doner slices in sauce inside a huge pitta

parcel with salad and chips. Where would we be without the immigrant restaurateurs? And their cheery “Welcome to Boden”. Back at the station by 4pm, we were soon met by the man, who took our fare, filled our form and stuck a copy to each bike, and we carried them across the rails to the next platform.

The station suddenly became animated at 5pm, three trains came and went before ours at 17.55. Family groups, holidaymakers, a guy with skis. We still didn't know whether we would get beds or even seats ourselves, but our Godskompiert man said we would be unlucky if we didn't. Michael chatted to him as we waited for our train; he doesn't like fishing but he goes on the fishing expeditions and paints, in pastels. He would like some time to go to Ireland.

The train came in and our man found the inspector immediately; she looked at our ticket, issued for next Friday, and said yes we could go, and we could have beds 4-6 in carriage 42. So with great relief we boarded the train, ensconced ourselves, sent some messages, phoned to cancel our stuga and bade farewell to our furthest north.

## Monday 14<sup>th</sup> June

The train journey was a fast rewind through the forests; our compartment had three bunks, of which we used the top (me) and bottom (Michael). Not spacious, in fact quite tiny, but pleasant enough. The trains seem to go at a faster speed than the track was designed for; on each major bend the carriage gave a series of shuddering lurches that were at first quite alarming, but we reassured ourselves that they do this every day.

We arrived bang on time, 12.45pm, in Göteborg, retrieved our bikes and headed down the platform to see about the possibilities for getting back to Copenhagen. If we had found transport to Helsingborg or Malmö

we could have got on the Danish train, with its bike spaces, but there was neither a bus nor a train that would take our bikes there. There seemed to be nothing for it but to take a ferry to Frederikshavn, right in the north of Denmark, and train down from there. We saw little enough of the historic city of Göteborg as we cycled around the ring road to the Stena office. We bought tickets for the 18.30 sailing; there was an earlier one but it was booked out because the previous sailing had been cancelled. We then cycled around the town again, to the DFDS office where we were able to change our Esbjerg-Harwich booking from Wednesday week to the coming Thursday. Then we went back to a pub near the railway station—very cosmopolitan, in fact just like an Irish pub—where we had some lunch: ox filé and a couple of Newcastle Brown Ales.

Although we were well south the weather was overcast and windy, quite cold and threatening to rain. We cycled back to the Stena quay by 5pm and didn't board until 6.15 though she sailed promptly at 6.30. It was windy but the seas were pleasantly small. There was time for a meal and a read, and we arrived at Frederikshavn at 9.45pm, found a hotel on a list and cycled to it. We got a small but airy room and phoned home.

## **Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> June**

We breakfasted at 7.30, packed up and had a short rainy ride to the railway station. We got tickets to Copenhagen for us and our bikes, bought sandwiches and drinks and Mars bars and bananas, and made our journey back to Copenhagen in comfort. We phoned the Volvo garage to say we would have to collect the car early—it was booked to be serviced by the 17<sup>th</sup>—and they said it was already done and we could collect it any time. So we took a train from Copenhagen direct to Naerum; not quite direct, as we had a few changes along the way, including a gorgeous local train like a big wide tram. We got there at 4.45pm, Michael paid the stiff Volvo-garage bill, and we set about dismantling the bikes (Michael's is too long with its wheels on, it would stick out both sides of the car) and attaching them to the carrying-frame. They had to let us out of the garage compound to lock up at the end of business, but we did a thorough job and refused to be rushed. Finally we drove back to David's, remembering the landmarks and getting there quite efficiently. David's colleagues Jake and Marguerite let us in; they were preparing an end-of-conference party for the International Council for Exploration of the Seas, which was well under way before David arrived from another assignment abroad. There were about twenty or thirty scientists there, mostly from EU countries but including one Russian, and we had interesting chats with a lot of them.



## **Bloomsday, 16<sup>th</sup> June**

David got on the web and Michael found himself a flight home, then David set off to work. In mid-morning we drove to the airport, where Michael caught his flight and left me to drive the car home. In civilized fashion, we got 15 minutes free parking close to the departure hall, and I could drive straight out and back to Vedbaek. David had arranged for me to be included in his invitation to a talk on Joyce given by an American writer, Thomas E. Kennedy, at the Central Library of Copenhagen at 4pm. This was to mark the opening of a Joyce exhibition, on the hundredth anniversary of Bloomsday. I got a bus to Lyngby where I bought a sandwich, then took a train to town. I wandered through the streets and called into a bike shop to enquire about a wooden bicycle hanging in the window. The man said it was a prototype, but might eventually sell for DK20,000—about €2,500. I got to the Central Library and joined the reception. David had dressed appropriately for the occasion, in stripy blazer and straw boater, but he was alone in this. We wandered around the old city for a while after the talk, a piece of sincere fawning in which Thomas Kennedy

confessed that Joyce had shown him the way to discover his own mind. He has been a constant Joycean since his teens, and has written his own odyssey novel about Copenhagen, where he now lives,

### **Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> June**

I left David's house at 8.30am, he had already gone to work at eight. I drove south and through the maze of Copenhagen motorways, the same route we had taken to the airport until a turn to the west brought me onto the road to Esbjerg. I lunched in Odense and bought some jigsaws and little presents, and stocked up with snacks for the journey. Uneventfully I reached Esbjerg, and boarded the ferry to Harwich. The cabin had a TV with lots of things piped in; I watched the film of Veronica Guerin after a slap-up dinner similar to the one we had had on the way out.

### **Friday 18<sup>th</sup> June**

We docked at 11am and I had a little trouble negotiating the roads without a co-pilot. I had set out a route, but problems arose such as deciding how close to approach Colchester before it's time to start avoiding it. The city that appeared on the signposts wasn't always the landmark I had it in mind to navigate by. I went close to Cambridge again but didn't stop by at Dougie and Bonnie's, as I had a notion to spend a night in Betws-y-Coed, which I did, and a gorgeous place it is. The view of the Welsh mountains from the long descent to Shrewsbury was more breathtaking than most of what we'd seen in Sweden; we never did make it to the high mountains around Jokkmokk.

At Betws-y-Coed I booked into the second hotel I came to, the Waterloo, as the first was full. It had a page mounted on the wall reproduced from a census taken in the 1880s, which revealed that the proprietor was a retired Irish medic. There were apparently three guests that night, and eighteen servants, from farm hands, chamber maids and a boots, to a coachman who took pains to establish for posterity that he was actually self-employed.

### **Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> June**

Last leg home; a short drive to Holyhead, a short and calm crossing, and back to Glentanar where Jenny was waiting; we all had lunch in the garden, with fresh strawberries and elderflower wine.

