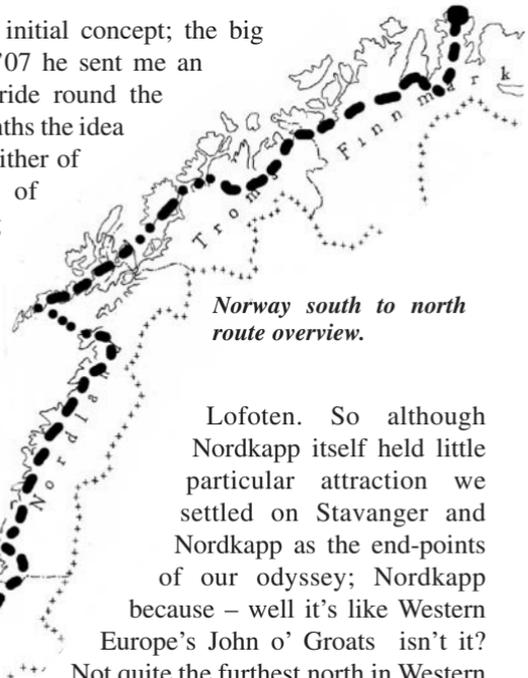


Stavanger to Nordkapp or 'How Custard Creams Saved My Life'

by John Richardson

Brian's your man for the initial concept; the big bright idea. One day late in '07 he sent me an e-mail, 'What about a bike ride round the Baltic?' Over the next few months the idea was trimmed down a little, neither of us was drawn to the idea of endless miles of forest, cycling south through Finland. We acknowledged that what really attracted us was Norway, the fjords, the mountains, the coastline,



Norway south to north route overview.

Lofoten. So although Nordkapp itself held little particular attraction we settled on Stavanger and Nordkapp as the end-points of our odyssey; Nordkapp because – well it's like Western Europe's John o' Groats isn't it? Not quite the furthest north in Western Europe, not quite on the mainland of Western Europe, not quite anything really, Stavanger because it was the point furthest south on the west coast to which we could find a flight – the ferry from Newcastle to Bergen having been terminated in September 2008. And we settled on May because even though we both admitted to some uncertainty about whether that month was too early in the year, nevertheless it was what could be managed without too much family upset for either of us.

So on 8th May Sue dropped us off at Gatwick airport and after the inevitable hassle of getting the bikes accepted for the flight we were away. My diary states:-

Arrived at Gatwick with four hours in hand, kissed Sue bye-bye, she drove off towards France and we walked

straight into a crisis. Check-in said, 'no bikes,' supervisor said, 'must be shrink-wrapped,' wrapping station said, 'we don't wrap bikes.' Phoned Norwegian Air who tried to help but then... Just watch Brian Silver-tongue move up through the gears. He charms the supervisor, who quickly becomes our friend and ally, and then goes to work on the boss of the baggage handlers – putty in Brian's hands – who eventually personally carries a bike in each hand for careful loading on our flight.

In Stavanger airport the bikes were carefully handed over to us. Ten minutes work with Allen keys and pump, ten minutes ride down midnight Stavanger roads and we had located our first hytte (Brian had pre-booked it), the key was in the door and very soon we were into our sleeping bags. *In bed by 1:00am up at 6:30* says the diary.

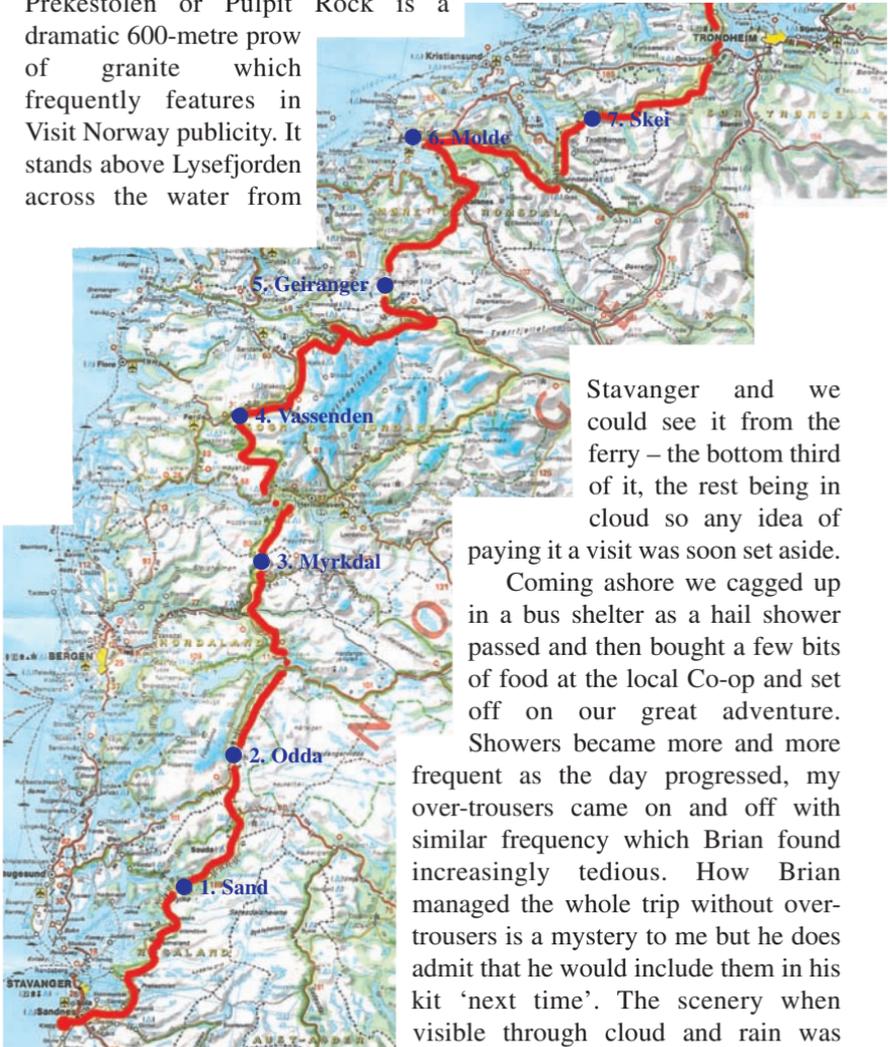
Our ride fell fairly naturally into three sections: Stavanger to Trondheimsfjord – the 'tadpole's head' at the bottom of the country, Trondheimsfjord to Bodø – known to Norwegians as Kystriksveien or the Coastal Route, and Lofoten to Nordkapp, the far north. Whilst planning the trip I had come across the web diary of an Aussie couple who had successfully completed a top to bottom ride through Norway in June '07. Their approach had been broadly similar to ours, the main difference being that they had carried very light camping gear. Brian had actually spent some time with them while he was visiting his daughter in Melbourne. They had covered an average of 120km per day, never missing a day in their 25day trip. We had pre-booked flights south from Alta in the far north four weeks to the day after our arrival in Stavanger thus allowing ourselves 27 days to cover the distance. We needed a bit more of a framework and, working around a notional 120km per day I came up with a schedule of 22 days riding plus one day to get the bus back from Nordkapp to Alta and a four-day cushion to cope with unavoidable delays.

We travelled very light – our kit list included neither tent nor stove. We had tested this idea on both our Groats–End ride which had seen some very cold weather and the Irish End to End when we had enjoyed rain every day. I was, I admit, apprehensive and made the case for either a tent or a bivvy-bag in case of being marooned in foul weather, miles from shelter in the far north. Brian however is a professional persuader, his argument won the day and we made the trip on lightweight (Cannondale) sports machines with a saddlebag each – no panniers. The bikes behaved impeccably; not a single puncture, broken spoke, snapped chain or cable – nothing. Our skinny tyres and light gear drew many a doubting glance from the few touring cyclists we encountered. They were invariably travelling heavy-laden. One of them had had a rear wheel collapse under the weight of his bags. We on the other hand became steadily more confident that our formula was right for us.

Stavanger to Trondheimsfjord

The first two days supplied a pretty thorough test of our resolve as well as of clothing and equipment. Leaving our hytte we managed with a little navigational difficulty to weave our way across early morning Stavanger on a bewildering series of cycle paths to the ferry for Tau. We had not eaten since the previous afternoon and were happy to find breakfast on the boat. Prekestolen or Pulpit Rock is a

dramatic 600-metre prow of granite which frequently features in Visit Norway publicity. It stands above Lysefjorden across the water from



● Overnight Halts — Route

Stavanger and we could see it from the ferry – the bottom third of it, the rest being in cloud so any idea of paying it a visit was soon set aside.

Coming ashore we caged up in a bus shelter as a hail shower passed and then bought a few bits of food at the local Co-op and set off on our great adventure. Showers became more and more frequent as the day progressed, my over-trousers came on and off with similar frequency which Brian found increasingly tedious. How Brian managed the whole trip without over-trousers is a mystery to me but he does admit that he would include them in his kit 'next time'. The scenery when visible through cloud and rain was impressively fjord-like from the start. We were following Road Number 13,

which uses a second ferry from Hjelmeland to Nesvik then through fifteen or more tunnels to reach Sand where we paid 200 NOK for a fine warm hytte which turned out to be the joint cheapest of the entire journey. We had covered 120km since leaving Stavanger airport on the previous evening.

My diary has the following to say about Day 2, a Sunday, and one of the three most challenging days of the trip:

We were up at 6:15am and away within the hour through the left-overs of Saturday afternoon's rain. Route 13 was fabulous on this quiet Sunday morning; it follows the Suldal River through green pastures to Suldalsvatn which is a classic fjord in every way except that it doesn't quite reach the sea. Granite cliffs plunge vertically into the lake necessitating upward of fifteen tunnels most of which have good electric lighting. With traffic at absolute zero these first 45km were a joy.

At Nestflaten, just before the road climbs out of the valley, a café was advertised but there were no signs of life. We began to realise that we should have taken more care to carry some lunch with us, especially on a Sunday. We had some apricots which were scoffed before tackling the hill toward Røldal and shortly afterwards the half packet of salami left over from last night and a packet of peanuts disappeared but both of us were in need of some real food. At the start of Røldal itself we were directed left towards Odda but a short way up the road a tunnel entrance loomed with a 'No Cyclists' sign. Ridiculous! There was no alternative route so we rode through. Next came a huge climb at a very steep gradient, climbing about 450 metres in 2.5 miles. At the top we were both exhausted – Brian said he was 'cream crackered' I was definitely worse: totally 'Donald Ducked'. It had started to snow as we plunged into another 7km of tunnels and some at first quite intimidatingly noisy traffic. We emerged into a blizzard of sleet; agony to fly downhill into it and nowhere to hide as we hurtled precariously through closed-up ski resorts. Eventually we spotted a high-roofed open-ended building, a sort of massive bus shelter but actually a public weighbridge. We dived in to jump up and down a bit and put on extra clothing. During my final pack in the UK Sue had pressed on me a small down waistcoat. I had packed it rather reluctantly but now it saved my day, Brian donned a similarly light insulated jacket.

Further down, at Latéfoss, a huge dramatic waterfall, there was a kiosk selling postcards, souvenirs, hot chocolate and hot dogs. When she saw how cold we were the proprietor instantly became our angel of mercy. She brought us into her tiny shop and placed a heater in front of us while we munched a couple of hot dogs and slurped beakers of hot chocolate. Furthermore she telephoned ahead to reserve a hytte for us at the Odda campground. Grateful and revived we ploughed on, tyres leaving a wake in



Byrkjelo (near Nordfjord). A fabulous morning.

Photo John Richardson



Reflections in Geirangerfjord.

Photo John Richardson

the road-become-river. As luck would have it the owner of the campground was out looking for us in Odda; he explained with apologies that unfortunately his hytter were all full because of a local football match that evening and suggesting as an alternative his B & B hotel at which he (probably) gave us a special price.

It was not all bad news; the breakfast buffet the following morning was huge and we were able to make a couple of sandwiches each and fill our bottles for the road. The snow and sleet of the previous days had cleared the air, what followed was a near fortnight of fine sunny weather. But cold – an anticyclone had established itself over the North Sea and was drawing down northerly breezes.

An easier day followed during which we crossed Hardanger Fjord and bypassed Voss to reach Myrkdal. From there we made an earlier than usual (5:30am) start, straight into a long tough climb of a thousand metres, into the hills. During the previous day there had been plenty of evidence around us of new snow on the mountains, now we were in it, in amazing quantities. The road, very efficiently cleared, headed for Sognefjord across several kilometres of entirely snow-clad Vikafjellet plateau – to depths of three or four metres in places. Unsurprisingly it was cold and once again we were all ashiver after the long descent to Vik where a filling station supplied much needed food and warmth. Filling stations became more and more of a life-line for us as we headed north, for not only did they fill vehicles with fuel, they could be relied on to fill empty bellies with, at the very least, a bacon polse (an oversize hot dog wrapped in a rasher) and a hot drink. Sometimes they also had filled rolls we could carry out for future consumption. Rather to our surprise we came to eagerly anticipate a late morning visit to a ‘hot doggerly!’

On the 10am ferry across Sognefjord from Vangsnes to Dragsvik we met a young French cyclist, a true adventurer, who had set out solo from his home in Chamonix on a heavily-laden but very robust bike (Koga Miyata). He too was heading for Nordkapp before planning on returning home through Finland and central Europe on his four-month trip. He boggled slightly at our light bikes and brisk (ambitious?) schedule.

Two more tough climbs to snow-clad passes of about 850m and 650m were accomplished before reaching our hytte at Vassenden. We were well pleased with our day; we had covered 145km with something like 2,600m of ascent, not counting minor hills between passes, and we felt tired rather than exhausted.

Four more days passed in similar fashion. Early mornings were brilliantly sunny and biting cold, afternoons, if we were sheltered from the north-easterly breezes, were warm enough for shorts. Vassenden to

Geiranger took us in a long loop around the shores of Nordfjord and over the hills to Hellesylt from where a ferry ride takes you through the majestic Geirangerfjord. The following day started with a challenging climb out from Geiranger; 600m of ascent in less than 6km of intimidating zig-zag road. But there were frequent excuses to sneak a rest as the views down into the fjord became ever more spectacular from each successive hairpin bend. From Eidsdal we took the ferry across Norddalsfjorden; we had planned to take the road to Andalsnes but were told that the pass was still closed due to the recent snows. This necessitated a diversion to the west, the day ending with the ferry from Vestnes to Molde and a small expensive hytte. The next day, heading towards Trondheim, we were again re-routed. The most direct route to Trondheimsfjord, along E39, was closed for major repair works but a helpful(?) guy lounging in a roadside café advised us that the southern alternative route, via Skei, was flatter.

Well if so says the diary the northern route must be a bit of a bugger; in the first 20 miles we crossed three passes the third of which had a full thousand feet of ascent.

Leaving our hytte in Skei however the road did indeed become a little easier and we cruised as far as Orkanger where we turned north towards Valset in order to avoid the city of Trondheim. Crossing the fjord to Brekstad (an inhospitable town) we had a little difficulty locating a reasonably priced place to lay our heads but eventually came upon an idyllically situated cheap campground with hytter. The guardian of the Austratt (Brekstad) campground was extremely helpful. We had been concerned to note in the past few days that several of the campgrounds we



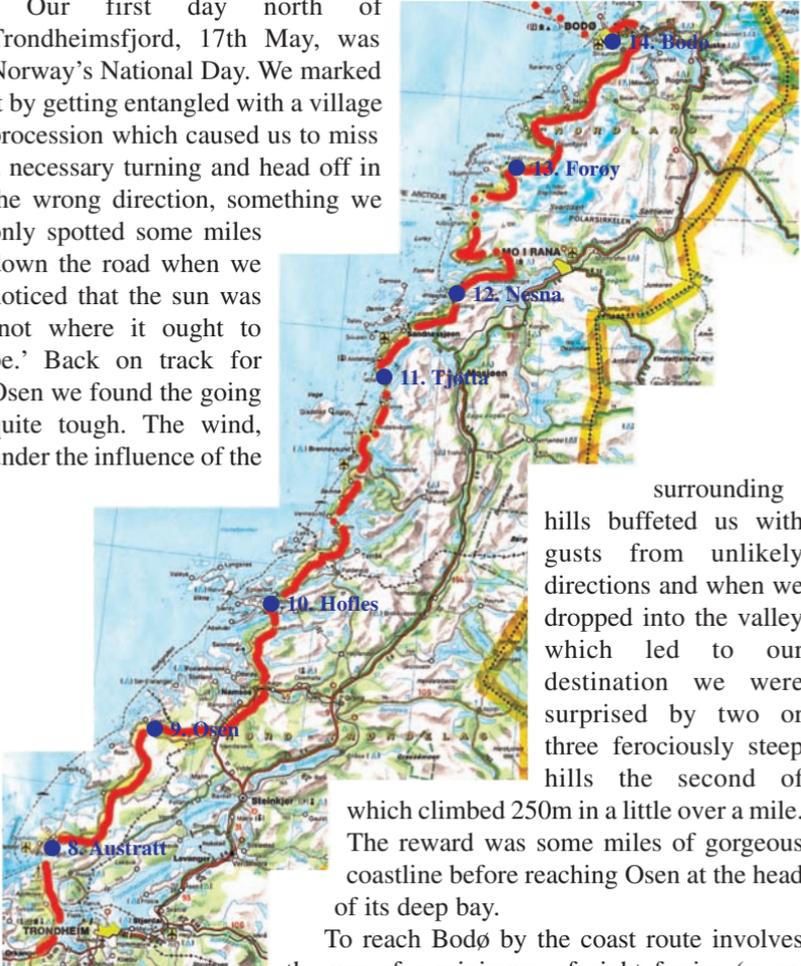
Typical Hytte (Austratt near Brekstad).

Photo Brian Cunningham

passed were not yet open for the season, despite the fact that Norway has a number of national holidays in May. She, the guardian, gave us two booklets with up to date details of hytte sites and timetables for all ferries between Trondheimsfjord and Bodø. Solid gold.

The Coastal Route (Kystriksveien)

Our first day north of Trondheimsfjord, 17th May, was Norway’s National Day. We marked it by getting entangled with a village procession which caused us to miss a necessary turning and head off in the wrong direction, something we only spotted some miles down the road when we noticed that the sun was ‘not where it ought to be.’ Back on track for Osen we found the going quite tough. The wind, under the influence of the



surrounding hills buffeted us with gusts from unlikely directions and when we dropped into the valley which led to our destination we were surprised by two or three ferociously steep hills the second of which climbed 250m in a little over a mile. The reward was some miles of gorgeous coastline before reaching Osen at the head of its deep bay.

To reach Bodø by the coast route involves the use of a minimum of eight ferries (many more are on hand if you choose to spend time exploring some of the multitude of offshore islands). These ferries are wonderfully efficient and **very** cheap for pensioner cyclists – the best bargain in Norway, you might say. Suppose you’re waiting on the quay for the nine o’ clock morning ferry;

you can be absolutely sure that at five to nine that ferry will be approaching the loading ramp, bow doors opening, a deck-hand standing behind a kind of steel apron, remote control in hand ready to adjust the height of the quayside ramp. Bang! The steel apron folds down onto the ramp, the foot passengers walk off, the ticket collector is with them and as a stream of vehicles leaves the boat we buy our tickets (24 NOK for two Oldies), wheel the bikes to the far end and climb the steps to the saloon for a bite of breakfast. Ferries are completely double-ended with a high centrally-located bridge giving the pilot excellent visibility in all directions. The same no nonsense, efficient procedure will be repeated on the opposite shore, plus there'll be a bus waiting to take foot passengers to the nearest town. My diary has the following to say about one of our days on the coast route:

Day 11; Hoflesja to Tjøtta. Off at 6:30 looking for an easier day. The 50 miles or so to Holm were pretty upsy-downsy but we were in good time for the mid-day ferry to Vennesund. I studied the timetable. One possibility it seemed was a boat which sailed all the way to Tjøtta from Horn at the far end of the almost-island of Sømna on which we would soon land. It was an attractive option, cutting out about 10 miles of road and a third ferry ride, the problem was the 35 miles of Sømna, could we cover it in three hours? Well, after all the hills of the journey so far the island was amazingly flat, all the way across, and we applied ourselves heroically(?) to the task, reaching Horn with almost an hour to spare – more than enough time to realise that the timetable had fooled me, the long ferry option was available only on Friday and Sunday (this was a Tuesday). The ferry from Horn to Anddesvågen reconnected us with Plan A. Ten extra miles of road brought us to Forvika where we caught the local Co-op just before closing time then had to wait more than two and a half hours for the ferry to Tjøtta. Fortunately Brian was able to phone ahead so when we landed at 8:45pm (almost our bedtime) we were straight into a beautiful apartment. The owner's hytter were all occupied so she generously gave us this luxury accommodation at the same price (maybe she was influenced by the dramatic way in which Brian threw himself at her feet as his foot failed to come free from the clip-in pedal). We've planned a short one tomorrow so a lie in till 7:00 seems good. 97 miles... Easier day?

As the Coastal Route approaches Bodø the mountains become ever more spectacular, so we were not displeased that ferry timetabling, geared to driving times rather than cycling times, gave us more time to stand and stare at the simply breathtaking scenery – reminiscent of Yosemite with the added attractions of sparkling sea and fjord as well as many large snow/ice fields, reflecting the fact that we had by now crossed the Arctic Circle. Tunnels were also back with us on this section but they were all of adequate width

and well lit. The longest measured 3,800m, no worries, it was smoothly surfaced and three quarters of it was downhill.

I was tired when we reached Bodø. We'd been two weeks on the road without a rest day and this last day, another of over 145km had been an endless series of ups and downs. The campground proprietor seemed at first to be rather surly but soon proved himself very helpful. On his computer he quickly drew up the appropriate website for the ferries to Lofoten and told us that the only ferry tomorrow would be at 4:30pm. We were disappointed (we'd been banking on a morning ferry) but decided to make the best of an unexpected rest day. I had come out in a very itchy and rather worrying rash. I consulted (by texting) wife and son, both medics, and their view was, 'find a pharmacy' and their view was, 'see a doctor' and her view was, 'I'd like to consult a specialist colleague.' They decided it was probably the early stages of a tick-borne infection and prescribed a 14-day course of antibiotics, which gradually cleared things up, and rest, which was not so easy to comply with.

There was a bit of a problem at the ferry terminal. It was Saturday (so nobody was on duty) and the officially posted timetable indicated that there were no weekend ferries to Lofoten. Tourist Info was also closed (perhaps nobody needs accurate information on a Saturday). Eventually a ferry from Lofoten arrived at the quay and a deckhand confirmed that the campground



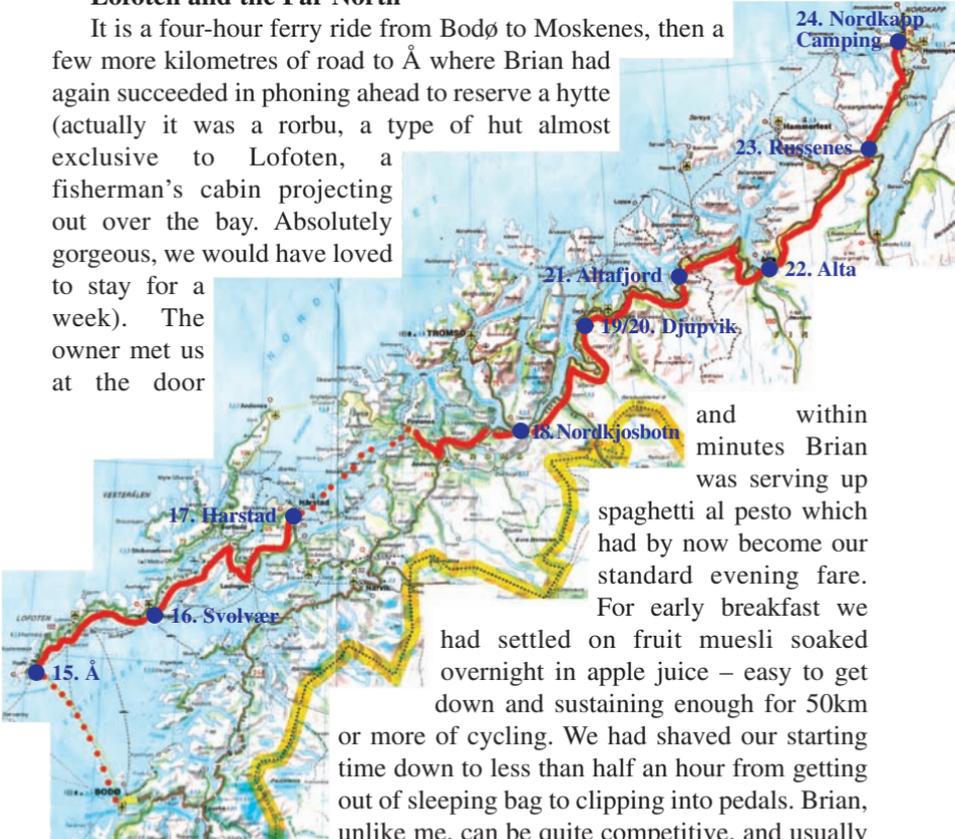
Near Bodø – Within the Arctic Circle.

Photo John Richardson

man had been correct; the ferry sailed at 4:30. Relieved we celebrated with a massive pizza in a genuine Italian restaurant we'd spotted. The Chef was delighted – most of his customers wanted only burger and chips – and the pizza was huge, freshly stone-baked and delicious.

Lofoten and the Far North

It is a four-hour ferry ride from Bodø to Moskenes, then a few more kilometres of road to Å where Brian had again succeeded in phoning ahead to reserve a hytte (actually it was a rorbu, a type of hut almost exclusive to Lofoten, a fisherman's cabin projecting out over the bay. Absolutely gorgeous, we would have loved to stay for a week). The owner met us at the door



and within minutes Brian was serving up spaghetti al pesto which had by now become our standard evening fare. For early breakfast we had settled on fruit muesli soaked overnight in apple juice – easy to get down and sustaining enough for 50km or more of cycling. We had shaved our starting time down to less than half an hour from getting out of sleeping bag to clipping into pedals. Brian, unlike me, can be quite competitive, and usually had a slight edge on me no matter how hard I tried. I caught him a couple of times sneaking a spoonful of muesli and apple juice in the middle of the night. He called it gamesmanship, I called it cheating.

The wild, vertiginous granite peaks of Lofoten seem to leap straight out of the sea and the road clings close to what little shoreline remains, occasionally piercing straight through a section of particularly awkward precipice. A few small picturesque fishing villages occupy any less than vertical bits of sea-side land, every fisherman's house being easily identifiable by rack upon rack of drying cod, much of which I believe is

exported to Italy. The weather, so generous to us for the past fortnight was clearly on the turn but it did allow us some stunning views of the classic Lofoten scenery of the first two islands, Moskensøya and Flakstadøya (plus the bonus sighting of a golden eagle). The road then dived into our first undersea tunnel, to Vestågøya – 2km long: Half a kilometre downhill, just enough level going to let you imagine all that ocean above your head then half a kilometre uphill at quite a steep gradient. Shortly after we emerged from this tunnel the rain arrived and stayed with us for an hour or two but cleared soon enough for us to dry out before reaching the day's destination near Svolvær, a pretty village with a harbour full of all manner of craft and backed by soaring sun-dappled crags.

The plan for the next day, according to our schedule, was to take the ferry north to Vesterålen, ride to their northern tip at Andenes and catch a boat from there back to the mainland. Fortunately we had discovered that the Andenes to Gryllefjord ferry did not start operating until four days after we proposed to be on it. Instead we took to the brand new road built to link Narvik with Lofoten through some of the wildest country of the whole trip. The forecast for the day was lousy but Brian suggested that an early start might give us three or four hours before the rain caught up. Nice idea but it was not to be. Within an hour of our 6:15 start the rain arrived and it became increasingly clear that we were in for a testing day. We turned right onto the



Wonderful Lofoten.

Photo John Richardson

new road at Fiskebøl and plunged straight into another undersea tunnel, this time of 4km, with similarly challenging gradients plus a disturbingly noisy fan system, presumably to guard against any build-up of carbon monoxide at the bottom of the slopes. Hugely vertical snow streaked peaks reared into the looming rain clouds, not a house, not a building and over ten miles of tunnel – the longest being four full miles long with perfect road surface and lighting. (When first we heard of this one we had been somewhat apprehensive; now we welcomed it, happy for a while to be out of the wind and wet.) We knew there was a hotel at about 75 miles – we had made a provisional booking the previous evening – and all the way until five or six miles short of the place the rain and wind lashed us but at 70 miles, at last, a garage/shop. We had been running on empty for quite a while but the shop had two hot dogs left and free coffee (a first, almost unheard of). It was a turning point. When we stepped out the rain had stopped, there were torn patches of blue and the wind, sweeping in behind us, had become our friend. We decided to speed past the very expensive hotel and use the tail wind to try for Harstad, thus improving our chances of catching a morning ferry to Finnsnes. It was, by a couple of miles, our longest day – 160km.

The morning ferry turned out to be the famous Hurtigruten; a fabulous service, part cruise ship, part packet boat, part ferry. Sixteen ships, we were told, maintain a daily coastal service from Bergen right up to Kirkenes on the Russian border. The boat journey takes a week one way and calls at up to 35 different ports en route. Boarding the ship, leaving our bikes in the hold, we entered a different world, one of deep pile carpet and gleaming polished surfaces. We gazed at the expensive fare in what we took to be the breakfast bar; 35 NOK for a coffee, 65 for a sandwich. The salesgirl must have read our minds (breakfast for me back at the hytte had been a glass of water and my antibiotic tablet). ‘There’s breakfast in the restaurant along there. As much as you can eat for 129 kroner,’ she said. We hardly hesitated, except to jokingly ask if there were reductions for pensioners – there weren’t. We basked in a multi-course breakfast, making many return visits to the inexhaustible smørgåsbord buffet, taking our time over many different fruits, muesli in orange juice, egg, sausage and bacon, sliced meats, pates and cheeses, two or three coffees, several fruit juices, and to finish we made up sandwiches for the road. Eventually we were elbowed out by the frosty faced head waiter – I think she rather disapproved of the fact that one of her staff was really interested in what these two bizarrely dressed ragamuffins were doing and so spent time in conversation with us. Coming ashore from our three and a half hour luxury cruise I couldn’t help thinking ‘If ever I grow beyond the (mental) age of 25 or my legs fall off, or both, I might just take a long trip on the Hurtigruten.’

We headed east to join the E6, the main road to the North, which we had hitherto managed to avoid. There would be no avoiding it from now on; it is the only road north. The terrain began to look rather more Arctic. When the road crossed a low pass, only about 250m, a lake on the summit was still partially frozen and wild reindeer were grazing nearby. Although the weather was nowhere near as bad as during the previous day we caught a prolonged heavy shower and arrived, soaked through once again, at Nordkjosbotn – a short day but sufficient after the previous day's exertions.

Camping and hytte places were by now few and far between. We had targeted Birtavarre at the head of Kåfjord for our next night but in the event, the road being not too hilly and the wind, for some of the way, in our favour we were there by mid-day, still feeling quite frisky despite having already covered 100km. The campground owner was generous in trying to help us with definitive information about the availability of hytter further up the road but nothing certain emerged from his many phone calls. Nonetheless we decided to go for it on the basis of a few vague possibilities:

After a further 22 miles we came to Lyngen Lodge, clearly far too posh for us but we parked the bikes, climbed the steep track to the door and found it to be owned and run by a young Brit – his pal was the chef and volunteered a cup of tea each. They were certain that there was no accommodation for another 20 miles along the E6 which included a pass and would be into a headwind. They kindly telephoned to ensure that room was available. We braced ourselves for it, set off expecting two hours or more of grind. And then ... not much more than a mile up the road, and with foul weather rapidly approaching from the opposite direction, a hand-painted hytte sign in the garden of a private house. Yes, it was available, two bedrooms, kitchen, armchairs, terrific shower and a view to die for across the fjord to the Lyngen Alps.

We were pinned down at this hytte, in Djupvik, for an unplanned second rest day. It had rained and snowed most of the night and well on into the next day; when we got up the wonderful view had disappeared, we could no longer see across the fjord. The hytte owner knocked at our door and reported that there was new snow on the road ahead to Storslett and we had been told that there was a much higher pass between us and Altafjord. We were awakened again by heavy rain on our second night in the hut but by 7:15am when we took to the road it had stopped. There were indeed two passes to cross that day. On the first, a modest 250m, there were patches of roadside snow but the second pass was more than twice that height and new snow lay everywhere except, thank goodness, on the road surface. At Kvænangen we found a café and shop (never pass one by when this far north) and a cheerful Belgian/French guy who had given us

a wave when he thudded by on a massive Harley Davidson as we were toiling up the second pass. We also found custard cream biscuits – twice the weight and half the price of any other biscuits on the shelf. We shared some of them, and coffee and French chat with our Belgian pal. He expected to reach Nordkapp that evening, (three more days for us we hoped).

Another wet finish at Altafjord Camping and Hytter, nobody at all around, key in the door of a cosy hytte, shower room and kitchen fully warm and functional, honesty system for payment. We saw neither hair nor hide of the owner during the sixteen hours we were on site. Once again it rained heavily in the night and by morning it had come on to blow strongly from somewhere south of west which simply whistled us along the edge of the fjord for the first 30km, at which point the road turned sharply south alongside the broad sweep of Altafjord's main arm. The sun showed itself; I thought for a while that the weather had changed but quite soon realised that the hill to our right was, for a while, giving us complete shelter. When we turned into a large bay we were hit by roaring destabilising gusts and in the second bay, more a short fjord really, the wind in the neck of the inlet was so fierce that I had to walk for a while for fear of being blown into the path of a car or lorry.

Alta itself is a surprisingly large town to come upon after days of passing through such thinly populated country. It is a university town and seemed quite lively (though all we were looking for was a hytte and a lie down). We found the Tourist Information office and, wonder of wonders, it was open, on a Saturday and the lasses in charge were really helpful, finding us accommodation and checking bus timetables for our return from Nordkapp via Honningsvåg to Alta. It is about 220km from Alta to Nordkapp, half as far again as our longest day so far, so the idea of 'doing it in one' did not come up in conversation – though in view of what hit us in the next two days it might have been a good idea. To quote:

We quit the rather grotty Alta hytte at 6:00am, bowling out alongside the fjord. Then in two steps the road climbed to about 400 metres, into an area of genuine arctic tundra; heathery stuff, mosses, dwarf birch, big snow patches, melt-water pools and lakes and lots of reindeer. We paused to eat bananas (no, they weren't growing on the tundra), again for salami and again for custard creams – a recent high value high energy find. At the shop and gas station in Skaidi we scoffed the by now compulsory bacon wrapped hot dog, then, wind-assisted we powered over the last 15 miles to Russenes to arrive almost embarrassingly early at 11:40 – we couldn't even get into our hut until mid-day but nobody seems to know of any hytte between here and Honningsvåg, 65 miles up the road, so here we are.

Our friends in the Tourist Office in Alta had informed us that a bus leaves Nordkapp in the early afternoon to link up with the afternoon bus from Honningsvåg to Alta. Having enjoyed an easy 100km getting here from Alta we came up with the idea of our earliest start yet (4:00am). Zoom up to Nordkapp, catch the appropriate buses and celebrate our success in Alta the following evening; simple. Well, the first bit worked. We were awheel by 4:10am, it had again rained for half the night but now there were patches of blue and, glancing over shoulders as the breeze wafted us northwards, the patches seemed to have joined together and to be heading our way. How wrong can you be? The next rearward glances revealed a huge black cloud filling the southern sky. Wind speed rose sharply and by the time we turned into the first bay on this wild broken coast it was much too rough to contemplate turning back. A white-tailed eagle swooped in front of us at little more than head height and flew casually back to perch on its crag, glaring at us – intruders in a world where it was utterly at home. ‘My territory,’ it seemed to say, ‘not yours.’

The wind increased in ferocity, the deluge soaked us. We stopped to struggle into more clothing and eat a few slices of salami. With the storm at its passionate peak and as the road turned westward over an exposed low headland we were both blown from our bikes, forced to walk for several hundred metres. We had had some worries about the 7km tunnel which links the mainland to Magerøya (Nordkapp Island) but now it came as a wonderful relief. Every inch of road up to the entrance had to be fought for. The tunnel dropped to 250m below the sea, levelled out for a short stretch then began a climb of more than 3km back to the surface. In an emergency lay-by we stopped for a short rest and to recharge our batteries on the last of the custard creams. At the exit, the northern entrance to the tunnel, we came to a toll-booth. The official raised the boom and waved us through with a sympathetic frown – had he let us off paying out of sympathy for our condition or did cyclists go free anyway?

At Honningsvåg (100km) we found the first and only hot doggerly and petrol station of the day; warmth at last. To continue to Nordkapp in the current weather was out of the question, the road rising as it does, across open tundra, to more than a 300m above sea level. The friendly and sympathetic cashier at the petrol station sang the praises of Nordkapp Camping, about 6km up the road – and that’s where we went. Our luck was turning, the proprietor of the campground put us in an apartment – she had had to close her hytter because the door of one of them had been torn from its hinges in the storm. She also had a detailed local weather forecast for the next 24 hours which showed wind falling away and rain passing through by 8:00pm. Several local people, including the Tourist Information Office, had

STAVANGER TO NORDKAPP

told us that a bus departs Nordkapp, heading south, at 12:15am. There would be no problem with the bikes and it would drop us back at Nordkapp Camping. We decided to go for it as soon as the wind dropped. Because of our ludicrously early start we had a long afternoon to eat and snooze away before setting out for the cape. An endlessly hilly 26km brought us home. We were, according to the receptionist in the visitor centre as we signed her register, the first cyclists to arrive at Nordkapp in 2009.

Nordkapp itself, sitting atop a 300-metre cliff and at 71°10'21"N , is a wild, bleak place – except that it is fenced off and visitors have to pay 140 NOK each to approach the actual cape. And there's the visitor centre with endless touristic rip-off opportunities and half a dozen different styles of café/restaurant on offer and elegantly wide automatic glass doors which even allow riff-raff (like us) to enter. And there are dozens of campervan pilgrims all parked up pointing north to where the midnight sun might appear (but it doesn't), and a squad of Harley-Davidson riders who also look upon the place as something of a shrine. Brian and I can't wait to get back to our beds. The sole reason we're up here so late in the evening is because we're sure of a lift back on the 12:15 bus.

But ... 'Bus? What bus?' asks the puzzled receptionist? 'The bus service doesn't start running until next week!' I feel quite prepared to cycle back the way we have come; Brian doesn't – he's straight onto his mobile. That silver tongue which helped us so successfully over those first hurdles of awkward officialdom at Gatwick now makes sure we complete our mission by arranging a lift back to Nordkapp camping and a long sleep. Good old Brian!



Nordkapp – Made it!

Photo Richardson collection

Notes:

A Few Statistics: We cycled altogether 1,704 miles (2,742km) in 22 cycling days (+ 2 unplanned rest days) which gives an average of 77.4 miles per day (71 miles if we include rest days). Average speed (rolling) was 11.68mph. This had stood at 11.81mph before our last, rather testing day.

Hytter: (one hytte, several hytter) – were our preferred form of accommodation. They are to be found on most but not all campgrounds. Hytter always have good heating (vital if you arrive soaked through), basic cooking facilities (or access to a communal kitchen), a fridge and two or more beds or bunks each with a duvet. Had we known about the duvets we might well have tackled this tour without the cosy down sleeping bags we both carried, thus reducing even further the light luggage we carried.

If the two occasions on which campground owners upgraded us to small apartments are included we stayed every night in hytter, except one when the owner had accepted our phone booking before finding that his hytter were full. He arranged a special price for us at a hotel (in Odda). As well as being generally good value, hytter gave us the freedom to cook and eat when we wished and to keep to the early-start strategy which proved so successful for us. Prices varied between 200 and 800 NOK for a hut for one night.



I'm Having so much Fun.

Photo Brian Cunningham

Tunnels: We quickly lost count of how many tunnels we passed through – on just the first two days we went through more than thirty. On the Lofoten Islands there were two undersea tunnels linking islands and the ‘new road’ which joins Narvik with Lofoten has more than ten miles of road tunnel, the longest being 6.4km. Longest of all for us was the 6.8km undersea tunnel from the mainland to Nordkapp Island. This one came on another day of more than 16km of tunnel.

Some tunnels are barred to cyclists (on three occasions when no alternative seemed available we ignored the ‘no cyclists’ signs). It would be time very well spent to gather information about tunnels barred to cyclists if planning a trip like ours. Cyclist websites proved far more informative than the Norwegian Tourist Office.

We carried LED lighting and rapidly developed a system of stopping to turn on/off front and rear lights at each tunnel entrance/exit. The further north we travelled the more likely it became that tunnels would be wide, well lit and smoothly surfaced.