

Travel Report about our bike tour from Tallinn (Estonia) to Klaipeda (Lithuania)
From Aug. 1, 2004 to Aug. 21, 2004.

Reinhard Wilhelm

This is an absolutely wonderful tour! It leads through beautiful, wide, open landscapes, and historically interesting, often well-kept or nicely renovated cities, towns, and villages. It stretched over roughly 1000km. Only minor parts were bike paths; the biggest part was quiet country roads, while a non-negligible part was busy roads with sometimes heavy traffic. We were essentially on our own. However, after a few days we synchronized with another couple from Bavaria, who made the same tour.

Languages

It was an interesting experience to visit three countries with languages without a bit of familiarity. German words have been adopted into the least familiar of the three languages, Estonian, which belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family. Latvian and Lithuanian are the oldest still spoken Indo-European languages. All three are spoken by very small populations. Therefore, I intuitively felt, that it was highly unlikely that two people would meet that could communicate in, say, Latvian, so that I was often surprised to actually see two people, who would effortlessly communicate in Latvian.

People

People were mostly friendly; some would even speak to us. Sometimes when we greeted another lonely bike rider in the middle of nowhere, he or she seemed to start guessing what we were up for. We were once surprised by heavy rain in the middle of the Latvian countryside. When we asked an older woman at a farm whether we could come in for some minutes, she invited us very friendly into her very modest house and offered coffee. We had some nice conversation with her, while her TV set showed some snowy images of the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympics.

The huge differences between rich and poor are clearly visible. We were shown shopping malls at the top western standards, while in the country side small shops dominate the picture. However, it was never a problem to find a shop with the necessary food supply. The western observer develops strange ideas, when the wealth is too apparent and shown in a very demonstrative way. Mafia imaginations pop up easily. Once, these led us astray. We were waiting for the end of the rain at the border station between Latvia and Lithuania, when two black Mercedes cars with dark windows arrived from the Latvian side and were received by a black car on the Lithuanian side. The interpretation was completely clear, Mafia is visiting. But then a blond middle-aged lady went out of the first Mercedes and was greeted with a huge flower bouquet by the Lithuanian side. Immediately, the interpretation changed. It was now; the (very popular) Latvian president is visiting Lithuania. This one was almost right. It was the president of the Latvian parliament, soon to become EU commissioner in Brussels. (Meanwhile, the hearings of this lady in the European parliament seem to indicate that our first impression may also be justified.)

We were astonished by the huge number of children and the young age of their mothers and took this as a sign of optimism. This is very different from what we see in Germany. We met a group of 4 pregnant young women on the Toom hill in Tartu. In order to see this picture in Germany you would have to attend a birth-preparing gymnastics exercise.

(Recently, I found a simpler explanation, at least for Estonia, in a newspaper article; the Estonian government offers a 1-year child leave with full payment.)

While we crossed the three countries, the capitalist in me could not but see many business opportunities, which I will enter where I feel appropriate and promising.

The route

We went on a more or less predetermined route designed by a travel agent in Hamburg, Schnieder Reisen. They had booked the ferries and the hotels and provided a description of the tour. Our daily routes measured between 50km and 100km. This allowed us to arrive in the target towns early enough to do some sightseeing or even make sightseeing stops during the trip. On the other hand, the longest tour, leading from Rakvere to the Peipsi Lake, exhausted us and stressed our bottoms so much that we did not even go to see the lake in the evening. We spent this night at a friendly farmer's family. When we enquired about the next restaurant, the farmer pointed us to the next town, 30km away. He noticed that this was out of the question and went off to get some barbecue sausages. We then had a nice evening with two farmer's couples discussing the average milk productions of Estonian and Westphalian cows and the future of Estonian farmers in the EU.

Weather

We had great luck with the weather. Tallinn had been flooded by heavy rains just before we arrived. The soil was soaking wet in many places so that the water still had not disappeared. We had only 2 days of rain. Other, late-afternoon rain did not bother us, since we had already arrived at our destinations. The wind, however, was not friendly towards us. We started with a long tour, 95km, to the east. Unusual eastern wind took care of blowing away the predicted rain, but also gave us quite something to struggle against. After 3 days, our main direction turned to southwest. This is the preferred direction of the wind, and that was where it turned to. Navigation was easy, just a simple check whether the wind was against us. One day, on the tour to Liepaja, heavy contrary wind, which slowed us down to almost standstill, demoralized us, so that we decided to switch to the bus after half the route. We hadn't seen a bus that day-it was Sunday-and there were no schedules at the bus stations. When we saw a grandmother with her grandson at a bus station we were sure that a bus would come. Fortunately, the bus driver allowed us to board the bus, one bike in the luggage compartment, one inside the passenger compartment.

Mosquitoes

Estonia and Latvia are full of former mansions of German or Swedish landlords. These are in different states, some nicely renovated, some more in shambles. They all had a beautiful pond with a small pavilion, a boat or two and some benches. We experienced them as mosquito-breeding places, for instance in Palmse, the center of the Northern Estonian Lahema national park.

Here comes my first business idea: Import and breed mosquito fish and sell them to the owners of the mansions. This will help them to get rid of the mosquitoes in the summer and will make them much more popular with their guests.

Three countries compared

It is tempting to compare the 3 different countries. Here are some categories, in which I could make a try.

- Foreign languages: Estonia offers the most English-speaking people, Lithuania the most German-Speaking people. Often people don't speak either.
- Road signs: Estonia has quite good signs on the roads. It is not easy to get lost. This is easier in Latvia or Lithuania. Often, one arrives at crossroads with no signs. We had quite good maps in Latvia, 1: 200 000, while we only had 1: 400 000 for Estonia and a road atlas, 1: 500 000 for Lithuania.
- Roads: The main roads are mostly in good to fair conditions. Secondary roads are mostly sand or gravel. The beautiful Gauja National Park in Latvia has only dirt roads. This is tough, even for Mountain bikers.
- Drivers: All 3 countries have crazy drivers, with a strong lead of Latvia.
- Hotels: The hotels we stayed in were mostly quite nice, well-renovated, and with friendly personnel. One notable exception is mentioned below.
- Girls: All 3 countries have gorgeous girls, with a slight advantage for Latvia. One sees potential models all over the place.

Traffic

Traffic is already heavy on the main roads. The Baltics have almost completely emptied the German used-car market during the last years. Most of the heroes of the road seem to have recently changed from Sowjet tanks or ox cars to Mercedes, BMW, and Audi. They still enjoy driving as an adventure including the uncertain outcome, "Will I be able to pass this row of cars, even with these bike tourists coming the other way?" One particularly pleasant situation occurred at a long road construction site. One lane was switched between directions. Of course, as bikers you are far behind the cars. The fellow at the other end did not want to wait for us, so he let the waiting oncoming traffic start. Trucks, buses came our way on this one lane. Very enjoyable!

Streets in the cities and towns and the curbs are often in lousy condition, big holes, very uneven pavements or cobble stones. Here is my theory based on long -time observation and reflections.

These holes were relicts of the former Sowjet regime, a system known to us as totalitarian. It could not bear to see people walking upright. Therefore, they instrumentalised the holes in the ground to force people to walk with their eyes facing the ground demonstrating utmost humbleness.

National Parks

We touched two national parks, Lahema National Park at the northern shore of Estonia and Gauja National Park in Latvia. Lahema offers a lot in terms of untouched nature. We had one day to visit places. However, as bikers you are not so mobile to see everything worth seeing. We went to Käsnu peninsula. The fishermen village Käsnu impresses by beautifully restored houses.

We crossed Gauja National Park starting at the beautiful and historically interesting town Cesis with its huge ruins of a German Order fortification. 40km of dirt road were ahead of us. Partly the ground was firm but bumpy; partly it was gravel with little possibility to control your bike. This was particularly unpleasant for Margret, who had broken her elbow last year at an accident on similar ground. The landscape was gorgeous, lightly hilly with beautiful rivers and lakes. In Ligatne, one crosses a river on a small ferry

running along a steel cable moved by the water.

Kurische Nehrung

This is a roughly 70km long and 1-2km wide strip stretching from Kaliningrad (Königsberg) to Klaipeda (Memel). Both cities were formerly part of Ostpreussen. Now, Kaliningrad is Russian, and Klaipeda is Lithuanian. The Nehrung---I don't know what an English word would be---separates the Haff, a sweet water area, from the Baltic Sea. The Haff is open at Klaipeda, where one crosses it by a ferry. The Nehrung is a beautiful landscape. I often had the feeling to be in an artificial landscape, e.g. on the stage of a Tschekov play. This is probably connected to the very young age of the Nehrung. It was created only 7000 years ago, when the wind filled up the space between a strip of islands left there by the retreating ice age glaciers. The center of the Nehrung is a ridge formed by sand dunes. Most of it is already populated by fir trees and bushes. However, one part is still a wandering dune, an impressive small Sahara.

Nida (Nidden) is a beautiful village on the Nehrung. Formerly a fishermen village it had been discovered by German artists in the twenties. Expressionist painters of the Brücke had settled there because the area seemed to offer some magic light. Thomas Mann built a summer house there in 1930 when he was living in München. Imagine, traveling to this summer house meant two days of train ride! The house is overlooking the Haff. Nicely renovated it has become a target for pilgrimages of German teachers. The fishermen houses mostly painted in a typical combination of dark blue and red-brown and all surrounded by colorful gardens are a pleasure to the eyes.

Hotels

At the end of this day, we arrived in the town Sigulda, beautifully located on the steep banks of the Gauja River. We were quite exhausted. A 13% ascent awaited us to reach the city and this was not all. When we enquired about our hotel, we were told that it was 2km outside the city. One of these 2km turned out to be dirt road again. We were greeted by the most beautiful receptionist in all of Latvia, but when she told us that the hotel had no restaurant, I had to tell her that it was a very bad idea to send us to this otherwise nice hotel.

Hotel Kursa in Kuldiga still adhered to the old Sowjet standard. The furniture were original Sowjet style, the bath was tiny, dark. The hallway had a strong smell of urine. The service mentality was at the height of the socialist times. Breakfast was offered starting at 9 o'clock. I asked whether we could get breakfast earlier because we had a 95km trip that day. Some seemingly former member of the Latvian national team in free-style wrestling built up in front of me, "What? Breakfast before 9? No way!"

Business idea 2: Import decent toilet seats. All over the three countries you find these light plastic seats, which stick to your bottom when you get up.

Asbestos

One observation really shocked me; 95% of the houses in the Baltic states are covered by cement-asbestos shingles. This is a major threat to the health of the people and a big challenge to the people and the administration.

Business idea 3: Import German technology for disposing of asbestos. We have

meanwhile paid our dues for sins of the past and should have learned how to get rid of this dangerous stuff.

At times, we reflected about, whether this challenging tour was appropriate for our age. We had not planned to take it, but registered for an accompanied tour with the same travel agent. This means that the luggage is transported from hotel to hotel and that you are also transported along less interesting parts of the tour. We met several accompanied groups. They made roughly 260km in 2 weeks. The tour we had booked did not materialize, since there were not enough bookings. So, the travel agent proposed an individual tour of 22 days as an alternative.

Well to answer the starting question, we were proud that we made the whole tour, but We are not so keen on doing a similar one again.