

Will Fraize's Diary

Bike Tour through the Baltic Countries, 2004:

6/22:

- * We arrive at Riga on time and OK, but two bikes are delayed (no room on the KLM City-hopper flight)
- * We enjoy a splendid reception at Ambassador Carlson's residence and are entertained by a very talented troupe of four Latvian Folk singers/instrumentalists (led by a Bronx native, now a confirmed Latvian)
- * Many of us are wearing the Janee (sp?) wreathes associated with the annual Beginning of Summer festival
- * Two bikes (Ed's & mine) arrive at Riga airport 11:30pm. The hotel calls us (and awakens us) to tell us this (Grrr!!)

6/23:

- * Five of us, Brian, Jon, Leslie, Jerry, and I, enjoy a 5.5 mi run through Riga, led by Brian, with running commentary throughout!
- * Marcia Carlson leads us on a very informative and entertaining walking tour of Riga
- * We all have lunch in an outdoor cafe
- * Our bikes are delivered. Ed and I assemble them.
- * All hands enjoy dinner at a great Italian restaurant
- * Joe and I go off, having given up waiting for the others, on a futile search for tram 11 to Meza Park. We finally give up and go to bed; those who do get there say it was hardly worth the effort.

6/24:

- * Joe, Marge, Bernadette, Ed, and I go by train to Segulda w/ bikes! (bikes ride for 0.21 Lats ea)
- * We ride for a total of 55km through the Gauja National Park on a variety of surfaces, including soft sand for several kms.
- * We arrive back at Segulda just as the skies open; we enjoy a beer (or equivalent) under a canopy while awaiting our train
- * The entire group, with Brian and Marcia, have an authentic Latvia dinner at Lido Park. After dinner, we present Brian and Marcia our thank-you gift: a Connie Slack painting.

6/25:

- * Joe delivers the empty bike boxes to Carlsons'
- * We pick up our van (9-pass., 5-spd. Diesel Toyota)
- * We are finally ready to leave for Vilnius at 12:30pm
- * At least two of the vans stop at Pils Runsdale for lunch & palace tour
- * Arrive Vilnius at 7:30 pm
- * Unloading takes place at two hotels; the three single men join the Stowers in staying at the Apia Guest House in old town Vilnius—a newly and very stylishly remodeled hotel within walking distance of everything
- * We find a dinner restaurant at 11pm!

6/26:

- * It's a rainy day (all day)!
- * Marcia, Mike, and I tour Old Town on foot
- * I find an unpublicized archeological dig of ruins that the Information Center says are of an ancient Jewish community
- * We look for but fail to find the rest of the group who had taken a bus tour of the city and were to end the tour at Cathedral Sq. We console ourselves with a very nice lunch and soup, etc. on a street (Pilies Gatve) off Cathedral Sq.
- * As we approach our restaurant, Joe with his bike and in full biking costume catches the eye of a wedding photographer who asks to borrow Joe's bike as a prop for one of a comic series of photos of the married couple, still in their wedding garb. Unfortunately, we don't catch our own photo of the event.
- * After lunch, we return to the Square where we meet several of the bus tour crowd. Most of us then walk to the KGB Museum—a very interesting yet chilling experience to view the actual prison cells and read of the means of torturing and murdering the prisoners
- * All 14 of us meet for dinner at Chili Kaimas.

6/27:

- * It's a cloudy day at the start.
- * We depart in a loaded van at 10:00am
- * All cell phones (6) have been made operational and distributed
- * We stop in Kaunas for a walking tour of the city: We visit the ceramics museum, watch a Cathedral procession, and hear the choir singing Kum By-Ya
- * Our van is broken into in broad daylight on the city street outside the Art Museum (where we are all expected to meet by 2PM). Florence files a police report and we make a temporary, plastic bag patch for the broken passenger side window. The plastic bag doesn't survive but a short portion of our trip to Klaipeda, so we travel with an open window, even though we encounter heavy showers enroute
- * We arrive at a wonderful, loft-oriented hotel by 6:30PM
- * We unpack and head for dinner at a nearby cozy restaurant w/ a stunningly attractive Russian waitress (I could have fallen in love again!)

6/28:

- * We enjoy a full Lithuanian breakfast served in the hotel lounge.
- * All the bikers leave for the peninsula at 9:50AM
- * The ride thru Klaipeda's busy streets strikes this rider as quite dangerous, but we survive it!
- * We arrive at the ferry that we ride to the island park
- * The cloudy, showery morning gives way to mostly sunny day
- * We enjoy looking at the Statuary along the shore park in J-town where we stop for lunch
- * The bike paths for the ride to Nida are wonderful; even the roads are good because they are so lightly traveled.
- * From Nida, we decide to continue south another 4-5km to view the Russian border. Joe (and later, Florence) asks the border guard if he can touch Russian soil and is politely refused.
- * Mike (leaving early & alone), Joe, & I start for home on bikes.

- * Florence picks us up en-route
- * Total biking distance for the day: 90km
- * We arrive at the hotel weary but fulfilled, too tired to search for another restaurant. So, we make a repeat visit to the same nearby restaurant (where we learn that the owner's son is going to Boston to work as a mover, to make \$s)

9/29:

- * Today is consumed with a long ride thru 3 countries to Tartu (580km, 11hrs.)
- * We stop at the Hill of Crosses on our way.
- * The weather clears as we enter Estonia
- * We, again, have a late dinner, this time at the Oscar Wilde Tavern
- * We find rather primitive showers in our room—the bathroom is an integral part of the shower stall.
- * I start drinking the tap water with no ill effects (yet!)

6/30:

- * The rain returns!
- * With bikes strapped to our van, we drive to the highest pt. in Estonia, Suur Munamagi, about 15 km S of Voru, and climb the 6-story observation tower; the viewing is limited by clouds and mist.
- * Tom, Joe & I take off on bikes for Rouge, traveling the first 9km on (hard) dirt road. The weather begins to clear as we start (1:00PM)
- * We ride through beautiful rural farmland, with hardly any traffic
- * We find no place to stop for a lunch break until Palva at about 4:30 at the Hotel Paes
- * While "tailgating" Joe, I fall when Joe stops short. Tom tumbles (gracefully) into me, and I end up with a skinned left knee (again!)
- * We arrive in Tortu at 8:30 after a ride of 110km
- * Dinner again at the Oscar Wilde tavern where the crowd exults as Portugal defeats The Netherlands 2 to 1 (why Portugal?)
- * It's late again to bed

7/1:

- * Internet access is available. I use my time to fix the Reston Runners Website
- * We have an uneventful drive to Parnu and the Ammende Hotel - a very posh place with an Ex-Calibre convertible in the front drive and staff in formal wear!
- * Weather: cloudy & showery at the start, but clearing by the time we reach Parnu
- * Our van strikes a concrete lamp post while making a 3-pt. turn to get into the hotel lot. No damage to bikes! The rear rack takes (and survives) the hit.
- * 7 bikers (all but Joe & Tom who went off an hour earlier) head out for a 14.4K before-dinner tour of Parnu. We see beaches (men, women, mixed, & nude), the downtown (pedestrian street), the two ugly bridge crossings (I fell on the first bridge when a pedestrian forces me to hug the bridge railing)
- * We enjoy complimentary champagne and a great guitar & saxophone jazz concert (No CD available yet, but with Marcia's help, I "steal" one of the now-obsolete posters for the event as a souvenir)
- * A sumptuous dinner in the hotel followed

7/2:

- * Another great day.
- * Breakfast is sumptuous, matching last night's formal dinner presentation. I order pancakes - deliciously eggy!
- * We drive to Saaremaa Island, making our noon ferry reservation with 15 mins. to spare
- * The weather turns cold and rainy as we approach the island. Plans to bike from near the ferry exit to our hotel (about 70km) look dubious.
- * We try to connect with Joe & Tom in the other van but fail to find them and assume that the rain discouraged them, too. It turns out that they did ride (and get soaked).
- * The Jurna farm is a great place - a thatched roof lodge.
- * BJ backs his VW van into an apple tree beside the driveway, smashing the rear window and damaging the tailgate. He turns the van into the local Hertz office and picks up a sedan.
- * We take a walk thru Kuressaare, have a late lunch, tour the castle (a remarkable structure, with countless rooms, narrow stairways, 8-foot thick walls, a music performance hall, a museum, and art galleries—well worth the visit), and have another light meal.
- * After we return to the Juran farm, many of us gather in the women's suite for wine & cheese snacks. I have one glass of red wine before heading off to bed.

7/3:

- * On a day that's perfect for riding, three of us (Marge, Ed, & I) bike 78K together, including 10K on unpaved roads and enjoy views of the unspoiled Baltic Sea coast
- * Ed & I travel another 32K so we can view the meteor crater
- * A strong head-wind slows our return from the crater and we arrive barely in time for dinner. Total distance for the day: 110K
- * Dinner, served family-style, consists of fish soup, salads, rabbit, fresh strawberries, wine, & coffee. Delicious!
- * We watch the TV broadcast of the Estonian Music Festival, fascinated by the high quality of the singing and the strong character reflected in their faces.

7/4:

- * Up at 5AM to prepare van & bikes for an early departure. We leave at 8:45 and are the 3rd last vehicle to make the 10AM ferry
- * We again meet our full-bearded Finnish tourist, Jorma Haapamäki whom we encountered and photographed in Kuressaare the day before, while waiting to board the ferry. We exchange e-mail addresses..
- * Our hotel in Tallin is hard to find.
- * We store our bikes & bags in a spare room and take the #3 tram, plus a 1K walk thru a park, to the Estonian Music Festival. I get in for the pensioner's rate of 50EEK (\$3.75)
- * Rain showers threaten to disrupt the concert, but we get only a brief sprinkle
- * The Music Festival is an awesome experience. I estimate 10k - 12k singers on stage at the finale. Next day reports say singers numbered 26k, with 325k in the audience.
- * Taxi back to the hotel where we find most of the others drinking & singing God Bless America
- * We eat in the Hunter's restaurant across the alley - rude waiters and mediocre food

7/05:

- * The day is a mostly-sunny beauty
- * After breakfast, we load bikes on the van and drive east to the Laemaa National Park where Florence & Bernadette, feeling low with a bad cold, drop us off at Podisoo, promising to return to the same spot between 4:00 & 4:30 for pickup.
- * Marge, Ed, & I spend the next 6 hrs doing 55K thru the park on a mix of paved & unpaved roads, many bordering the Baltic
- * For dinner, 8 of us go to the town center platz and find a place w/ outdoor seating. The others find us, and all but Bernadette who is still laid low by her heavy cold, enjoy a final dinner together.
- * Ed & I go food shopping on our way to the hotel for in-car feeding tomorrow on our drive back to Riga
- * A great day!

7/06:

- * Up at 5AM to pack and load the van so we can leave at about 8AM on a mostly sunny day. Distance to Riga: 304K
- * We depart at 8:10AM
- * Lots of road construction slows our travel in Estonia
- * At a pit-stop, Marge discovers her wallet is missing
- * We finally find our hotel - a nice Best Western with FACECLOTHES in the bathrooms! - arriving about 2:15
- * The hotel gives us access to their garage space - a perfect location for storing, disassembling, & packing our 3 bikes
- * Florence, Mike & I drive back to Riga, in the rain, to retrieve our bike boxes from the Carlsons' basement
- * We disassemble and pack 3 bikes w/o incident. Bikes packed by 6:30; it's a good thing we left Tallinn early!
- * The hotel receptionist recommends a restaurant featuring Latvian dishes about 2K away which all agree to in the interest of an early bedtime. The food was some of the best of the entire trip!
- * In bed by 11:00 after agreeing to meet with bags packed at 5:00AM

7/7:

- * By 5AM, Ed has corralled the hotel van driver and gotten all 3 bikes in his van.
- * We arrive at the airport, 5 min. away, before 5:30 and check in without any problem
- * The weather is great, allowing spectacular viewing of Amsterdam as we land
- * Schipol Airport offers a small art museum and gift shop that we enjoy during our 3-hour lay-over
- * Our flight to Dulles is uneventful. We land on time (2:20PM), just before a major thunderstorm shuts down the landing process
- * Our bikes appear to have arrived intact (judging from the condition of the boxes)