

## Bulls in the Baltic: the “Detour” Tour June 2013

The invite to Latvia to Ilze's second cousin's wedding came after we had planned the 10-day Germany Trip and would mean heading off for Latvia very soon after arriving back in England on the bike. Ilze came up with the idea. “We are already in Germany. Why don't we take the bike to Latvia?” It would also mean that we could return via Sweden. In our frequent trips to Latvia over recent years we have often seen the daily Stockholm ferry moored in Riga. A return via Sweden and Denmark seemed a pleasant alternative to Lithuania and Poland. We would stay in the log cabin in Latvia for nearly two weeks so it would extend the overall trip to 36 days. I calculated it would effectively double the distance travelled.

### Friday 24<sup>th</sup> May



Kunz's lounge - not his garage!

Leaving the “After Germany Meeting Trip” group at the Nurburgring was quite sad after ten days of good company. We headed for Rheindahlen near Monchengladbach where we had a break from the bike for a couple of nights staying with our friends Peter and Thea. We ate a lot of spargel (white asparagus) and tucked into Peter's extensive wine cellar. A trip to Peter's brother's immaculate garage was an inspiration. This pristine shrine contained a selection of classic Mercedes. As a retired college motor vehicle lecturer Kunz had the time and skills to restore his vehicles. The classic petrol pump in his lounge was a clue to his love of old cars!



### Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> May

Oberhaverbeck is in the national park of Luneberg Heath not far south of Hamburg, so we knew we would have a long autobahn drive on the Sunday. We didn't expect so much rain however. After the days of rain in southern Germany this turned out to be the wet one! The Gasthaus was remote but luckily we were able to get some sustenance on the Sunday afternoon after we dried out. Pork schnitzel as it turned out...



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



By passing Hamburg we headed for Lubeck. Autobahns here all seem to be derestricted. HGVs are limited to the inside lane so none of the 0.5mph overtaking we see in UK. We stayed at 75-80mph in the middle lane while BMWs, Mercedes and Audi cruised sedately past at 120+mph in the outside lane. Any overtaking required a determined study of the offside rear-view mirror...

Lubeck was a pleasant stop-off with interesting gates and buildings. By now yesterday's rain had disappeared and we had a hot sunny day as we

headed for Travemunde and the tea-time ferry to Latvia.

The dock was very commercial and we had to report to the dock offices to locate the good ship “Urd” and obtain our tickets. The ferry was a very commercial affair and took some finding in the big docks. We

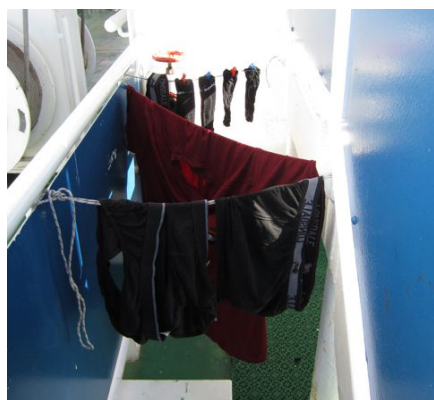


The good ship Urd

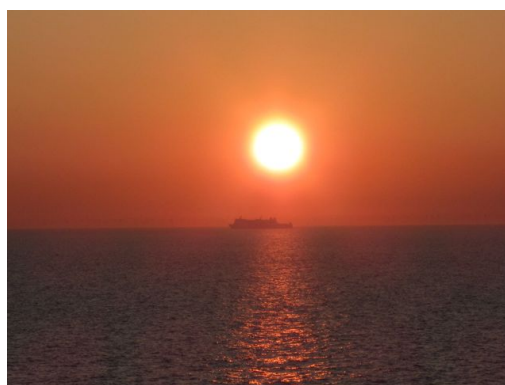
were the only bike amidst about 12 cars, one caravan and lots of trucks.

### **Tuesday 28 May**

Now in Latvia in the western port of Liepāja. The ferry was smaller than normal with everything in one small area. The cabin was good with a huge window over the Baltic. It was run by Latvians and had a very friendly, rustic feel. All meals were included in the price of £230 and tea and coffee was on tap at all times. With Latvian beer in the bar at €1.80 a pint a good evening was had by all. It left Germany at 6pm on Mon night and arrived in Latvia at 10.30pm Latvia time tonight. We caught up with two week's sleep in the 27 hours.



**Smalls drying on deck!**



**Midnight sunset over the Baltic**

In Liepāja we were first off the ferry in what was dusk and drove straight into Latvia with no passport checks and no idea how to get out of the docks. We headed into town negotiating tram tracks and cobbled streets and found our super hotel with a safe car park. Tomorrow I must address the dead headlight bulb and then try to find a new one to replace the spare. Then we will head off via Riga to Ilze's cousin's town of Sigulda for a night. Simple speed limits: 90kph on roads; 100 on the rare dual carriageways. Motorways? There are none.

### **Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> May**

The drive across Latvia included some horrible roads which deteriorated as we neared the east of the country. What I thought were remote speed cameras turned out to be weather stations! We negotiated the traffic of Riga without much difficulty but I do know my way around. I found that dealing with tram tracks on cobbled roads requires a new set of skills... I replaced the bulb with the spare I carried. It needed the skills of a contortionist and a gynaecologist to extract the old bulb and insert the new. Managed to find two more spares in a B&Q-alike shop for £3 each. Ilze's cousins and their daughter gave us a warm welcome in Sigulda and were amused to see the bike. Sigulda is 30 miles from Riga and is a classy, up-market town which is a commuter bolt-hole for Riga as well as being a major tourist centre.



### **Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> May**

A hot and sweaty day but with patchy thunder showers. They always seem to hit you before you have a chance to put on the waterproof clothing. A few miles past Sigulda and it starts to become seriously rural. Even the main highway to Russia has very little traffic. The countryside is fairly flat and heavily forested with smallholdings and fields in between. Many people get around using the good bus services,



by walking and by hitch-hiking. We turned off the main road after 70km onto the Gulbene road. This is even quieter with denser forest. We arrive at the cabin which has been empty for a year to find a wood ant nest in the bedroom. Ilze's cousin Ojars helped out with some toxic Russian ant spray and a big shovel. We would spend the next 13 days dispatching the odd lost wood ant that came through the gaps in the wall looking for its home! We filled the 100 litre water boiler and it fell off the wall smashing the water pump. Luckily neither of us was underneath. A product of shoddy Latvian workmanship. However we knew a reliable plumber who came around the next day and fixed it cheaply.



**Growing old disgracefully in a log cabin**

The bike is now in Ilze's cousin's garage protected from the elements, which happen to be very hot sun with very occasional thunderstorms. Looking forward to next Tuesday when we pack up and continue shining! Hope Sweden has better roads...

### **Monday 10 June**

After a two day residential Latvian wedding and being woken on Sunday morning with a beer by Ilze's cousin, we are getting ready to set off tomorrow. The bike is clean and I have brought into town for a ride only to be met by the first rain for a week!

There was a bike rally in a nearby town this weekend with more than a hundred bikes on the roads, mostly in bike club groups, some of which looked pretty scary! I had to go to the wedding so didn't go to see what was happening. Pity.



**Ilze's wedding dress carried in the pannier for 2000 miles!**



**Setting off**

trip and, at the age of 20, a bit too young to try to recruit. We took him for a short ride to show him some of the local tourist sites. Good to ride in a group for a while, albeit with just two bikes.

### **Tuesday 11 June**

Set off from the wild east of Latvia along bumpy, potholed roads to relative civilisation back to Sigulda where we will stay tonight to see some more of Ilze's cousins.

Met up with Johannes from Leipzig on a 20 year old Kawa EN twin fully laden with camping gear. He is touring the Baltic on his own. His first bike



**Ilze and Johannes**

### **Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> June**

We decided to have a night in Riga to chill out after what turned out to be a busy DIY week in the log cabin. We booked into the "Radi un Draugi" (Relatives and Friends) hotel in the old town as they have secure parking at the back. After a visit to see cousin Elize's trendy fashion shop we had a fine meal and the best of Latvian beer al fresco on one of the squares. The weather has been in the 30s now for two weeks. No problems with the jet stream up here. The ferry to



**In the fashion shop**

Stockholm leaves at 17:30 tomorrow. The port is only half a mile away on the River Daugava.

### Friday 14 June

Having breakfast on the Riga-Stockholm ferry as we pass hundreds of islands in the archipelago near Stockholm. Fascinating and we pass so close to the islands. About 15 Latvian members of "Brothers of the Wind" m/c club arrived noisily on their Harleys at the port. They appear to be growing old more disgracefully than the rather demure British couple on a blue BMW and wearing sensible reflective safety vests! The ferry seems to specialise in getting people

as drunk as possible. Typically a number of Latvians are enjoying their morning beers. I have heard that all drivers are breath-tested as they leave the ferry. It should be interesting. They must be accustomed to hordes of drunken Latvians and Lithuanians steaming off the boat. The roads we can see from the ferry look a bit more bike friendly than we have been used to over the last two weeks in Latvia. Bliss!



### Saturday 15 June near Nörrköping

Nice drive through Stockholm which was very pleasant and then onto Swedish motorway where everyone drives at 110kph in a very well-behaved and relaxing manner. Scenery pleasant but not startling. We were twenty minutes from our B&B when we saw the ever-darkening clouds and decided to go for it rather than put on the waterproofs. Big mistake. We managed to get to the small town before the torrents came mdown as we were turning in a car park. It was as if the local population emptied buckets over our heads. Just three minutes and we were drenched and ditched the bike for cover under a shop front. Meanwhile the main road flooded. So it doesn't happen just to Barry and John!



The B&B is well located next to an inlet but with a small room which is now like a tropical rainforest as the soaked gear sort of dries out. Clothing is hanging off everything possible - TV, door handles etc.

Pleasant but costly meal last night with my first experience of Swedish beer. A slow bottle was enjoyed at £6 a throw so no danger of a thick head this morning. A bit different from the £1 a pint in Latvia! Today the sun is out.

### Sunday 16 June

Sleep can be elusive up at these latitudes if the curtains are not thick enough. There doesn't seem to be a lot of night and windows facing northeast are particularly bad. Yesterday we had a sunny day's travel which made a change, although there was a strong wind blowing up from the UK direction. Off the motorway the roads were pleasant and empty but with what seemed a very low 80kph speed limit which was hard to stick to. Plenty of coniferous trees as you might expect.

At last night's B&B we bumped into a group of 4 Ulysses-qualifiers from Finland on their way back up North. Two junior members on V Strom 1000 and VFR and two "senior" and very short members on a RT1200 with a fancy low seat and the other on a R1200R with proper BMW panniers like the RT. It was a nice bike and seemed a better bet for a short person than a GS. We had a chat over breakfast and had a



photo shoot. They were taking photos of their meals to show their wives that they were eating healthily! The long arm of the Finnish law...

We are staying at the IKEA Hotell in Ålmhult which turns out to be the centre of the IKEA empire. The hotel is actually very good and next door is Willy's, a big supermarket. I was surprised to see beer on sale at Willy's as I thought Sweden had liquor shops like the states. It was only after a careful look



at the labels that I realised that all the beer was less than 3.5%, even big names like San Miguel, Staropramen etc. After the strong beer in Latvia this turned out to be quite pleasant as the chances of a thick head were far less.

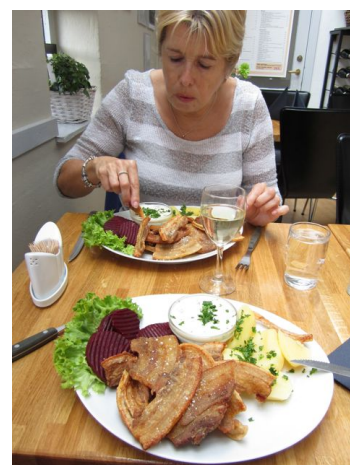


Today we will have an early start (not hard up here) and drive to Malmo and then over the Orisund Bridge to Copenhagen and then down to south Zealand. Not many hills and twisty roads expected. Sunny at the moment but it looks as if wet UK weather will be visiting us later. Back to the usual then.

### Update: Sunday afternoon

An interesting drive over the big bridge was spoiled by an intensely strong wind. It was hard to steer let alone enjoy the view. At £21 it was not a patch on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in Virginia. Stopped off briefly in Copenhagen until the heavens opened. Again. Now we have stopped for the day the sun has come out. Hope UK weather is better. Somehow I suspect it is not.

We found a restaurant open at 5pm on a Sunday. The guy recommended the "typical Danish Sunday lunch", predictably a pork-based dish. Potatoes, beetroot, cream parsley sauce and a mass of what turned out to be deep-fried belly pork slices cooked to the consistency of pork scratchings. A glance around the room revealed that this was indeed a popular Sunday dish! Bring on the Rennies.



### Monday 17 June Dötlingen

The journey continues. We left our B&B in the basement of a wonderful manor house in South Zealand after a posh breakfast. Surprisingly the weather was good as we arrived at the Rodby - Puttgarden ("I beg your pardon, I never promised you a ..." etc.) ferry. This is a slick affair. Motorway leads to a tollbooth-type place to pay - no getting off the bike, then straight onto the ferry. They run every 30 minutes to Germany. It takes 45 minutes and there is time for the Danes to extract money from passengers with a huge duty free shop and 3 cafes. Everybody wants to off-load Kroner and Krona and whatever the Norwegians use. My spare Kroner bought a coffee, a sandwich and a pen. No stickers unfortunately although I am pleased with the Moose sticker I picked up earlier. The triangular Moose warning signs in Sweden make you think a bit more than the deer warning signs in UK although the outcome would probably be the same if you hit either at 60mph on a bike.

Comforting to be back in Germany. Basically it was all busy autobahn via Hamburg to south of Bremen. We kept at 120kph which is about 73mph and, again, had to take care when overtaking with cars coming down the outside lane at well over 110 mph. Quite tiring. Luckily, as Peter Read pointed out on our way down, the discipline of the truck drivers is superb. They do as they are told and stay in.

Met two different bikers, an Italian on the ferry on a BMW 800ST and a Belgian at a service station on a Kawasaki Versys 1000. Both had been to Nordcapp but the weather had been dire apparently. Like us they had struggled with strong winds over the past two days.

Temperatures rose to 27C which made for a sticky afternoon. The hotel is a picture-postcard place in a lovely village. Excellent restaurant and cosy bar BUT... both closed on Mondays! Apparently there is another place open in the village but a major disappointment. No "Bier im Leder" as Uwe & Silke would say!

Last day abroad tomorrow for the Bülles as we head through the Netherlands to Hook of Holland and the overnight ferry back home.



**Two bald statues**

## **Tuesday 18 June**

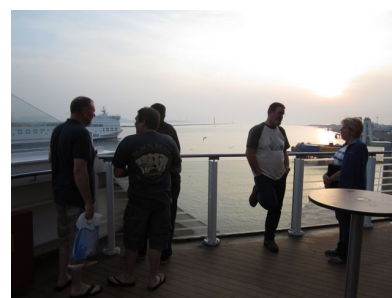
A blast across the fine motorways in Holland which seem to be wide, flat and blessed with courteous drivers. Decided to visit The Hague, which is a bit like one of those cities of the future with trams in mid-air and lots of glass buildings. Then drifted into Chinatown which was like New York. Fascinating place. Then decided to head out of town to a small town on the coast called Monster and found a quiet park with lakes and a comfy cafe. Spent a few hours here and then headed for Hook of Holland, which was basking in the sun and was like a Mediterranean resort. The recommended Italian restaurant was closed on Tuesdays so had a picnic instead.



**A hot day in Monster**



Pulled up early on the ferry queue to find 3 bikers from Harwich who had just been to the Black Forest and back in a week and a lone Pan European rider who had visited Kaliningrad (cut-off bit of Russia) and had plenty of tales to tell. We all met for a beer on deck as we sailed into a warm and lovely sunset. A nice end to our trip.



## **Wednesday 19 June**

Early start from Harwich and straight into a heavy no-time-for-waterproofs shower. Made it to the top of the M11 for a Tesco brekky. Luxury! Then back to God's own market town of Bingham for 11am. Glad to change into another set of clothes after a month.

On our trip we drove 3411 miles and used 298 litres of petrol averaging 52 mpg (well done RT1200!). Not bad for a heavy bike with 2 humans and luggage. Well done to Ilze for being a non-complaining pillion passenger on what was her second big bike trip!

After we returned I couldn't resist taking the empty bike out along our local twisties and down the dual carriageway (at speed) to see what it felt like empty. It was like having a sports bike! Oil level the same as when we left. Perhaps I will keep it after all!

A fine trip and it was great to meet so many pleasant bikers in a variety of countries in the 36 days.



**Home after 36 days**