

## **ZEEBRUGGE TO KAISERSLAUTERN CYCLE TOUR 2011**

### **Ride Report**

#### **FRIDAY 15 JULY**

Sail Hull to Zeebrugge

My wife Janet and I took the bikes and luggage by car to Hull and Frank made his own way there by train. We met outside the rail station at 2.30pm and set up the bikes and fitted the panniers/saddlebags. Janet took a commemorative photo and then having said our farewells Frank and I set off on the short ride across Hull to the docks. Having checked in and received our boarding passes we left the bikes and walked back to the lounge area to kill time.

We boarded our ship, the Pride of Bruges, at 4.45pm and settled into our very small cabin – but didn't stay in there longer than necessary. The evening meal was substantial and enjoyable although this time we hadn't the 100 miles cycle ride from Bury to recuperate from. The cabin was hot and cramped but we had little trouble sleeping.

#### **SATURDAY 16 JULY**

**Zeebrugge to Ninove 106.8km (66.34 miles)**

After a hearty breakfast we made our way down to the bikes for disembarkation. Once all the cars were away we (and one other cyclist) were allowed to ride off the ferry and before we knew it we were through the docks area and Zeebrugge itself and away. After a short ride down the cycle path alongside the main Bruges road it wasn't long before we made a left turn to enter the village of Lissewege. Here we had our first experience of Flemish cobbled streets in this pretty village. Light drizzle started but thankfully soon stopped. We halted at a bar in the small village square to check and confirm our directions to the canal side path and with the help of one of the locals soon found this quiet tarmac road heading towards Dudzele.

From here it was on to more cycle paths as we followed a couple of local cycle tourists through the village centre before joining the road to Damme. Here our enthusiasm took over as we increased our speed with Frank going ahead. Back together we passed through Sijsele, Maldegem and Eeklo before leaving the main road at Waarschoote to get to Sleidinge and Evergem before reaching the outskirts of Gent. Here the rain started and we had to don our rain jackets.

In view of the weather we decided on taking the direct route to Aalst instead of the planned route around the outskirts of Gent, but to even find this we had to ask directions on two occasions – despite my advance map planning exercise. We knew for sure that all was well when we arrived at Gentbrugge and the road, served by a good cycle path, was now pretty well straight all the way to Aalst - and the rain had eased off.

The last leg of the day's ride was from Aalst to Ninove. Alas we missed the Ninove sign and continued needlessly into the centre of Aalst with the rain becoming heavy and persistent again. Having doubled back the short distance, we found the road to Ninove was a dual carriageway but thankfully a cycle path was provided which kept us well away from traffic spray.

On arrival in Ninove the rain ceased and without much difficulty we found our way to our booked overnight hotel – the Hotel de Croone. Once the bikes were stored in a locked corridor in the hotel it was off for a welcome shower and down to the restaurant and bar to sample the delights on offer there. We asked for a local beer and were served with a very nice brew called Witkap. A few of these went down well with the wonderful steak meal we were served.

## **SUNDAY 17 JULY**

### **Ninove to Huy 116.6km (72.48 miles)**

After overnight rain the morning was bright and clear so after breakfast we loaded the bikes and off we went heading south out of Ninove through Meerbeke, where the annual Tour of Flanders cycle race finishes. It was pleasant cycling down through villages to the first main town – Halle – reached after a long descent on a cycle path - and on to Nivelles.

Just before arriving at Nivelles Frank hit a raised kerb on one of the cycle paths and had a rear puncture. His rim was slightly damaged too but it was soon put right. We stopped at a supermarket in the main cobbled square of Nivelles. As we refreshed ourselves we admired the wonderful large church (which I later discovered to be the Collegiate Church of St Gertrude). After sheltering from a heavy shower outside the supermarket we carried on and soon after we were on terrain close to where the Battle of Waterloo was fought in 1815 – the crossroads of Les Quatre Bras being famous in this respect.

On through more villages and we approached the large town of Namur which is located on the river Meuse. We didn't have too much trouble getting through this town once a sign for Andenne was spotted. I could see a bridge ahead which I knew we had to cross. Once on the other side of the river we pulled over for a break and a drink. We could only consume what little we carried as all shops were shut. Frank thought he had seen an open bakery shop but after a long walk back he found it was closed. We were now on the road which runs alongside the river Meuse so was thankfully lacking in any significant hills. Just before Andenne we halted at a garage to buy a couple of welcome Cokes and Snickers bars which did the job. As we stood there we were pleased that a DEFENSE D'URINER! sign had been obeyed.

We pressed on towards Huy following the river all the way until eventually arriving at our hotel, the Hotel du Fort, after a mainly rain free day. In fact by this point in the afternoon it was quite warm and we enjoyed a Jupiter beer each before going up to our room and the shower. There was no restaurant at the hotel so we ate next door at a popular (judging by the number of patrons) Italian restaurant called San Marino. My Quattro Stagioni pizza went down very well.

## **MONDAY 18 JULY**

### **Huy to St Vith 95.39km (59.27 miles)**

After a very poor breakfast at the hotel (sliced white and brown bread with jam and butter and no yogurts or fruit) we set off. We knew that there would be a hill to climb first thing as we were moving away from the river but we only knew the full severity of it once we had reached the top. It seemed to go on forever. Huy is the location of the finish of the Fleche Wallonne cycle race and it ends at the top of the Mur de Huy (Wall of Huy). Ours was not that climb but there is certainly no shortage of hills in Huy.

Well away from the river by now we continued along the pretty N66 on a roller coaster route through Stree, Tinlot, Seny, Warzee and Ouffet before hitting the climb of the Cote du Werbomont out of Tamoir. It seemed to go on forever until the welcome sight of a cafe bar indicating the summit. Frank was still not in sight as I entered the bar and ordered a lemonade which went down a treat. The girl spoke English and told me that the Tour de France had passed here last year. (Indeed it had – on stage 2 Brussels to Spa, but I was dismayed to learn that the Cote du Werbomont only warranted a 4th category classification.) The girl also said that the Tour of Italy also had come through the same year.

Frank eventually came into view – a moment I captured on camera - but he couldn't get served in the bar as the girl was now on a long phone call which she made no attempt to cut short. We left and decided to carry on to Trois Ponts and enjoyed a very long descent pretty much all the way.

In Trois Ponts we found a cafe/bakers and I ordered coffee and a ham roll. Recognising our English voices were some Irish motorcycle tourists patronising the cafe and we had a brief chat with them. They were on their way home at the end of their tour. After this break we set off in a southerly direction on the road to Vielsalm. This scenic road follows the course of the river Salm but has plenty of rises and falls. It was a very pleasant ride though. On entering Vielsalm we made a left turn and began climbing once more before eventually reaching Petit Thier after 6km of uphill. From here it was for the most part downhill into St Vith. We had a little trouble finding the hotel, but by making enquiries of the locals we found the St Vith Hof Hotel and settled in – our bikes being stored in a container van round the back!

It was a good high class modern hotel but was absolutely deserted. We were the only diners and the owner didn't produce a menu but suggested verbally what we could have to eat. So we both had a soup starter followed by Spaghetti Carbonara. This was served by his delightful smiling wife. Both of us could not finish the main course due to the quantity – they overestimated these cyclists' appetites. A pity Duncan wasn't with us. After the meal we enjoyed a beer whilst seated on a luxurious white leather sofa in the lounge area which we had to ourselves. During the night our friendly host disappointed us by being noisy - waking us from our sleep by having a loud heated discussion with someone seemingly right outside our door.

## **TUESDAY 19 JULY**

### **St Vith to Bitburg 62.76km (39 miles)**

A good breakfast here was served by an employee - we did not see the owner or his wife. Conveniently for them the Mastercard machine did not work so we had to pay in cash. The excuse didn't convince us but what can you do? On this morning I heard that Frank had had trouble sleeping due to a painful hand which was injured when he fell off his bike yesterday after his front wheel slid off the edge of the tarmac as a large logging lorry overtook him on one of the climbs. Not the lorry driver's fault.

Back to today and once on the road this was to be another day of long climbs and winding descents. Approaching the German border there was a long drop to Steinebrück. I waited here for Frank who did not show up. Very few cars were about but one that did pass turned round and came back to me, the driver informing me that Frank was repairing a puncture. I decided to cycle back up the hill to find him and fortunately I found him only 500 metres up the road. Once his puncture was mended we dropped down to cross the small bridge and entered Germany – only indicated by an easily missable sign. Our welcome to Germany was a long winding climb to Winterspelt.

Soon after, we made a stop for drinks at a drinks warehouse/outlet in Lünebach – the owner interested to hear of our tour whilst he accepted a delivery of pallets of drinks. The 'best' climb of the day was out of Waxweiler all the way up a succession of bends to Lambertsberg where I waited in a bus shelter for Frank to arrive. We had a breather here before continuing. Then just after Rittersdorf heavy rain started and with nowhere to shelter we had no option but to continue riding. Thankfully we soon came to Bitburg and I nipped into a petrol station for cover under the canopy. Inevitably there was a big hill leading to this and it was some minutes later that Frank showed up. Whilst sheltering we bought some food and drink from the garage while the intensity of the rain seemed to increase.

In view of the conditions we decided that we should go no further today. It was 3pm but the prospect of another hour or so of riding in the rain did not appeal. The lady garage shop owner advised us of the nearest hotel and I purchased a street plan so she could mark the location on it. In our depression we even asked her where the nearest railway station was! (It was at Erdorf.) When the rain eased we rode into Bitburg town centre and checked in to the Hotel Eifelbrau to consider our options. This shortened day meant that we would need an extra day to complete our tour.

Having settled into the hotel and showered and changed we ventured out to explore the town to find a suitable restaurant. Thankfully the rain had stopped by this time. A desperate restaurant owner tried to entice us into his empty establishment, but we settled on the Restaurant Zagreb which turned out to be a good choice. Frank enjoyed two helpings of Goulash soup whilst I had a huge steak, kartoffel (fried potato slices) and onions – marvellous. We also tried the Bitburger beer. We had to - the brewery is located only a few hundred metres from our hotel.

## **WEDNESDAY 20 JULY**

### **Bitburg to Morbach 74.88km (46.53 miles)**

The idea of getting a train was soon dropped for two reasons – 1) due to the hilly terrain there was no direct line to anywhere near where we wanted to go, and 2) the day dawned bright and the desire to cycle took over again. And Frank's hand injury seemed to have recovered. Frank's tyre had split slightly following his two punctures so he thought it wise to buy a new one. The hotel receptionist indicated the location of a bike shop on my map and we pedalled on down to it. Tyre duly purchased (but not fitted) we continued our ride on the road to yesterday's planned overnight destination – Bernkastel Kues. There was no way we would have made it to here yesterday even if the weather had been fine.

We had a good downhill start from Bitburg but the hilly conditions prevailed throughout the morning as we continued through Dudeldorf, Binsfeld and Landscheid to Wittlich before stopping at a cafe here. Rain threatened but didn't come to anything as we sat at an outside table. We left the town and whilst stopped at traffic lights an interested motorist with a good grasp of English asked us where we were going. He advised us to use another road but I wasn't going to chance getting lost. He was right, there were lorries on the road to Bernkastel Kues, but nothing like the number we have to put up with in England on a daily basis. As ever the road went up and down but eventually the wide river Mosel came into view and it was spectacular. Steep vineyards rose above the far side of the river as far as the eye could see.

On descending to the river we noticed a couple cycling on a cycle path so we joined it and enquired of them if it would take us all the way into Bernkastel Kues. They said it did and we followed them at a leisurely pace right alongside the Mosel. Eventually we had to come off the path and up into the picturesque town of Bernkastel. We had to cross the river by the road bridge to Kues which we did. This would be a great location for a cycling holiday if cycling alongside a river on cycle paths is your thing. You can go for miles in either direction along the Mosel.

We knew that a climb was coming after we crossed the river and it was a cracker. A left turn at traffic lights took us into a tunnel which was well lit and not too long as the exit could be seen. On exiting the tunnel the road curved to the left and ramped up to the first hairpin bend where I waited for Frank. He had decided to walk through the tunnel. Once together we set off on this wonderfully engineered road which finally topped out at the village of Longkamp after 7km. I sat down at a table outside a closed bar and ate the last of the energy giving Jelly Babies I had brought from home whilst waiting for Frank.

Once he arrived and had some time to recover we continued onwards and upwards to Gonzerath with rain now in the air. Thankfully it held off so we could enjoy the twisting descent into the town of Morbach which we had decided would be our overnight stop. Sheltering from a rain shower at first, we continued into the village and found a good place to stay – the Hotel Hochwald-Cafe – after being advised of it by the receptionist at the main hotel which was fully booked. The friendly owner ran the hotel as well as a cake shop, bakery and cafe on the ground floor. Our bikes were stored in his garage. There was no restaurant at the hotel but we had a choice of many once we wandered out after our shower and change into civilian clothing. We both

had Goulash soup followed by an onion and mushroom omelette for a change. All washed down by a glass or two of the local brown beer.

## **THURSDAY 21 JULY**

### **Morbach to Kaiserslautern 85.01km (52.82 miles)**

Again the day dawned bright so after a fantastic breakfast at the cafe/bakery (the owner even gave us a bag each to take food for eating later in the day) we left the town in an uphill direction. We climbed steadily towards the region called the Hoch Wald (high forest). Then on turning left towards Allenbach we were rewarded by a descent which pleasantly surprised us by going through Allenbach, on through Kirschweiler, on through Tiefenstein, and all the way into Idar Oberstein – a distance of 18km.

Idar Oberstein is a largish town but was negotiated easily and we were soon on the road out of town following signs in the direction of Bad Kreuznach. Another tunnel was ridden through and soon after Fischbach we saw our first direction sign for Kaiserslautern which raised a smile and a cheer. Before long we made a right turn in the direction of Lauterecken and hit quieter roads again. Although not as hilly the road was by no means flat but undulating with long rises and falls.

We stopped at a garage at Sien with the road sign indicating 42km to Kaiserslautern. We sat in a bus shelter and ate the breakfast food from Morbach (hard boiled eggs and bread rolls with jam and butter) washed down by a Sprite bought at the garage. Frank handed in a Pet Passport he had found on the road approaching Sien to the garage owner who recognised the owner's name on it. His good deed for the day done we continued on in warm conditions through Lauterecken, Wolfstein, Olsbrucken and Katzweiler to Otterbach on the outskirts of Kaiserslautern.

Here we made a left turn to find the road to our hosts' home in the village of Morlautern. After making enquiries with a local who didn't want to know we came across someone who did help and we were on our way. The unpleasant surprise for us was that the road was uphill. A definite sting in the tail as we climbed steeply round a saucer of a bend and upwards for quite a while until at last the road levelled out on high ground and we could see houses ahead. A few hundred metres further on and our journey was completed.

**Total Mileage: 336.44 – average 56.07 miles per day**

**Total Kilometres: 541.44**

## **FRIDAY 22 TO SUNDAY 24 JULY**

Our hosts Valter and Marianne made us very welcome and provided some fine meals as well as wonderful accommodation. Our stay in Kaiserslautern included a visit to the USA – the massive US Air Base in Ramstein - for some shopping in US dollars (Marianne is a US citizen). We also had an escorted tour of Kaiserslautern to see the

sights and a visit to Bad Durkheim where we dined in the world's largest barrel! We also visited the village of Frankenstein with its ruined hilltop castle that inspired Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley to write her horror novel of that name. On two occasions we were able to view the day's Tour de France stage live - in the local hotel in Morlautern and at a bar restaurant in Kaiserslautern.

Due to the hilltop location of our accommodation we didn't venture out on our bikes at all during our stay.

## **MONDAY 25 JULY**

Flew home from Frankfurt after Valter drove us and the bikes to the airport.