

NORTH SEA TO THE BALTIC BY BIKE, 2014.

Just two on this trip – the old team (and getting older...) of Martin Brice and Rob Foster. After a scary London cycle from London Bridge to Liverpool St station, we squeezed into a busy commuter train for Harwich, on 2 September. For £62 each, we get a Stena night ferry with our own comfy 2 berth cabin to The Hook of Holland, which is of course in the Netherlands.

After a great buffet breakfast, we arrived at 8 am, in time for an early start on the bikes.

And we are in cycling Heaven! – this part of Europe has BRILLIANT cycle lanes, polite drivers and of course is flat; just the odd headwind to worry about...

We head north, generally following the 'North Sea Cycle Route', which goes through scenic dunes, on a traffic-free well-surfaced path. Go and sample it and see what we are missing!



The only slight snag is that there are so many other cyclists, all going shopping or whatever on sensible bikes, with no Lycra in sight – you have to pay attention.

We are camping as usual, and Martin has a book listing good simple, cheap campsites; some are a bit tricky to find, and some are quite busy with school parties. Lots of coffee stops opportunities, and the weather is dry.

We fancied visiting some of the Fresian Islands on the coast, so took a short ferry hop to Texel; a bit average, I thought, and the small ferry at the other end wasn't running for a day or two, so we returned to the mainland. This meant we had to cross the huge Afsluit dyke, which is 30 km long, crossing a vast inland sea – it went on forever in a straight line, shrouded by autumn sea mist each side. But of course an excellent cycle lane by the busy dual carriageway.

Harlingen was a lunch stop (tasty Dutch savoury pancake), and the old port was very pretty, as are many places on this coast. Then a nice small campsite in a farm orchard, where we cook our supper. Next day we cross to the island of Ameland, which was lovely, having a proper 'island feel' to it and a perfect campsite. One bonus was the provision of a picnic table/bench, ideal to rest tired legs! Fish and chips in the town, with BEER.



Our route now meets some huge rivers, which are crossed easily on ferries. This leads us into NW Germany, which seems that bit busier. And they have stalls selling wurst and beer!

The River Weser is enormous, lined with factories and docks, while the R Esse has a transporter bridge, and the equally vast Elbe has another ferry.

We have a few mechanicals – I break a spoke, while M has a bottom bracket coming undone and loose spokes, but all gets sorted.

In Germany we decide to detour north east along the famous Kiel Canal, which allows big ships to shortcut into the Baltic Sea without going round Denmark. And there are indeed many big freight ships, which travel serenely, matching our pace on the cycle path on the



bank. Eventually we reach the Baltic Sea at Eckernfjorde, and get very excited, taking photos of bikes being dipped into another distant bit of the marine world!

Next day it gets wet (well it had to sometime), but a lovely local called Jan invites us in his house for coffee, where we drip all over the kitchen and eat home-made apple cake. Then it's into south Denmark, which is a bit rural and average down there. The campsite has wooden chalets, so we pay a bit extra to avoid camping in the monsoon – good choice.



Ribe is a pretty old port, where we camp the next night, and then

it's a short hop to Esbjerg where we catch a DFDS overnight ferry all the way back to Harwich, £118 each. These ferries are so much nicer than flying, with all the airport hassle!

So that was it, we cycled 1,042 km over 13 days – a great trip to cycling heaven.

Rob F