

Cycling Finland, Norway (1.800 km)

Pure pleasure, pure fuck-up... yes, this was the moto of this year's cycling on Lapland. The cycling wasn't just a collection of latitude and altitude kilometres, although I covered quite a few: about 1.800 km, about 25.000 »high kilometres«, for relaxing the muscles about 30 km of cross-country skiing, some 100 km of hiking, as I needed to collect some food (cloudberry, blueberries, and yellow chanterelles), catch a fish, etc....

To begin with I will describe the far north region of Finland and the Sami – Lapland culture. Most of Lapland's population are still living in the tradition of their ancestors, deep in the vast forest, far away from roads and television. The true Sami still mostly remain reindeer-breeders, as for these indigenous people they are not just animals, but a lifestyle; yes – a lifestyle. Something, a cow or a pig will never be for a European farmer, despite all subsidies. For the Sami, all things in nature possess a soul. Animals – birds, moose, bears, reindeers – are their friends to whom they dedicate them their life, their love, concern and effort. Reindeer gave them everything they required for living: meat for food, hides for beds and blankets as well as warm clothes and shoes; from sinew they produced strings for sewing; the stocked fat was used for soap and the bones and horns were used for tools and weapons. Nowadays, not every reindeer is someone's possession. Instead, all reindeer are running FREE out in the woods. Twice a year they are being hunted, they decide which are going for cull (about 30.000 a year), they mark the young ones, that follow their mother right after birth (the young animal is the possession of that person, that owns the mother animal), and others are being released. For a Laplander it is a big insult to ask him how many reindeer he has. This is always a riddle.

The next holy thing for the Finns (last years also for me) are their SAUNAS. Once they were used for washing death people inside them. This is the place to relax and socialise. The sauna is a symbol of purification, and therefore a special ritual is being performed. Before every sauna visit, a broom-like tool is made of birch twigs. During the sweating in the sauna they dip it in cold water, and then beat themselves in order to relieve themselves from sins, and besides that it smells nice. It's nice, this confessional.

Rainwear is a must, as the weather changes from one hour to the next during the summer. The morning sun gives no clues, and neither does the rain. And at MIDNIGHT, the sun is just wonderful. When on Lapland, it is simply pure joy to admire the nature, the endless woods and clean lakes. When you are hungry you can gather cranberries, blueberries, raspberries, or catch a fish. When you get thirsty, you drink water from the nearest lake.

During the Second World War, Lapland was a terrible battle field. When the inhabitants fled through the extensive forests, they were even set ablaze burned down. Only one village and 5 churches have been spared. Among the natives there is a saying: all Germans that come to the country must leave all matches at the border.

Typical for summers in Lapland are the mosquitos which you cannot avoid, especially near rivers and lakes. Sometimes even a deer succumbs to a high number of mosquito bites. Luckily only the females bite, while the males feed on vegetable juice. One local even claimed to have killed 64 mosquitos with a single hit on a friend's back. The locals say, that you get used to them after a while, so that you don't even notice (meaning: feel) them anymore. And it's true; one can get used to anything.

On Lapland, the height of the summer ends at the beginning of August. During the polar day the daylight lasts for 24 hours. When the days get shorter, the sun initially only disappears for some hours

behind the horizon. When you the first star can be seen in the sky, the natives say that the winter is coming.

I suppose it is a good thing that the nice old man with the white beard doesn't accept any complaints between June and August, as I wanted to file a complaint for a new tarmac between Kaukonen and Rovaniemi. But Santa is in Rovaniemi available from November to January; despite he used to be at home in Sodankylä. Santa is just one of the global advertisement moves staged by the megalomaniac corporations of the capitalistic world, where he is getting competition from Jack Frost.

Lapland is still an ideal hideaway from the fast rhythm of the modern world. In this respect I would like to tell a little about my cycling tour through Lapland, parts of the North-West of Norway and central Finland. For some this is just a piece of cake, for others it has a "vauu-factor", and for me its pure disconnection from the world.

At midnight, I and my Finnish friend start the cycling tour from Kuusamo. The midnight light is a bit confusing, but it also gives you a big energy boost. The roads are wet, foggy, there are deer on the road and you need to watch out for elks and avoid close encounters with them, as it would not end well for you (because more people die in elk-encounters than from those with bears). Freezing, we reach Salla at six in the morning. I just want to drink something warm, but everything is closed. Luckily I am skilled in observing. I spot a light, in the kitchen a woman with a white hat and a man, sitting and staring out of the window. God knows what he was thinking. Look at this two fools. ☺ I stop. Yes, it is an advantage to cycle with a local, as it would sometimes be hard to communicate only with your hands. But this way, we got a warm breakfast in the morning in a house, which helps people without money and jobs. In this house, each Tuesday morning there is a kind of workshop going on, that begins with a warm breakfast.

We continue cycling along the Russian border to the border crossing Kellosele, where we have to turn around, as we don't have a Russian visa. And the policeman at the border has no clue anyway. What follows is the way to Savukoski (Santa's birth place), Tanhvi (once a gold mine, now a museum). It's exactly midnight and the sun is throwing gold rays on me. Maybe because there is still some gold here or maybe because of the polar day. Sodankylä, Vuotso, Kiilopää ... after 230 km it's time to sleep. In the morning, before continuing the road, in Kiilopää the smoke sauna feels good, although it too has cooled down a bit during the night. Ivalo (the most north lying airport in Finland). Through the rain on our way to Inari (Inari lake – the second largest lake in Finland, when solving crosswords) we meet two cyclists, Rita and Guido from Switzerland. It only takes about ten minutes and you can make good friends that feel and breathe just as you. Just as we have agreed on the road, Rita and Guido visited me at home with their bikes on their way back home two months later. Congrats to both. What follows are Utsjoki (the most north lying city in Finland, Lapland) and Nuorgam (the most north lying point – village in Finland). Then we go to Norway to Savda, where there is nothing but the »ice sea« in front of you. When you have no boat, you have to stop and turn back to the Tana bridge, and then along the river Tana in Norway again to Utsjoki, where first you warm yourself, dry your wet clothes on an electric oven, and that you get »PORO KEBAB« (poro meaning deer in Finnish) at a kiosk. At three in the morning they close, that's why we need to find a place for the tent; the thermometer is showing just five degrees. And in the morning we continue: Utsjoki, Karasjok, Suossjavri, Kautokeino (time for sleep and the war with mosquitos). After breakfast we ride to Rovaniemi. I want Santa to repair the asphalt on the roads, that lead to him, for in some moments I thought I had suffered a concussion. I need to visit the Santa Claus village (the business is booming, the last hope for the adults and a dream come true for children, that they were at Santa). The most interesting for me are the construction pits, from which structures appear to be just growing. Professional deformation of the eyes I guess. What follows are Vanttauskoski, Posio, Kuusamo, we go in the direction of Kuopio. In between I found the

time to cross-country ski for half of the day in Leppävirta, where everyone knows our Petra Majdič. Then cycling through a countryside of lakes (in Finland there are more than 188.000 lakes); sometimes the road would be easier with a kayak. At the end I found out, that I was cycling too fast and that I need to return back home already. In Varkaus I get on a bus where I enjoy a five-hour countryside observation to Helsinki.

Until I haven't written the story and published it, I thought and felt like I was still cycling somewhere up there.

PHOTOS in the album CYCLING!

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