

Barwon & beyond

Time & tide, November 2009



No more visa problems for ages!

1/11/09

The phone call from a keen cycling friend in Melbourne was full of promise...

"Our friend Dorothee from Germany, who's cycling round the world, is at the Grampians. Could you put her up for a couple of days?"

And so, after a few days of extreme wind and weather, she arrived, a tiny, tanned woman on a very heavily laden touring bike. David, our athletic neighbour, had accompanied her on his ultra lightweight racing bike for the last few kilometres, and they'd been chatting. She wore dusty grey with a faded orange safety vest, he was in immaculate coloured lycra. The disparity in their bikes and their clothes made them an odd couple, but David was obviously impressed, and so were we.

She was clearly very fit, and equipped for all conditions. You don't get here via the Balkans, Siberia, the Gibb River Road and the Nullarbor without being ready for anything. After she had showered, unpacked, and eaten a hearty dinner, we settled down over a bottle of wine to hear her story.

"I started in February 2008 from my home near Stuttgart. Since I can remember, I always loved cycling, and my godfather gave me my first bike when I was 8. One day, I said 'I'm cycling round the world', and no one was surprised. I didn't want the goodbye thing, so I took the train to Vienna and set off down the Danube through Eastern Europe. Soon, I had been through 20 or more countries, and every day was an adventure. I love setting off, wondering what kind of surprise will bring this day. A good cycle path is under construction, all the way to the Black Sea.

From the Black Sea, I headed north and east, through Romania, Moldova and Ukraine to the Crimea and then on to Russia. I had taken basic lessons to learn enough Cyrillic to read the road signs, and it helped that in Serbia and Romania, the signs were duplicated in Roman script, so I soon got to know them. To make life easier, I avoided the 'Stans' — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan etc — and found the Russians to be completely different people, but very nice and welcoming. I mostly had a tailwind through Siberia.

The Urals between Europe and Asia are always thought of as very as mountainous, but the first real climbs to more than 1,000 metres were between Irkutsk and the border of Mongolia. The visa for China was a big problem, and while I was waiting, many people gave up. It took four weeks and the office was often closed. It was just before the Olympics and the Chinese do not welcome independent travellers. Often, a car followed me, and every day, when I tried to find somewhere to stay, I had to register with the police and put up with two or three hours of questioning. They would only give me a 28-day visa, so I had to use the trains quite a bit.

Always, I thought someone was observing me. You have to show your passport to use an Internet café, and they keep the details. One night, there was knock on the door at 9.30 — the police wanting to know why I had been visiting German websites!

When I got out to Vietnam, I felt I could breathe again, and the baguettes were good, too! I travelled through Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia, then on to Sumatra, which was not so crowded, but very hilly up and down the volcanoes. After Java, which was noisy, crowded and polluted, Bali and Lombok were relaxing and beautiful. From Indonesia, I flew to Darwin. In Australia, it's nice to have your privacy again, to not always have people staring, to not be under visa pressure. Asia felt safe, but I didn't want people taking photos any more.

I rode through Kakadu, the Gibb River Road, the Kimberley. Between Broome and Exmouth there were 600 kilometres of endless nothing, but always there are stations. The people there are special, and mostly welcoming. I had to carry a lot of water, and I always had my music because I carry a flute. In Perth, like all round-the-world cyclists, I visited the famous Quantum Bicycle shop. I needed to get my Rohloff hub serviced and Aldo and Sats were very helpful. I was the third woman to stop there on the way round the world. Across the Nullarbor, one of the biggest adventures of the trip so far, I had a perfect tailwind.

In the Grampians, I left my bags in the bushes and cycled up Mt William, but it was misty at the top and I couldn't see anything. I don't expect anything any more. Normally, I do some research, and I carry the Lonely Planet, but I like to be surprised. Of course I miss quite a lot. You never know what the wind will do and you never know where you will end up. You always find something with experience and patience. Never in my whole life could I plan, that's how it is, that's the excitement.

I want to be home in about June 2011. First there is Tasmania, up to Queensland, then over to Hawaii. I've already been to New Zealand, and I don't want to go again because of the bad weather and the sheep trucks. In the US, I will ride up to Alaska, perhaps, then on to the east coast. I have friends in Boston and Quebec, and a cousin in Philadelphia to visit. I've always wanted to go through Africa from Cairo to the Cape, but the politics makes it too difficult."

The next day, Dorothee set off for the Queenscliff ferry and the ride up the Mornington Peninsula to Camberwell, her next stop. Not surprisingly, after nearly one hundred thousand kilometres of cycling, her kit has a solid, weather-beaten look. The German flag sewn to her handlebar bag has faded to near monochrome. I couldn't lift her loaded bike off the ground, but as she headed off, she stood up on the pedals and quickly built up speed.

Dorothee is a sturdy, courageous, indomitable figure. On her rest day in Barwon Heads, she had done her washing, run up the riverbank to the Moonah Park, gone for a long walk, and cycled up the Bluff. It had been a privilege to meet her, but after talking to her, I felt like a cup of tea and a nice lie-down.

Steve Craddock

And Dorothee Fleck's blog is at <http://d-tours2.blogspot.com>

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