



A Russian Adventure

Vologda-Onega-Ladoga 2008
by
Jan Buschardt

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Vologda-Onega-Ladoga - 1200 km by bicycle
July 4 - 8 2008

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'Abenteuer!' – 'Adventure!' - exclaimed my newfound German friend, Claus Czycholl, as he greeted me at the Hotel German Club in Saint Petersburg. 'Adventure' was exactly what I had told my wife a few hours earlier as she kissed me good-bye in the airport of Copenhagen. And now I was in the middle of an adventure, that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago: A bicycle ride of more than 1200 km in the area North of Saint Petersburg.

A little less than a year ago I had completed the legendary 1200 km of Paris-Brest-Paris. After

handing in my brevet card I stumbled over a brochure describing a new ride to take place the following year: The Vologda-Onega-Ladoga. The brochure described a ride on newly paved roads, hardly any traffic, and beautiful scenery. I was intrigued: How often do you get the opportunity to meet the 'real' Russians and get a taste of everyday life in this part of the world?

As time closed in, the practical problems of arranging transport, getting a visa, etc., seemed overwhelming. Although the Russian organizers – especially head organizer, Mikhail Kamentsev -

were very helpful, it was difficult to get a firm idea of what to expect: How was I to transport myself, not to mention my bicycle, the 600 km from Saint Petersburg to Vologda? Would I be able to buy food during the ride? What kind of food, drink and sleeping facilities would be provided at the controls? Etc., etc., etc. A German web-forum with a thread dedicated to the ride was very helpful in providing information, although some of it never got through to me due to linguistic problems!

Finally, a few weeks before the ride, things sorted out and I was



ready to go. At this point I had done the qualifying rides – a 200-km, a 300-km, a 400-km, and a 600-km brevet – my bicycle was trimmed, maps and the route had been loaded onto my GPS, and my equipment was packed.

The flight from Copenhagen to Saint Petersburg was smooth with only one small hiccup in Copenhagen: When I checked in, I was told that I could not take my bicycle! A bit of talking back and forth, a bit of persuading, a bit of mild pressure, an extra fee, and I was finally allowed to let my bike follow me to Russia.

My bicycle arrived safely in Saint Petersburg without a scratch and I went to the exit. I had been told that it would be possible to take a bus from the airport to the meeting point, but I had doubts as to whether this would in fact be feasible. As I ride a recumbent bicycle I had not been able to fit it into a standard bike case, so I had left it unwrapped and I was now rolling it along with my two bags on top of it. I looked for the bus stop, but although I was told where to look for it, I never found it – and, as I was worried that my fellow pas-

sengers might get oil from my bike on their clothes, I decided to take a taxi. It proved to be one of the most expensive taxi rides in my life – but it was worth every kopeck!

So I was now in Saint Petersburg at the designated meeting place and Claus Czyncholl greeted me and helped me relax and feel at home.

In the late afternoon all the foreign riders, who had come to Saint Petersburg, met at the hotel and went together by metro to the railway station, where we would take the train to Vologda. Like most of the riders, I was only carrying my luggage, as my bicycle would be transported to Vologda by the organizers. We arrived at the station a few minutes before the departure and I witnessed how three experienced riders disassembled their bikes on the platform, carried them onto the train, and lodged them into the luggage racks above the seats. All in less than five minutes. Quite impressive!

The train ride was an over-night ride in an open coupe type wagon with bunk beds. My ticket stated



With wheels, handlebar, and front fork disassembled, two bikes can be fitted into the rack above the bunks.

quite clearly which bed was mine – only problem was that the clear statement was in Russian and I had no idea of which of the many numbers on the ticket to put my faith into. So I started out by placing myself amidst a Russian mother and her children. Although they said nothing, I somehow had the feeling that I had chosen the wrong seat and soon I was shown to the right seat by fellow travelers.

Ivo Miesen from Belgium, who speaks Russian amongst several other languages, let us in on the dos and don'ts of Russian train riding – of which one is the possibility of getting tea from the samovar at the end of the wagon – and hints on how to do a Russian brevet. The train ride, which



I rode my Velokraft VK2 carbon recumbent fitted with parts in the Ultegra class, a compact crank 42-52, 9-gear cassette 12-25, 28 mm front tire and 25 mm rear; a SON hubdynamo, 2 frontlights (that I didn't have much use for), an extra battery light, a GPS, and a toolbox, that held every thing I could imagine, I would need on the ride.

Photo: Manfred Tinebor

was at quite slow speed, gave me the first impression of the Russian countryside, we were going to ride through. As the evening grew dark, we went to sleep in the bunk beds and I had a tolerable sleep in the upper bunk.

As we arrived in Vologda in the morning, we gathered together with riders that had been on the same train, but I had not yet seen. After waiting around a little, we walked to a nearby sports hall. I had expected we would take the road, but the organizers led us along to the end of the platform and then on to the tracks! Apparently there are not many trains to and from Vologda, so we had the tracks all for ourselves the short distance to the sports hall.

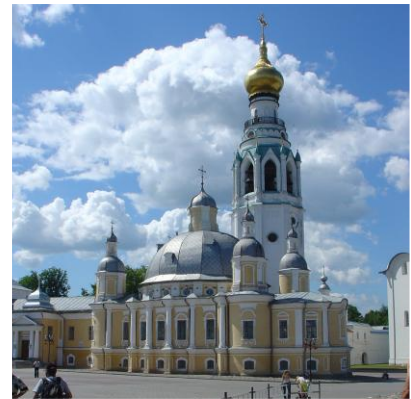
The riders, who had brought the bicycles, took them into the sports hall, where they were looked into a room and left for the night. We then took a taxi to our hotel. We had originally been booked in a hotel very close to the sports hall, but apparently a few days earlier the hotel had announced that it did not want to house foreigners! So the organizers had to make a quick adjustment and find a hotel about 7 km

away for us. The reluctance to take in foreigners is most likely due to the fact that the hotel is compelled to make a registration with the authorities. This is a time consuming procedure, which in our case meant that the hotel kept our passports until late in the evening and thereby kept me from acquiring a simcard for my cell phone.

I was to share a room with Ivo, Abi from England /Israel, and Mikko from Finland. We were soon installed in our room and left for a day of sightseeing in Vologda.

An information meeting was scheduled for the evening at the Hotel Sputnik and we arrived on time not to be late. But soon we learned that the meeting had been postponed as Mikhail Kamentsev, the head organizer, was still on the road from Saint Petersburg in the van with the bicycles, luggage etc. That's OK, I thought, just go slow and easy, so my bike won't be destroyed in a highway accident.

Finally the information meeting started with the participation of most riders and most of the sup-



The Kremlin, Vologda

port crew. The route sheet had been altered in the last moment – at least I think so – so the final route sheet was to be handed out at the meeting. The English edition had not yet been printed, so a PC, a printer, and a stack of paper were set up and the printing process began. However, before I received my copy, the printer was out of paper and I didn't receive my copy before the next day at the third check point! This didn't bother me as I had the route on the GPS and I also had secured a Russian version of the book. Not that I read Russian, but I can understand numbers and arrows, so I was quite comfortable.

My bicycle had arrived with Mikhail and needed a bit of assembly and adjustment, but time was running late and I decided to wait until the morning before putting the bike together so I could get a bit more sleep before the ride.

The next morning, Friday 4th of July, we rose early, had a quick

Hectic work is conducted in the Sports Center to get the bicycles ready the evening before the start.





Getting ready for departure in front of the Sports Hall.

and light breakfast, and then took the taxis, we had ordered the night before, to the sports hall. We arrived at the sports hall at 6:00 with an hour to the start and still with my bicycle not yet fully assembled. There were a lot of riders, who had just arrived. They were unpacking their bicycles, filling water bottles all while they were chatting with each other. I quickly assembled my bike, packed it with what I needed to bring with me, and packed the rest of my stuff in three bags: Two as drop bags for the fourth and the ninth control and one with the rest of my things for the finish. Although there was reason enough for getting stressed, I was now at a mental stage, where I had realized, that I would have to take the blows of life as they arrived – one by one. So I was surprisingly calm considering that I had neither time for a test ride nor any idea of how I was to transport myself and my bike to the starting point together with three big bags. But a few minutes before we were to leave, this problem solved it-

self: Plastic bags were provided for our bags together with labels for marking the place, where the bags were to be dropped. Together with the plastic bags, a rider number was handed out to be fixed to the frame. In the last moments before leaving I was busy securing the number to my not-so-standard recumbent frame.

Finally, almost by miracle, we were all ready to leave the sports hall at 6:50 to ride the few km to the Kremlin, where the official start was to take place. As we took off a quiet drizzle started, just enough to make us wonder how the weather would be, but it soon stopped. As I was riding leisurely through town, I noticed a strange noise from the rear of the bike. I pulled over and took a

good look at the chain, the rear derailleur, the cogs – but I couldn't find the source of the noise. That's what comes from not test riding your bike before taking off! The sound reminded me of spokes not properly tensioned. Cold sweat broke on my forehead: Imagine riding 1200 km on roads, that had been reported to be not completely smooth all the way, with a wheel that might give in at any moment. At the Kremlin I took a harder look at the rear wheel, testing the spokes with my fingers. They seemed all right and well tensioned. So I just had to go on my ride without fixing the problem. The sound stayed with me for the better part of the first day, coming and going with intervals that grew longer and longer as the day progressed. I never discovered the source of the noise, but I now believe that it was caused by the rim and spokes settling in after a long and perhaps cold flight.

More riders were arriving; control cards and route sheets were handed out. Several group pictures were taken and then we



Ready for departure from the Kremlin in Vologda. The Austrian riders had 'Vologda-Onega-Ladoga' printed on their jerseys.



After 7 km we stopped outside town to wait for everyone.

flat, I soon decided to speed up a bit. This meant that I would be riding alone for the most of the day, but that suited me fine, as I this way could go at my own pace.

This first day the route was quite flat going through what seemed to be swamps with the road raised high and shallow water with thick vegetation on the sides. This meant that on large parts of the route you could see nothing but the trees and scrubs lining the road. The road was wide with little traffic – largely big trucks, that generally pulled way over to pass you without any danger or discomfort. The surface of the road was rough with quite a few holes and patches making the ride kind of harsh.

The route sheet was easy to read even in Russian: For 112 km I should go straight ahead and then I should turn left! None the less, I somehow misread my GPS, which sent me to the left after 110.4 km. At first it looked right, but when the road turned into a dirt road without any tire tracks

from bicycles, I became suspicious - and when the road ended, I knew for sure, that I was on a wrong track. So I backtracked and found the main road again after a detour of about 600 meters.

I soon found the right left-turn and from there it was straight ahead for another 16 km to the first checkpoint, in Kirillov. A few km from the checkpoint I saw the first riders returning from Kirillov.



I arrived in Kirillov at 11:55, having ridden 128 km, still in good shape and high spirits. I had hardly come to a stop before Veronika, the charming daughter of Mikhail, demanded my control card to stamp it. Very efficient! This was my first checkpoint in Russia and I didn't quite know what to expect, but I soon discovered that this was an open-air



The route was quite flat the first day.

checkpoint with food – bananas and biscuits - laid out on a rail for everyone to serve themselves.



The check point in Kirrilov

I had a small chat with one or two other riders, a lot to drink, some biscuits, and a banana to take along – and I was off after a stop of 20 minutes.

The sun was now out and I congratulated myself on choosing the right clothes for the ride. I had been in doubt whether to put on my warm autumn-clothes or my summer outfit. I had chosen the latter – a jersey, a vest, short pants, and a long sleeved rain jacket in my tail box together with my shoe covers. I was later going to regret I didn't bring warmer clothes....

The course continued to be fairly flat, so I could maintain a good speed even if there were many holes in the road.



By 15:15 Friday, after covering 202 km, I arrived at the second checkpoint at Lipin Bor. This checkpoint was a picnic in the grass by a gas station. I had

some bread and cookies, and then I was told that there was a café in the gas station. This was not obvious from the outside, as there was only one door in the building and nothing to indicate that there was anything for the general public behind it. So I was a bit reluctant to push the door open, but as I did, a lively party of randonneurs revealed itself. I was advised to order soup, which I luckily did, as I can't recall when I last had such tasty soup!

I was back on my bike after a rest of 45 minutes.

The next stretch I rode on and off together with Abi from England and Andrew Neiman from Russia. Going fast I could now and



The checkcheck poinen i Lipin Bor

then feel my rear wheel wobble. I was afraid, that the wheel might be giving in, but before long I could feel the bike being slowed down considerably when going over patches of tar and I realized that it was the soft tar, that made my bike skid a bit. As the air heated up, the tar became softer and when trucks passed, they would rip tar loose and throw great chunks into the air. Luckily the flying road didn't hit us! The tar stuck to my tires and I could feel as well as hear how the tires were sticking to the road, slow-

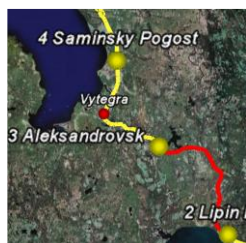


Russian Andrew Neiman in high spirits.

ing me down. I thought the tires were ruined and would have to be changed, but after a few kilometers on dirt roads later on, the tires were clean again!

The weather changed from a blue sky to overcast. I had been warned that we might have to fight mosquitoes, but apparently it was too cold for them to come out in any great number except at the checkpoint at Lake Onega, where they were abundant! But nobody had warned me of the Giant Russian Fly. They came out in great swarms circling my head – they didn't pay any attention to the bug repellent, I had generously applied to keep the mosquitoes away. These flies were about 5 cm long and even if they didn't bite or sting, it was very annoying having these giant things hitting your face and covering your sight all the time. When I first encountered the flies, I expected that I would loose them as soon as my speed exceeded 20 km/h, but even at 34 km/h they were circling my head as if they had gone into eternal orbit.

Around 19:00 it started to rain and from then on rain would come and go at intervals.



I arrived at the third checkpoint, Aleksandrovsk, at 20:25, after riding 306 km. The checkpoint was a small pavilion at the side of the road. A fire was burning outside with a kettle of hot water simmering over it. The water was used for producing hot noodles – very welcome after more than 13 hours on the road. As at every checkpoint the support crew was exactly that: Very supportive, handing you tea as soon as you arrived, insisting on stamping your control card as the next thing, to make sure that you didn't forget, and then offering you whatever they had to eat. True Russian hospitality!

At the start of the day I had placed my passport, my 'registration' and a couple of other official papers in my neck pouch, so I was sure not to lose them on my way. Now I discovered that the neck pouch was soaked with sweat since it was not watertight, as I had expected. So my passport was warped with humidity and the print of the registration was almost washed away. I decided that it would probably be better to lose my official papers than to have them destroyed in a bath of sweat, so I placed them in

the tail box for the rest of the ride.

I rested for about 40 minutes – how time flies – and then I was on my way again.

After 19 km the route sheet called not to follow the road to the left, but to go straight ahead under the 'No entry' sign! This was to be my first encounter with Russian dirt roads... It was no more than 1.7 km long, and even if it didn't take more than 10 minutes to traverse, it felt like hours! The road was wide, with BIG and deep holes in it, so I had to plan which way to zigzag my way through it. Luckily I only met a few cars on this stretch.

At 23:00 – just before sunset – I passed a bridge with a magnificent view of a lake to one side and the Volgo-Balticysky canal on the other. After that I was riding into the sunset for an eternity, with a spectacular view of red and golden clouds.

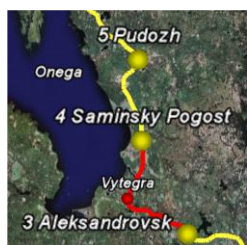
My knees and legs were hurting badly. I often experience pain in the knees, but usually it goes away after some time or at least I can just ignore the pain. But this was different. The pain was bad and I feared that I would do permanent harm to my knees if it continued. This was the first time ever I have actually considered quitting a brevet as a consequence of pain. I decided that I would see if sleep would help my knees and reconsider my position in the morning.





Old railroad track on my first Russian dirt road.

I reached the checkpoint at Saminsky Pogost Saturday morning at 01:40, after covering 398 km in 18 hours and 20 minutes.



This checkpoint was situated some 300 meters from the main road next to an old wooden church, where tents had been pitched. It was a beautiful setting! I was offered tea and a hot meal, which were both very welcome. I was then shown to a tent, where a sleeping bag and my drop bag was waiting me. I wasn't slow to brush my teeth and then hit the sac.

I was sound asleep, so I didn't notice when another randonneur arrived in the tent, but when the third randonneur crept into his sleeping bag, I woke up after only three hours of sleep. I decided that it was time to move on, so I got out of my nice and warm sleeping bag into the cold morning air, that was now wet with rain. My drop bag provided me with the opportunity of a change of clothes, which I took advantage of even if I knew, that in a very short time the new clothes would smell as bad as the old ones.

I had a little to drink and eat and then I was on my way again in

The check point in Siminsky Pogost. The tents where pitched by the old church. Luckily I didn't see the state of it before the next morning - if I had, I wouldn't have slept a wink from fear of it collapsing on top of us during the night.

the cold morning. The rain grew heavy and I had to stop after only 15 minutes at a bus shelter to put on my shoe covers. I had hoped for the quality of the road to increase, but the road sheet called for worse roads, and that they were!

18 km after Saminsky Pogost I passed the border into the republic of Karelia. I really couldn't tell the big difference except the names of towns and villages became more Finish - and of course the dogs...



I didn't meet that many dogs on my ride, but the dogs in Russia left a big impression. The vast majority of these dogs looked like black Siberian Huskies. They often sat in the driveway or came walking out to the road when I came by. The first few times I encountered these dogs, I expected them to bark and chase me, but they just sat there looking at me with great interest - no doubt wondering where I came from and where I was going. In Karelia most dogs were chained to the house. They would bark loudly as soon as they heard me. So did the dogs, that had not been chained – but they were also free to chase me...

My knees and legs still hurt badly. I believe that the reason for my pain was that a great part

of the ride had been one long series of stops and starts due to the bad roads, putting stress on the knees and not allowing them to get into a continuous rhythm.

Next check point was in Pudozh. The GPS didn't indicate the exact spot and the road sheet only gave 'School #2, gray brick school building' as a description. As I rode into town I had great difficulty in telling which of the gray buildings, that was the school, so I stopped several times to check the road sheet. Once I stopped, a police car pulled up in front of me and an officer walked towards me. 'Oh no', I thought, 'I can't bear the thought of shoving my passport, explaining why my registration was no longer readable, and what I was doing here on that strange bike'. So I

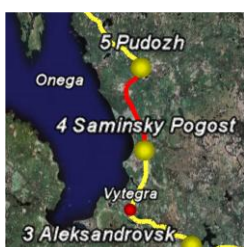
looked up at the officer and asked 'Do you speak English?' He froze at once, shook his head, and turned around on his heels. Once in the car, he spoke a few words with his partner and they took off. I followed them and we rode together through town going at the same speed - they some 50 meters in front of me, me looking around for a gray building, which might contain a school.

Almost out of town, the police car pulled over and I passed it. But as I didn't feel like missing the school, I too stopped to check my road sheet. As I did, the police officer, stepped out of his car and pointed to my right through some bushes saying something in Russian. I was not quite sure, what he meant, but I

I constantly passed beautiful full timbered houses, grey with aging. Unfortunately they have not been maintained so most houses are slowly sinking in one or more corners.



soon understood that he was indicating a path to the school. I thanked him, waved, and headed towards the check point in school # 2, this being the first time the law enforcing authorities have helped me to complete a brevet. I suppose the police officers had seen a lot of bicyclists heading to the school and therefore knew with great probability, that I too was heading there.



I checked in at 9 o'clock Saturday morning after riding 459 km whereof 61 km this morning in 3 hours and 10 minutes – not exactly a fast start! This was the first of several check points in schools, and I was surprised to learn that I was to bring my bicycle with me inside. This was however a very good way of making certain, that the bicycles would still be at our disposal, when we would like to continue.



The check point in Pudozh was - as many others - situated in a grey school building.

I was offered hot tea, a hot stew, bread and cookies, which I accepted happily, as I had grown hungry by now. I had a chat with some of the other riders, so my stay lasted more than an hour – I must have been tired...

Leaving Pudozh at 10:00 my legs and knees were still hurting and although I was hoping for the road to improve, the bad surface continued.

Next stop was in Peschanoe, to

which I arrived after riding 518 km, at 13:15 Saturday afternoon.



The checkpoint was in a summer camp for autistic children some 200 meters from the main road. The little road leading to the camp was clearly marked with balloons and colored tape – very easy to find. This time I was offered coffee, instead of tea, and cookies.

I left after 35 minutes and headed on down the road. I was riding close to Lake Onega, but I didn't see much of it, to tell the truth.



*The check point in Pudozh.
At all the check points there were plenty of food.*

After about 30 km the road changed, becoming absolutely perfect. My speed increased a bit and the steady rhythm of pedaling finally relieved the pain in my knees and legs. The perfect road continued for 24 km at which point the road sheet called for a left turn. The road I turned onto was a dirt road with a thick layer of gravel that made it difficult to navigate my bike. So the next 1200 meters was at slow speed concentrating on keeping the bike upright. Another left turn and yet another kilometer of anxious scouting for the check point before I arrived at Chelmuzhi School at 17:05, after doing 578 km.



Food and drink was handed out at one end of the gym while riders were sleeping on mattresses in the other end. I didn't lie down to sleep, but I sat myself on a bench and closed my eyes for a few minutes, so I spent 1½ hours at the checkpoint.

I backtracked to the main road, where I once again enjoyed the good road surface – as long as it lasted. After about 15 km things were back to normal.

Going through the towns this evening I met large groups of young – and not so young – people heading towards what seemed to be a Saturday ball at the local meeting place. They



The sun was just above the horizon and lit the trees on a background of steel grey clouds.

seemed cheerful, waving, cheering and laughing at me. It looked like they were going to have a joyful evening and I wondered what I was doing on a bike riding through the evening all alone instead of going to a ball together with good friends.

In Povenets I passed the sluices of the Belomoro-Baltiysky channel. As I passed the bridge over the channel, a couple of young ladies were standing at the side of the road. When they saw me coming towards them on my recumbent bicycle, they had trouble to keep their laughter back. But as they apparently were well brought up, they covered their mouths not to embarrass me. As I passed them, I could see the laughter in their eyes and how they could hardly keep it from coming out of their mouths. This was so funny, that I couldn't help laughing out loud.

And this again sparked the laughter of the girls. So as I rode away our merry laughter entwined and rose towards the quiet evening sky.

In Medvezhegorsk, at the North end of Lake Onega, the road sheet called for a left turn onto a smaller road. Immediately a steep hill – going up – appeared and from then on the road was significantly more hilly than up to this point. Soon I descended to Lake Onega and had a beautiful view of the lake in the light of the setting sun. Soon I was riding with trees on both sides of the road, which made this perhaps the darkest part of the ride.

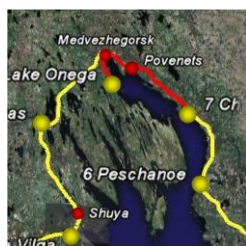
My back was now hurting as if it had been bruised by the beatings it had received through the past couple of days. Riding was not so bad, but whenever I got on or off the bike, I was reminded that



Shortly before midnight I rode along the coast of Lake Onega.

I had a back. This was something I had never experienced before, and something I expect comes from the very rough roads.

About 8 km from the check point a steep hill slowed me down so bad, that I could have walked up faster than I rode. But from the top of the hill there was nice long descent to the Lake Onega check point - number eight in the ride - where I arrived at 23:45 Saturday night, after covering 682 km.



The checkpoint was on the beach of Lake Onega with a short walk in the sand to a fire amongst the trees along the shore. Although it was late, it was still light enough to see the lake and a

lonely boat in the distance. Beautiful! The support crew made sure to stamp my control book and then offered me sausages from the fire. The mosquitoes had come out and were feasting on my blood – probably very tasty after being boiled for more than 36 hours. It would have suited me more than fine to sleep at this checkpoint, but this was one of the few checkpoints without a dormitory of any kind. So I had to continue, which I did at 12:20 Sunday morning.

100 km of night time riding lay

ahead of me, which usually means slow riding, but although I was tired, I was fairly confident that I could ride this distance in less than 4 hours as it was not dark. Little did I expect of what was to come.

As I started out the same way back as I had come, darkness surrounded me, as the trees stood high along the road. The hills had the same height going back as coming, but after feasting on sausages and hot tea they didn't seem nearly as tough. Now and then I would swoosh past other riders coming in the opposite direction and even if it was so dark, I could not tell who they were, I could tell that they were having about as much trouble, as I had had overcoming the hills. What a difference a hot meal can do.

Going out of Medvezhegorsk I took a right turn onto the Murmansk Highway. Along the road cars were lined up and at first I couldn't make out what they were all doing. But I realized that they had stopped to rest on their way to or from Murmansk. Within 400 meters I discovered

The check point at the shore of Lake Onega had a cosy fire.



that I was going in the wrong direction and I turned back, but still I was not sure which way to go. So I ended up going back and forth several times before I finally headed on in the right direction. Several motorists were awake and they must have been very surprised at seeing me going back and forth like a pendulum on the Murmansk Highway at 2:30 in the morning!

The light was very special – I now understand why they call it ‘the white nights’. The sky was clear and although it was the darkest time of night, I had no trouble seeing the road. The cool air combined with the warmer lakes and rivers brewed a fog that lay in all the lower parts of the

countryside. As I advanced out of the lowland I was met by the most spectacular sight at the crest of a longish hill. Below me lay a forest with a lake in the distance. The dark silhouettes of the shoreline trees were reflected in the mirror-like water of the lake and together with a ghostly fog and the light beyond the horizon, an almost fairy-like scenery was at my feet. I stopped to take a couple of pictures, but they only render a vague image of what I saw.

A few kilometers further on a nice smooth asphalt lay waiting for me. The road was wide, well paved and with hardly any cars. The area looked deserted and I saw nobody for a long time. I

was not going as fast as I had hoped, and I could tell the result of not getting the sleep I needed.

As I pedaled on, I thought of the wildlife that Mikko almost had promised me, I would see: Deer, wolf, and bear. But until now all I had seen was two gulls chasing away an owl - something, I had not witnessed before, but still not as exciting as a bear or wolf. I played with the thought of coming across a Siberian Tiger – not that they are native to Karelia, but if I could go 1200 km in 4 days, I suppose a tiger could go 5,000 km in a month or so. I found the thought amusing, but got so caught up in my own imagination, that I almost got afraid of meeting a Siberian Tiger!



Riding up a long, low-grade ascent, I looked up and saw a lion crossing the road! In a split second it disappeared behind the crash fence some 50 meters in front of me. I was tired and thoughts only emerged slowly, so only after winking my eyes did I think that it must have been a dog. A Golden Retriever perhaps, as it had the right color? But the hind legs were wrong. They were unmistakably the hind legs of a lion. As I rode by the crash fence I looked under it - and there he was: A big, golden lion! I downshifted to make a little noise and the lion turned its head and looked me straight in the eyes: A big, round face with big eyes. Luckily the lion was just as scared of me as I was of it, so it turned and disappeared without a sound. Later I have established that it was a Lynx, a medium sized wild cat, which can grow up to about 1.2 meters.

The clear sky caused the temperature to fall and my thermometer registered 2 degrees Celsius as the lowest. I was still in my summer outfit: A short sleeved jersey, arm warmers, a thin rain jacket, and a reflective vest. Not much to defend yourself against winter temperatures, so I was freezing cold. Around 4 a.m. I stopped shortly to have a bite of bread, which was a major mistake. As I set out again the air cooled me down so I started shivering and no matter how much I tried to push on, I couldn't get warm again. I was shivering with cold and could

barely maintain a speed of 15 km/h. After half an hour of this I had to get off the bike and walk instead of bicycling as the wind didn't cool me off to the same degree when walking. German Manfred passed me checking if I was all right, which I assured him - I don't know why, because I wasn't! I was hoping walking would allow me to warm up, so I could get on the bike again, but it didn't really help.

After ten minutes of walking I realized that walking wouldn't do me much good and that it would be frightfully far to walk all the way to the next checkpoint in Girvas. Inspiration hit me: I got out my emergency survival blanket - as this was an emergency - cut a hole in it, and put it over my head as a poncho. I finished by putting on the reflective vest to keep everything together. This helped! I could immediately feel my body heat being reflected by my newly tailored poncho. Now I could continue my ride and before long I was no longer shivering although I was still cold.



I arrived at the checkpoint at the school in Girvas Sunday morning at 6:40 am. - 102 km and 6 hours and 20 minutes after the previous checkpoint - cold, tired, and with a memory of the Russian winter although I had only been there in summer time! This was truly a terrible night ride, which was caused by my own mistake in not preparing for a cold night. I was not the only rider who was surprised by the cold as I later heard several other riders telling tales from that memorable night!

I had something quick to eat and then I headed for the dormitory: The gym with mattresses laid out and nice, new blankets to hold you warm. I had hoped for the possibility of a warm shower, but I saw no showers at any check-



The Dormitory in Girvas.

points. And anyway I was too tired to shower and only wanted some sleep. I had about 4 hours of sleep and then I surfaced to another meal.



My bike was re-packed in Girvas.

Girvas was the second bag drop, so I could put on clean clothes – this time with one more layer! – and rearrange the things I was carrying in the tailbox.

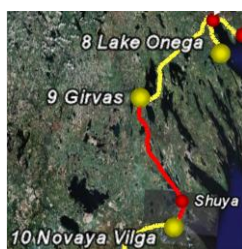
I was on my way again at 12:00 noon.

Today my back didn't hurt and my knees were much better. The roads hadn't improved much during my sleep, but they became better as the day progressed.

The next stop was to be Shuya according to the original plan and I hadn't noticed that it had been changed in the final route sheet. So when I arrived at Shuya, I couldn't make out why my GPS told me to continue through the town. I was soon riding on a very new highway, which was not on the GPS, so my confusion was complete. At a highway junction I turned towards Petrozavodsk, but after a kilometer or so, I realized that I was going in the wrong direction, so I turned back again. Two road workers took great interest in my riding back

and forth on this very new and nice highway so I gave them a friendly wave as I passed them the second time.

I was now quite confused as to where I was and which cue was the next, I should pay attention to, but four kilometers further on I took a left away from the highway and soon rode into Novaya Vilga, where the check point was situated. I had some difficulties in finding the School, where the check point was and went back and forth on the road a couple of times to see if I could find it. A car stopped and a man beckoned me to follow him. I was not sure what he meant, as he spoke no English, but he was very insistent, so I followed him up a dirt road to a junction, where he pointed me in the right direction a few hundred meters down the road.



I arrived at the checkpoint in Novaya Vilga Sunday at 5 p.m. after covering a total of 875 km. The support staff was as always very helpful and made sure that I had a nice cup of tea and some hot stew. I had decided to have a short sleep to make up for the lack of sleep the previous night, so I lay down in the dormitory and slept for about one hour.

I was back on the road again at 6:30 p.m.



The check point in Novaya Vilga.

When I reached the asphalt again I met one of the German riders who was as confused as to which way to go, as I had been. After a brief chat we were soon on our way again in each our direction.



How often do you get the choice between turning left towards Saint Petersburg or right towards Mumansk?

I was now riding on a good surface on a nice and wide highway. After 30 km the road sheet called for 5 km of road works. When I reached this, the surface of the road had been removed leaving two tracks covered with rocks the size of a blacksmith's fist. As I rode from the hard asphalt onto this, my bike slipped on the loose rocks and I almost fell. I had seen only little traffic until this point, but now cars were coming bumper to bumper, leaving no space for a bike on the side of the road. I tried to walk my bike, but this was impossible



Russian Antov Vikulov traversing the road works
Photo: Valentin Novikov

as cars kept coming, forcing me to pull my bike and myself up onto the piles of rock and gravel that were lining the road. Despair almost overcame me as I envisaged a very slow walk for five km to the end of the roadwork.

As a pause in the constant flow of cars appeared, I noticed that the road now was more compact

and had less loose rocks. So I decided to try to ride my bike. Luckily it was possible to keep the bike upright on the rough surface although I could only go at a very slow pace. And luckily no cars came up behind me before I had gained enough confidence in riding this very rough surface.

A little further on the road nar-

rowed into one lane, the rocks were replaced by dirt, and a steep climb began. There were now trucks and cars in front and close behind me so I had to stay in the middle of the track to make sure that they didn't try to pass me, because that would have squeezed me off the road. Luckily most of the Russian drivers were very patient with me. I was grinding my way up the hill concentrating hard not to slip and fall, when a Russian rider passed me dancing up the hill, overtaking cars left and right.

At the top of the hill a new, smooth surface emerged and I was able to zoom down the hill at considerable speed.

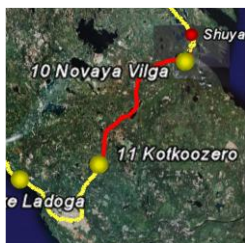
After another short stretch of roadwork a few km further on, the road narrowed to barely two lanes. Big trucks would pass me at a distance of a few centimeters, which was not pleasant. This was the only stretch on the entire ride, where I felt uneasy and vulnerable.

Four km before the checkpoint in Kotkozero the route turned away



I was queuing together with lorries and other big vehicles.

from the highway and I rode between trees floating on islands of mist – really beautiful, but the mist also made the air cold.



On arrival in Kotkoozero at 11:40 Sunday night I was determined not to relive the nightmare of the night before, so after a hot meal I headed to the dormitory, which was again situated in the Gym of the school. I was hoping that the morning would be as beautiful as the evening, so I slept only 3 hours, so I wouldn't miss the sunrise.

I left Kotkoozero Monday morning at 4:20 a.m. after restocking food in- as well as externally.

The fog was thick as I left the checkpoint, but less than 10

minutes down the road the fog had lifted and only a thin mist over the lower parts of the countryside was left. This was what I had risen early for! The sun was not up yet, but a pink edge was visible in the horizon, the sky was purple-blue and white mist shrouded the lakes and streams. Beautiful! In less than an hour the sun was up and shining from a blue sky – life was wonderful!

Shortly before the checkpoint at Lake Ladoga, I discovered that my handlebar was coming loose. I stopped and secured the 4 screws in time to make sure that none of them ended up somewhere on the Russian roads.

At 9:20 a.m. I arrived at the checkpoint by Lake Ladoga after covering 1062 km.

The checkpoint was right on the shore with tents for dormitories, a fire with tea and stew and as always a very hospitable crew, who



did everything they could to make me comfortable. After having something to eat and drink, I wandered down to the beach to have a good look at the lake. The lake is enormous – the opposite shore could not be seen and the sandy beach was as wide



as most beaches, I know. The weather was however overcast now and there was a cold wind, so the beach didn't really invite to a prolonged stay.

Morning mist at Kotkoozero.





The weather was fair Monday morning - and the scenery was beautiful!

I waved good-bye to the crew, who followed me out to the road to take pictures, and headed down the road at 10:05 a.m.

The road followed the shore for a little while, but soon it turned inland. I was now marked by the many kilometers, which resulted in a rather slow progress. I seem to remember the route being more hilly than the previous 1000 km, but this might be my memory playing tricks with me.

My GPS had the checkpoint in Pitkyaranta marked almost on the other side of town and I was heading for it when another rider, who

was coming from a side road, signaled me to turn onto this road and head down to a school. I was lucky – had we not met, I would probably have spent hours looking for the checkpoint in the wrong place.



I arrived at the checkpoint in Pitkyaranta Monday at 2:05 p.m. after riding 1138 km. The 75 km since last check point had taken

me 4 hours, which illustrates how little energy I had left at this point in the ride.

The checkpoint was once more in a school, but this time it seemed that the school was larger than the others, with quite a lot of activity going on. Finding the support crew was not easy, as I had to carry my bike up two flights of stairs – something that was not easy to do at this stage.

There was an exhausted feeling to this check point instead of the excitement of being close to the finish line – finally the support crew seemed to be worn out after



View of Lake Ladoga shortly before reaching Sortovalva.

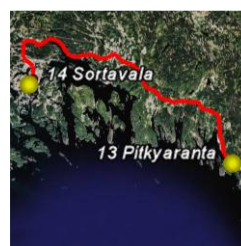
long days of helping and servicing the riders.

I left Pitkyaranta after 45 minutes and headed down the final leg of the ride. This last part of the ride was very hilly with some quite steep ascents.

Some 20 km before the finish the road again followed the shoreline and I had to stop to take a couple of pictures of the beautiful scenery. But following the shore also meant going up and down some steep hills.

At 6:53 p.m., after covering 1214 km in 83 hours 40 minutes, I arrived at the final checkpoint in Sortovalva. I was greeted by Mikhail, the organizer, and his support team and was given the choice between the usual cup of tea and an unusual glass of vodka! I choose the tea, as I feared that alcohol would greatly impair my ability to walk to the hotel.

I rented a room in a hotel, had a long, hot bath, and then went out to have diner. And before long, I was asleep in my bed.



A few numbers:

	Number	Average time	Fastest	Slowest
Starters	47			
DNF ¹	12	37 h 40 min	16 h 30 min	85 h 17 min
Completed 600 km ²	2	38 h	36 h 50 min	39 h 6 min
Completed 1200 km	33	79 h 37 m	59 h 59 min	90 h

¹ One rider was out of time at one check point, but he never the less completed all 1200 km.

² Two riders did the first half of the ride as a 600 km Brevet.

Epilogue

As time goes, the memory of rough roads seem to fade, and what remains is the imprint of kind hospitality and well organized check points, of roads with little traffic, of the beautiful scenery, of the light at night, of the mist in the evening and the morning, and of a ride without a single puncture!

My bike took a severe beating, but withstood it all without any damage - except for a broken headlight, courtesy of the airline – so now I trust it to go anywhere. I will, however, look into the possibilities of suspension next time, I come around this part of the world.

I will most certainly be very tempted to go back and do this ride or another Russian ride, if the possibility arises again in the future. Because this definitely was

an Adventure.



Photo: Manfred Tinebor, Valentin Novikov, Jan Buschardt