



Norway

in Granny Gear

by Sasha Aslanian

W e're high in the western mountains of Norway drenched in a cold rain when we reach the tunnel. I can't quite tell where its roar is coming from, but it frightens me. The red taillight from my husband's bicycle rises in the distance — even the tunnel is uphill. My legs tremble and refuse to cooperate. I'm not sure if it's exhaustion or fear, but I can't make it. I climb off my bicycle just a few car lengths in and my bike shoes sink into the black dust as I push my bicycle. We are inside Grieg's Hall of the Mountain King, and I'm terrified.

My husband and I are retracing a World War II bicycle ride across Norway. My grandparents went this way in the summer of 1940, just a few months into the German occupation. Asta and Kristoffer Ladstein caught a ferry boat from Finnøy, their small island near Stavanger, and pedaled 200 miles into eastern Norway. Their two-year-old daughter was in the handlebar basket.

In 1940, the tunnel wouldn't have been here. They were out in the open on this mountain plateau. Lichen-covered rocks met sky. Waterfalls, wind, and sheep bells would have been the only sounds. Petrol was so scarce that Norwegians converted cars to burn wood pellets. Military trucks would have been the only traffic. All roads were gravel, making it a challenge to climb or descend Norway's steep landscape.

Inside the tunnel, headlights shine beside me. Cars slow to a crawl and seem almost protective of us. I feel like I'm swimming with whales. My kneecaps keep shaking as I plod along, holding the bike between me and the cars. A half-mile in, the tunnel curves and I see white daylight ahead. My husband, Leif, waits at the mouth as rain pelts down. We learn a few days later there was a bypass road. We missed it a few kilometers back.

It's day two of a six-day trek and I'm realizing that biking the flat Paul Bunyon Trail where I live in Minnesota was no way to train. The first day in Norway, as I inched along a stone shelf over waterfalls, Leif asked if we needed to turn back. For a year I had been emailing Norwegian relatives about this idea. At first, there was silence. "They're a little worried about your trip," my mother explained. I'd made magnets for everybody in the family with a vintage photo of my grandparents on their ride, smiling into the sunshine in 1940, to

commemorate the trip. I can't quit now.

My grandmother told me about her bicycle trip when I was a teenager and I was impressed by her athleticism. She still took a daily three-mile walk around her

closes the door, leaving us to eat. I open the guestbook and see only Norwegian writing inside.

Few of my Norwegian cousins took me up on my invitation to join this bike



Baby on board. Asta and Kristoffer arrive in Heddal with two-year-old Gunbjorg.

neighborhood in Seattle. To her American grandchildren, life under occupation was as mysterious as the flashlight my grandfather kept in the shed. Pump a little lever with your thumb and a weak beam of light comes out. "This is what we had during the war," he said.

When I asked my grandmother why they did the bike trip, she shrugged and said, "There was nothing else to do." More than a decade after their deaths, I wanted to understand people who biked up mountains when life got tough.

Leif pedals out of the tunnel. I've taken to calling him The Viking for the way he muscles up hills with four heavy panniers. Suddenly he breaks line and aims for a red house with a Telemark-style grass-topped roof. "Lefse waffler kafe," says the home-made sign. Three old people, seemingly the last non-English speakers in Norway, answer the door and we step into the past.

They usher us into a tidy room that takes up half of the little wooden house. There's a bed in the corner, a wood stove, and a long wooden table with two benches. We drip everywhere with our raincoats, bike shoes, and helmets, and they wave off our apologies. Out come plates of lefse, heart-shaped waffles with strawberry jam, and cups of strong, hot coffee. Our hostess

trip because they've used up their generous vacation time in Thailand, Greece, and Portugal. Norway is rich with oil money, and the prosperity is staggering. Things feel particularly stark this summer as Leif and I watch the dollar plummet to 5 Norwegian kroner. A beer costs \$16. I celebrate finding an \$80 cabin the first night in Røldal until I discover I have to spend \$25 to rent sheets and a buck for a three-minute shower. I have a flash memory of Eastern Europeans flocking to Paris where I was living after the Berlin Wall fell. They camped in the parks and ate canned goods they carried from home. But they saw the City of Lights.

We're just hoping to make it to Heddal. My grandparents' grand destination was a farm that her older sister and her husband were renting to make a living during the war.

The lefse lady returns, and we discuss the weather. It's rained for three days. But our hostess pantomimes that we've made it to the top of the mountain pass and the road will be flat going forward. None of this, she says, raising her forearm to signify the sharp slant we've battled all day.

She shakes my hand goodbye and clucks at how cold my skin is. We struggle to get moving quickly and, just as she says, we



Generations. *The stabbur, or granary, on the Mælansmo farm that marked the end of the ride nearly 70 years ago – and today.*

turn the corner down into an alpine valley, the sun appears, and a tailwind pushes us past intense blue lakes and white waterfalls. We see no other bicyclists for two days and only a few cars. We have Norway to ourselves. For a few minutes, flying downhill, I imagine my grandparents must have felt free like this.

I pull out my cell phone and call ahead to a cousin who's invited us to his family's mountain cabin in Vågslid for the night — 10 kilometers until a warm bath and the embrace of family. We spend the next day with them on their folding bicycles coasting 30 miles downhill to Åmot. Like childbirth, I have already forgotten the pain of the previous day.

Another epic descent greets us on day four as the rocky canyons empty to the canals of Telemark. On day five the fields flatten and we see the breadbasket of Norway. Then two spokes on Leif's rear wheel give out, and we find a bike mechanic, Arne, in Seljord who's just finished his own trip over the mountains. He spends his lunch hour helping us and refuses all payment. "Just greet my Aunt Gerd for me in Minneapolis," he says with a big smile.

Another relative who worries about us spending the night in a town where we know no one calls up the wife of a cousin she hasn't seen in 10 years, and the good

woman comes home from work and cooks dinner for two rumpled Americans riding through town.

I'm seeing what family means to Norwegians, and that's partly why I came here. It turns out the wartime bike trip is a common story. We hear tales about how they had to cut tree branches to drag behind the old bikes to break the speed on the mountain descents. My great-uncle, who made his own bike trip to Heddal, remembers that milk was rationed so he carried a bucket to buy it from farms along the way.

Most of the bicycles we see now are tied to the back of RVs roaring past us down the road, but my relatives see that I am searching for a connection. One cousin remembers that her mother got my grandmother's bicycle when they moved to America. The cousin remembers how her mother liked to ride it in a dress, the wind billowing underneath. She recommends this sensation to me, the bicyclist's version of skinny-dipping.

The weather gets sunnier as we move eastward toward Oslo and I'm baking in lycra shorts on our last uphill climb to Heddal. We reach Heddal's famous Stave Church in the evening, an 800-year-old wooden church that's one of the few left in Norway. Think of a Viking ship sticking out of the earth, tall

with vaulted angles. It's a miracle this tinder has survived the ages.

As I lean my bicycle against the cemetery wall and step around the old bumpy gravestones, Leif has moved ahead. He finds the church guide who understands our mission at once. Liv remembers the island people coming to work here so many years ago and doesn't seem to think we're crazy for pedaling six days to get here.

She rushes to the edge of the cemetery in her long black guide costume and points to the valley across the river. "See that red barn? It's there! The family will be happy to talk with you. The grandmother will remember."

We backtrack the farm roads and get lost. I pull out the photographs of the Heddal farm that another great-aunt in Oslo had thought to send with us. A kindly neighbor lady listens to my story and offers to call ahead for us. She returns and says, "Jon is waiting for you!" Down the road, a trim man in work clothes walks out to meet us on our bicycles. Jon Mælansmo's blue eyes crinkle as he remembers my great-aunt and great-uncle who rented his family's farm for five years. He pulls out his cell phone and calls ahead to his wife at the farmhouse to let her know we're coming.

I make a not-so-triumphant arrival pushing my bike up an incredibly steep gravel

driveway (did my grandparents pedal this?) and gain a view of the valley below and the Stave Church like a toy on the other side of the river. Jon's son, wife, and elderly mother take turns holding the black and white photographs of their farm. The grandchildren stare and stare at the two Americans who arrive by bicycle with old photographs and bad Norwegian.

We are invited inside for cakes and coffee. It's like they've been waiting for us. The grandmother says she often wondered what happened to my relatives from Finnøy.

Hard times linked these two families for a time. The Mælansmos needed someone to work the farm, and my relatives had to rent land to making a living. Our arrival reminds them of this long-ago arrangement and the friendship that developed during those difficult years.

Fittingly, Jon's son works for the bus company that will haul us back to Oslo. My grandparents probably spent a few weeks here filling up on good food rationed in wartime and then turned their bicycles around for home. I can see them smiling into the sunshine, she in her blouse, he in his argyle socks and matching sweater, with Gunbjorg, their toddler daughter, covering her face from the sun.

They don't know the war will last five more years, that they'll eventually make it to America, and that someday an American granddaughter will put her bicycle on an airplane so she can make their trip again.

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Sasha Aslanian is a producer for Minnesota Public Radio and lives in St. Paul Minnesota. Norwegian truckers were surprised to see her pedaling along with a microphone tucked in her bike jersey.

Nuts & Bolts



Best time to go:

Mid-June to mid-August. Norwegians take vacation in July, so there may be more competition for accommodations.

Tunnels:

It's essential to get maps that mark the hundreds of tunnels in Norway. Many are completely off-limits to cyclists due to fumes and length (see the Trento Bike website for a guide).



Accommodations:

Campgrounds are plentiful, and Norway has a strong ethic of sharing the outdoors. It's legal to camp on private property for one night as long as you stay 150 meters from the nearest house or cabin.

www.visitnorway.com/en/Articles/Theme/Where-to-stay/Youth-and-family-hostels.

Web resources:

www.bike-norway.com
www.northsea-cycle.com
www.camping.no
www.cycletourer.co.uk/cycletouring/norway.shtml
www.trentobike.org/bycountry_one/Norway.html

Traveling with Bikes:

Norwegian trains accommodate bikes, with a separate ticket (about 10% of the cost of a train ticket). Check www.nsb.no/home. Bus companies (free) and ferry boats (additional 25% charge) also take bikes.

Bike Friday Travel Truths #1

THE BEST WAY TO GET FROM A TO B.

When Guinness Book of Records' "Most Traveled Man by Bicycle," Heinz Stucke, set out to break another record, only one bike would fold to allow him to hop, skip, and jump between remote GPS coordinates; Bike Friday's Custom Pocket Llama. We figure that with 45 years pedaling under his chamois and no rest stop in sight, he must know something about getting from A to B ...

THAT IS, ALASKA TO BOTSWANA.

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