

Going solo on the wild banks of the Baltic Sea



Starting the tour around the Baltic Sea, feeling excited

Could anyone have it any better?

Doris Zimmer was 55 years old when she set off alone on a remarkable 4,500 mile cycling circumnavigation of the Baltic Sea in 2019 – experiencing the “wilderness adventure of a lifetime”. While crossing nine international borders in 71 days, the intrepid German Audaxer had to be wary of the wild life, including bears, wolves, wild dogs and vicious sand ants in the lonesome forests of the east



CYCLING AROUND THE BALTIC Sea was still possible in 2019 before the coronavirus and the Russian war against Ukraine.

The seed of the idea was planted way back in 1998 while on a cycling tour of Denmark. I was chatting with other cyclists around a campfire, and the thought of riding around the whole Baltic Sea just took hold. No beer was involved, honestly!

I couldn't get rid of the notion, and instead started seriously plotting a tour. So in the early spring of 2019, ignoring my friends' warnings of loneliness, bears, wolves and biting insects, I began my preparations in high spirits.

The first thing I had to do was arrange visas for entry into Russia. Then I gathered parts for bike repair and bought a rough map covering the eastern countries of the Baltic. I also downloaded the Eurovelo route to my Garmin – and finally set off from the Danish ferry port of Frederikshavn on 31 May.

Having experienced many strenuous situations in my biking history, I was sure I could manage this journey... alone. My husband Holger and I shared an emotional farewell at the ferry, but he said he was sure I'd be fine.

The ferry reached Gothenburg on the east coast of Sweden on a cold but sunny day. The sky was an amazingly intense blue. Then I set off, heading north-west, and was soon happily cruising through the fabulous Swedish landscape. Good tailwinds made the ride to the lakes most enjoyable. My first night under canvas was at the forest edge, and it felt like coming home to be out in nature.

As I travelled further north to the southern mountain ranges of the Scandinavian shield, I experienced long, lonely hours in the pine and fir forests, meeting no-one. The silence surrounded me, interrupted only by occasional animal noises. The call of cranes carried for miles. I camped at lakesides, or on heathland or small beaches, watching the intense red sunsets as midsummer approached.

One night I accidentally pitched my tent in the middle of a grouse courtship area. It was fascinating to witness the night-time fighting between the males while the female stood to one side, watching them. The sparring and squabbling went on around me until nearly sunrise. I thought their fighting might destroy my tent, but somehow it was spared. Although I got no sleep that night, it was an extraordinary spectacle.

Eventually I left the mountains and reached the Baltic Sea Route at



Invited for coffee and cake on the Swedish National Day

Söderhamn. I met many other cyclists doing the coastal route, north or south. Friendships develop while cycling together, even for a short time, and I was honoured to be invited to celebrate Sweden's national day on 6 June. The coffee and cake buffet was delicious.

The temperature dropped suddenly, from around 16 degrees to almost zero, when I reached Lapland. I was only too aware that I hadn't thought about bringing winter gloves for this summer ride! The northerly winds, straight from the Arctic, continued for two days. One night an elk passed my tent in a clearing. I heard the sniffing and cautiously looked out, trying not to disturb it. It walked calmly by and was soon gone into the twilight.

After two weeks I reached the northern tip of the Baltic Sea, and the northernmost point of my travels. I stopped for a photo at a very shallow sweet water reed bay I'd passed a couple of years before. It was an

emotional moment – from now on I'd be going south!

It was a lonely ride down the coastline in Finland, but the landscape of low growing pine forests and the carpet of lichen covering the ground has always been one of my favourite ecosystems. Further south I was invited to a Finnish sauna after a hard day's cycling. It was, of course, a must, no matter how exhausted you feel. I came out of the lake with a leech on my leg.

I celebrated Midsummer at a music event with some fellow Germans – motorcyclists on their way to Nordkap. The Finns traditionally attend family celebrations on this day. A Finnish guy literally fell from his chair outside a supermarket, laughing his head off when I told him about my plans to cycle around the Baltic Sea on a bike. That's my kind of humour.

I'd made good progress; >>>>>



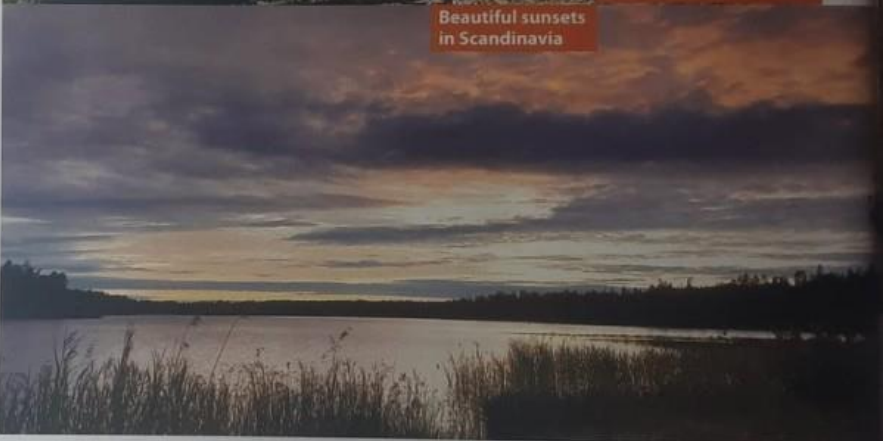
First night in the tent in Sweden, just great

“ My first night under canvas was at the forest edge, and it felt like coming home to be out in nature! ”



Crossing the border to Finland, heading south from now on

Beautiful sunsets in Scandinavia



so good in fact that I arrived at the Russian border too early, and found I'd have to wait for another ten days for my entry permit. So I detoured inland, visiting the Saimaa lake area in Karelia, watching in vain for the native sweet water Saimaa-seal, but otherwise enjoying the fantastic nature.

On 10 July I finally crossed the Russian border and was immediately aware that I wouldn't get by with English any longer. I was glad I'd trained to read Cyrillic script. It was a lonely landscape of dense primary forest. Without digital navigation I took to following the road signs, passing several control posts along the road without problems. The Russians I met never smiled or laughed, but were friendly. On one occasion they filled my water bottles with their own personal drinking water at a gas station. I had one last phone call with my husband for a minute before the

connection broke. I was alone and cut off in Russia.

I pitched my tent on the first night in Russia on a sandy bank of the Baltic Sea, south of Jernilowo. Looking around, I saw the footprint of a bear. It was quite old,

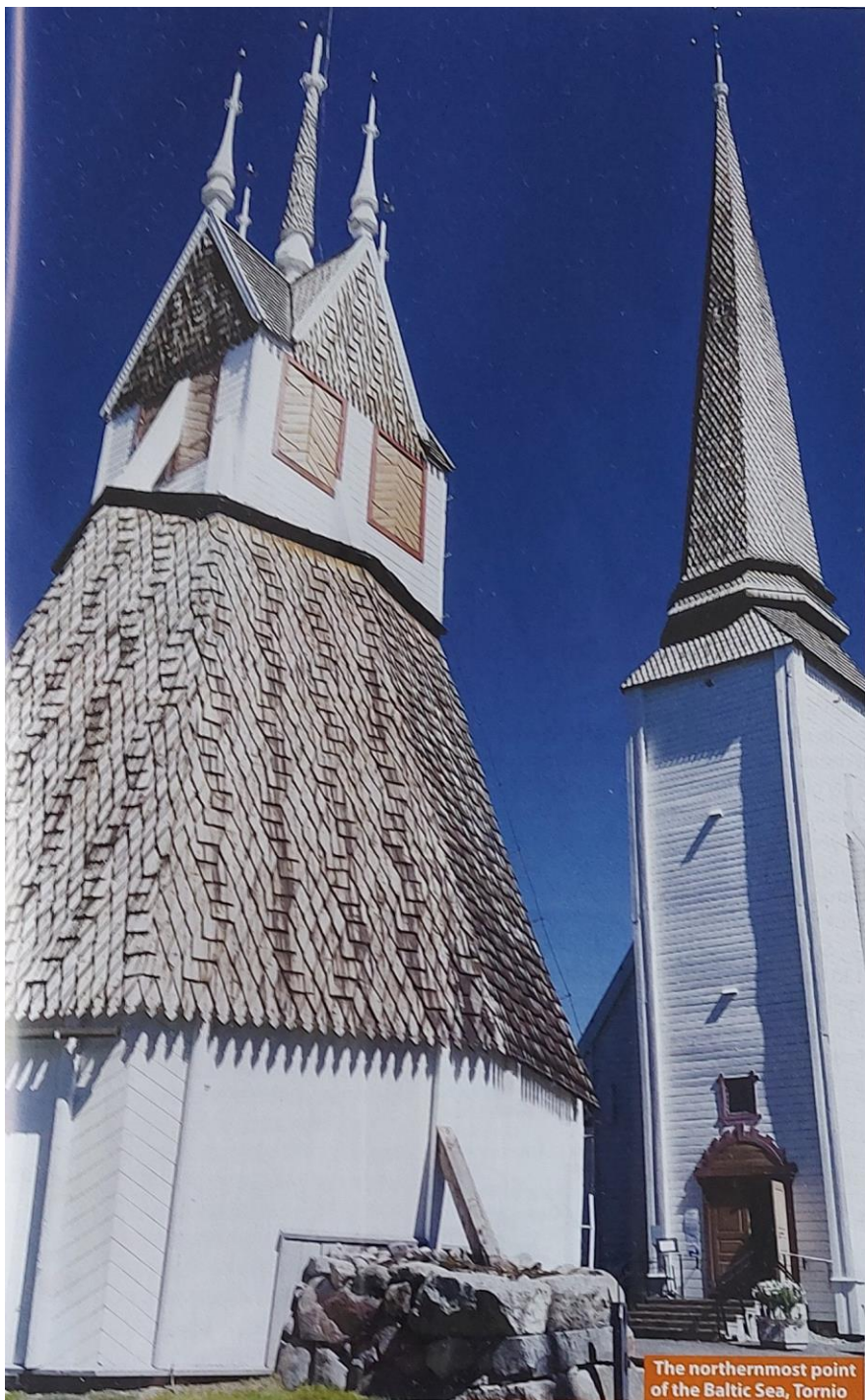
and there were no recent ones to be found. After dinner I fell asleep close to midnight but was suddenly awakened by the sound of a gun-shot close by. I was immediately tense. After a second shot I opened the tent and cautiously crept out, hiding in the dense willows. Two poachers were at the bathing spot, hunting ducks. The birds had clearly been frightened away, and the men got back into their car and drove away. I heard further shooting during the night, some kilometres away.

The incident left me feeling strained. I was still out of contact with anyone, but as nothing could be done about that, I continued my travels. I learned to identify the small shops in the countryside, some named *frukti* in Cyrillic, others completely without signs.

Reaching St Petersburg, and cycling along the Newa was very emotional, and I experienced a great feeling of happiness.

The Russian border, now it's Cyrillic





The northernmost point of the Baltic Sea, Tornio



Many Russians are part-time farmers

I'd reach the eastern end of the Baltic. My dream had come true! I stayed for two and a half days in the city.

On the road to Kronsburg I suddenly came up against a long tunnel, and was forced to stop. Luckily a Russian security officer realised my plight – and stopped a random white van, whose driver pragmatically gave me and my bike a lift.

I felt sorry to be leaving Russia, but the eastern Baltic countries awaited, with their long, sandy beaches and broad pine forests. In Estonia the highlights were, of course, the capital Tallin, and the Karst islands, Hiiumaa and Saaremaa were highlights. One night, after pitching my tent, I spent the night fighting aggressive sand ants. They managed to bite me, over and over again. I'd also been warned the area contained a population of golden jackals which had established themselves in the country.

Riding through Lettland I had to stop, of course, at the bicycle museum in Saulkrasti – an amazing collection. One night a young cyclist and I pitched our tents close to a populated beach, for safety reasons. Despite our age difference, we chatted until midnight about life and everything.

We split up again in Riga, because I wanted to visit the city. As I left for Lithuania I met Martin, a Swedish cyclist I'd encountered before. Going the same way, we decided to ride on together for Kaliningrad, and the famous Coronian Spit. "Flying blind?" he asked, when he noticed I was without navigation.

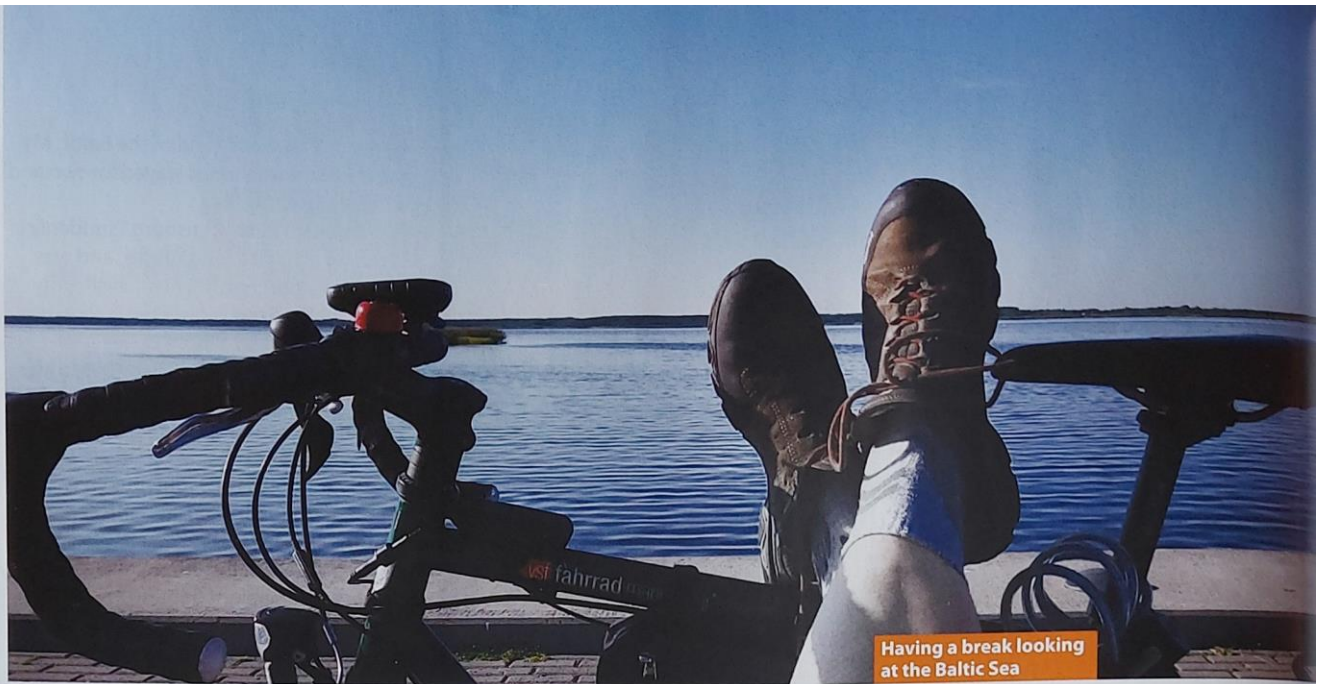
It has long been my dream to stay one night out on the Coronian Spit (a 98 kilometre, thin, curved sand-dune spit that separates the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Seas – a World Heritage Site). It was a fantastic, spectacular landscape – and we managed to avoid the notorious biting midges. The next evening we were invited to share a meal by a Russian family and that's where my love for blinis began. Empty bottles of vodka gathered under the table that night.

Kaliningrad (an exclave of the Russian Federation) was highly interesting. We had an encounter with two bad-tempered wild dogs which ran after our bikes, ears down and angrily bared teeth. They stopped in the last second when I shouted at them as loud as I could.

In Poland Martin took the ferry back to Stockholm and I continued the journey on my own. Concrete slab paths proved difficult cycling, then there was a car accident behind me as two cars tried to overtake at the same time. Luckily no one was harmed.

I loved the small, quiet





Having a break looking at the Baltic Sea

▶▶▶▶▶ villages and the softly rolling hills inland – and the good food. Wild dogs in the forest forced me to stay at crowded camp sites. I was also warned to watch my bike. It didn't help my camera though – so many photos lost! And then it was back home to Germany. I crossed the border at Swinemünde on a rainy day and experienced a big surprise: my navigation was back, right at the border!

Mecklenburg-Vorpommern then was known terrain and with a last ride through the night over 250km via Schwerin, Travemünde, and Kiel, crossing the famous Kiel-Canal, I reached my home village of Böklund close to Schleswig. The family was

waiting for me... with a big welcome!

In short: I experience zero defects over a distance of 7,200km. I changed the chain only once. The tyres were completely worn down, though, as well as the chain-rings. I stayed mostly in the wild, a few times at campsites or in hotels. Afterwards I had numb fingertips on both hands which took three months to heal.

So – 71 days of cycling – an average of 130 km/day. It was a great adventure; the feeling of freedom and happiness was an intense experience. Above all, it was the feeling of flying over the landscape on a bike.

Could anything be better?



An Irish rover with a love for lichen

Doris Zimmer is a freelance biologist who specialises in vegetation biology and lichens. She spent some time at Belfast's Queen's University in the 1980s – studying lichens on urban trees in the city, but also managing to enjoy wild camping on her bike while in Ireland.

"It was a long time ago," she says. "I was the only one riding around on a racer bike then, a very strange sight in Belfast. I was considered completely mad. I took the time to ride the Irish west coast in 1987, which was very unusual then. There were hardly any cyclists around, and none with tents of course. It was a time before the notion of this route becoming the Wild Atlantic Way. I repeated the ride from Belfast via Donegal and south to Cork in 2022, which was another fantastic adventure. And of course I've cycled in Scotland and England over the years as well. I have a great love for the UK and Ireland".

Today Doris lives with her husband and family in a small German village close to the Danish border, but admits she's the only one in the family who "can't live without cycling". She's a member of a cycling club in Schleswig, northern Germany. She completed her epic Baltic ride on a German-built steel VSF bike.

