

Greetings from Wagga Wagga and final trip newsletter 27 October 2005

Dear All

Take a deep breath or hit 'delete' – this missive is a bit long. This is the final wrap-up, sorry for the five pages but there will be no more!

We are, as you know back in Wagga Wagga and coming to grips with the catching up process and taking over responsibilities for our properties, our mail, and other trappings of life, after 2.4 years absence from the country.

A few more musings to finish off our reflections of our experiences:-

We enjoyed our time in the time-share unit at Otranto in far south Italy, but think that having to book it so far ahead was a drawback in that we had to have a schedule to get there on that date, and we could have spent a more relaxing time in Croatia instead. So we have not decided that it is such a good idea, unless it was the last week of a trip and you could clean up all the gear and get organised for the flight in comfort. Finding a nice place that was affordable would have been quite easy in the off-season in Western Europe, or anytime in Central Europe we thought.

Bearing in mind that we found deadlines unappealing, we decided to book our ticket once we got to Rome, and enjoyed our 'limitless' roaming till then.

We headed a bit north and then west across the hilly country towards Naples.

Away from the coast, we found all the towns were fully active – many of the coastal ones were virtual ghost towns till next summer. One characteristic of the inland towns seemed to be that they were easy to get straight into the centre, but once there we had to navigate around one-way streets and find the correct exit. This was often quite time consuming – towns usually signpost the way to the centre well but not the way out! By now we had become accustomed to the Italian signposting – an indication that the way was straight ahead at an intersection was an arrow pointing to the left if the signpost was on the right (instead of pointing upwards as is the norm).

A right hand turn was indicated by an arrow pointing right if the post was on the left, and a left turn by a signpost on the left with an arrow pointing left – all a bit complicated.

Another feature of inland towns in the south was no campgrounds, so we had to seek 'wild' camping under remote areas of olive groves or available nooks and crannies in countryside that has little space that is not under private ownership, or use hotels etc. We had 2 nights in a row without a shower – the longest period for the whole trip. Long distance bushwalkers will think of us as a bit prissy, but clean backsides are rather important for cycling.

Italy provided us with both our most expensive, and our least expensive, accommodations.

Riding in Italy was pretty good in general – secondary roads were usually easy to find, were well paved with light traffic, and the motorists gave lots of friendly beeps and waves. Cities and towns often had very poor pavement or cobblestones, were frequently very busy with cars, but the drivers seemed always alert. If one just watches Italian city traffic, one would probably not try to cycle, but in reality it feels reasonably safe.

The ride around the boot stiletto was great with little traffic, few hills and plenty of interest in medieval defences, Roman harbours carved out of the limestone, cliffs and beaches all backed by horticulture, principally olives. Another feature for us was the presence just south of Lecce of a few villages where Greek is still the spoken language. Quite a record, given the fact that the Greek administration was kicked out at about the time of Christ. However the different languages were all "Greek" to us so we have had to accept the tourist blurb as authoritative.

Our trip from east to west across southern Italy was just north of Taranto on the eastern side to south of Salerno on the west coast. Except for a couple of towns this was not typical tourist country. The eastern side was quite flat after rising a few metres from the coast. Lots of large olive orchards, vegetable fields (tomatoes, onions, etc) and fortified farm house-farm building

complexes (masseries). The masseries served as defence against pirates from the sea, and other brigands from inland that were a semi-continuous problem over the middle-ages and earlier. We thought the modern houses in towns still reflect this architecture, 'bunker architecture' seemed a good description of the style, with boxy buildings and porches topped by flat concrete roofs.

As we travelled west the landscape became more hilly, then mountainous. This also meant the minor roads became less trafficked (cars chose the freeways to bypass the winding slow roads), the views became better and the puffing greater. Coastal horticulture changed to grain cropping further inland, then back to chestnuts, olives, figs and forestry with the steeper hillsides. I

(KRH) was impressed with the almost universal use of mouldboard tillage despite slopes of up to at least 20%. This is bad news for soils as we experienced after one storm when our mudguards were blocked by silt deposited across the bitumen roads (we became bogged!). Australian systems using zero tillage cropping techniques would be highly appropriate in this area, which has a climate not unlike that of Wagga Wagga. We have to admit however that considerable numbers of Australian farmers are also still hooked on cultivation systems.

On this same subject, a feature of the western coastal plain south of Salerno was its history. Around 600 to 400 BC the area was colonised by the Greeks who built towns and temples there. Later, as the population increased, the farming extended into the hills resulting in erosion, silting the river mouths and the development of swamps along the coastal plains.

Malaria became rife and only buffalo herders would live there. A positive result was that mozzarella cheese based on buffalo milk was developed in this area. So when you next have a pizza laced with mozzarella a minutes silence in mourning for the soils that suffered may be a good idea! Paestrum has some of the best preserved Greek ruins in the world, partly because the malarial swamps made human habitation in the area largely unviable so the ruins were undisturbed for centuries!

Some highlights before we got to Rome were:-

- The town of Matero where 13,000 people lived in hillside caves till 1950s. These were the peasants (about half the town population), and they had no sanitation, no electricity, no running water AND they kept their animals in the cave with them – sharing your bedroom, kitchen and lounge with a horse, a pig, and a few chooks must have been a cosy experience for a family of 8 upwards! Now the town is becoming gentrified (accelerated by the filming of the "Passion of Christ" there) and we stayed a night in a very clean cave hostel with sanitation, electricity, running water and no other animals, including humans.

- The Amalfi coast. This strip of 60kms or so of south facing coast is a mass of buildings creeping up and down a cliff face, overlooking the clear deep blue sea below. To us the Italians have to get the prize for building on the most impossible building sites both here and Matero! The road, like the buildings and the vegetation, clings to the cliff but the cars cannot speed so biking is quite possible, and preferable we thought. Some towns have traffic controllers at each end to have the cars travelling one way at a time as the roads are so narrow. Despite this being a very expensive little tourist spot we found a great little affordable room where we could lie in bed and look over the cliff at the same time, walk down a hundred or so steps then dive into the sea and swim into a cave etc.

- The ruins of Pompeii. It took us a whole exhausting but fascinating day to wander over most of the area that is rightly thronged with tourists. A lot of the best preserved frescos, mosaics, and erotic art has been transported to the museum in Naples, but the "big picture" of a Roman resort city halted in its prime comes alive when you can walk around inside the walls of the houses, even over some of the mosaic floors, the public buildings, the bakeries with ovens and grinding wheels intact, the fast food stalls with earthenware vats in situ and so on. A few plaster casts of dead Pompeians made it more real. We also discovered that most probably suffocated under ash, rather than dying instantly as we had thought beforehand – a letter by one survivor describes having to continually shake off the ash over several days.

- Riding up and looking into Vesuvius. It dominates the landscape from the Amalfi coast to Naples (as much as the smog allows anything to dominate), and is a beautiful classic volcanic cone rising from the coast. For us it was a challenge to get onto the right road taking us to the top, and we cycled up 500m of altitude before we hit a dead end, then had to retrace several kms downhill, 10-15kms of traffic choked roads to the base of the correct road then a constant 10km climb up more than 1000m altitude. The final indignity came when we had to pay for the last walk to the top – we got some accolades from the locals but no fee waiver for our sweat! It was interesting to see the smoke seeping from several fissures in the crater, and to ponder the problem of 3 million people who live both ON it, and in its possible eruption area. The locals say there is an evacuation plan but seem very hazy about what it is, apart from acknowledging there is no road system capable of handling such an evacuation (the traffic is 'chockers' as it is!)

- The National Archaeological Museum in Naples with its treasures from Greek Paestrum and Roman Pompeii. Naples gave us a good insight into traffic congestion and graffiti at its 'best', and Rome was gleaming and quiet by comparison.

Rome was also the only capital that felt as if it existed before the Middle Ages as it has the Roman ruins popping up all through the city – well any ruin in Rome has to be Roman (!) but seeing where Julius Caesar was killed was pretty good, and the best preserved building, the Pantheon, was pretty impressive – preserved by its use as a Christian church over the centuries.

Back in Sydney we found ourselves feeling taken aback at the S P A C E, the lack of cars, the law abiding traffic and the quiet of the city (no horns). Central Station looked a bit miniature in comparison with our more recent experience of London Waterloo. We found the air so clean, the language so nasal, and the countryside cycling from Orange to Tullibigeal absolutely stunning and traffic free (thank goodness for the end of the drought). Things seem to cost more than when we left (not just petrol), but we have to convert back to euros now to get a comparison with what we have been spending. We have found a lot of positive changes in Australia, and it does not feel backward compared with our experiences of Europe – of course we were not living at the 'top end'! We found some countries have virtually no supermarket bags (you can buy plastic ones if you wish) but we did not see the degradable ones, like Woolworths sells, anywhere. Most supermarkets have a system where the customer weighs and attaches the price tag to fruit and veggies pre checkout so plastic bags abound there. We are thrilled to see the explosion of cyclist activity in Wagga, and the general feeling of affluence of Australia – what fortune we have to live in such a bountiful land. Etc.

General impressions after 2+ years of touring.

Our aim was to enjoy ourselves rather than do an epic challenging trip, and we certainly achieved that. Our troubles were few and minimal, and the only real regret was that Gill found 12 months working was too long to maintain the feeling of 'fun and interest' (this was more to do with the job itself in the NHS system). Keith did not have this experience but enjoyed some uninterrupted computing time, cycling in the magnificent Richmond Park and with a local CTC (Cycle Touring Club) group, doing an occasional vacuuming job and keeping the food on the table.

A feeling of timelessness with a lack of commitments and schedule was a huge luxury – 6 months is probably sufficient to get this feeling, but the lack of a destination was also significant both for the day-to-day travel and the end point.

The place was convenient for long term bicycle travel – Europe has a lot of towns and villages spaced within easy bike distances, and hence food and shelter are always not far away. The population density means that it would be relatively easy to get help if needed. The shoulder seasons are perfect times for biking in general though a lot of services and sights become more difficult eg campgrounds, restaurants and even tourist offices may be closed, ferry and attractions schedules are more inconvenient. We did spend one winter travelling and it was not as cold as we expected – we biked all year round in London, Gill going 20-25 kms for work each day. Wet and cold is a poor combination for camping and biking though, and though the Finns cycle in towns in mid winter, travel between towns in snow would be more challenging than fun. Variety was a daily experience – countryside changes, new understandings of history and geography, differing languages and customs in different countries. Even food shopping was fun, if frequent

due to carrying capacity and no refrigeration. Coffee and pastry opportunities were frequent, and bike routes or off-road cycleways were a boost to our experiences.

Having few possessions, but enough to be fully self sufficient for a few days, is extremely liberating. Wearing the same clothes for 2 years is no hardship at all (especially if you can wash them frequently!). We travelled with too much gear!

Travel by bicycle has several advantages over other modes of transport – it is easier than walking in general, especially carrying more comforts, and is often faster in cities. We often rode the bikes into the major cities on the first day of a stay to see the major sites, and to plan later days when we would go by public transport to visit museums etc. without risking getting the bikes stolen (twice bitten – ever shy). Bikes also allow one to be more in touch with the surroundings – smell, constant awareness of the weather.

It is easier to interact with locals by the wayside. It is so easy to stop for a better look at something interesting. The road surface is often less a problem than for cars – one can weave between potholes or a narrow track is sufficient. In towns it is distinctly advantageous – you can frequently pass along blocked roads, duck through lanes, become a pedestrian in moments if more convenient, stop and have time to read signs etc. Costs of getting from spot to spot are minimal – a bit extra food and what a joy that is! Healthy daily exercise is not a problem to fit in. Bicycles give a capacity to escape crowds - crowds of tourists really stilted our enjoyment of some places. One can have a feeling of discovery (false usually) when you are the only tourist present. There is plenty of space to think and relax the mind on the open road – almost a meditation. Touring by car or public transport usually means stopping only in the towns. Bicycle travel means most time is spent out of the towns – this suits our mentality. Drawbacks – some weather is testing (but not like summer in Australia!), sometimes you have to work harder than is purely 'fun' (but it only makes you fitter as a side effect), you need more time to see the same amount (but usually it is more enjoyable) and plane journeys with a bike can be a pain.

Camping was generally very available and comfortable, and very much cheaper in general than beds of any sort. We made a 'rule' to bathe before bed to maintain cleanliness of our sleeping gear, and so staying in campgrounds was our norm. It put us in touch with the camping car and tenting fraternity, but not many backpackers who spend more on their accommodation. Bikes and camping made our extended trip economically possible, and we seldom felt we were sacrificing comfort. If we struck problems, or the cost was low, we stayed in hotels, rooms, hostels. Often, after a day or two in accommodation, we were pleased to be back in the tent – like coming home.

Languages – a bit of Spanish or Italian, some French, some German and a lot of English means few problems with daily goods and services, but in depth conversations of course need good language skills and we missed the ability to ask the multitude of questions we pondered as we poked along.

In short, we feel extremely grateful to have been able to indulge ourselves for so long in such a hassle free existence but it is good to be back home and to start catching up with people again. We realise that this would have been impossible without the fantastic support we had at home from numerous people, especially those handling our properties, business and the dreaded mail. We are extremely grateful for this help.

Cheers,
Gillian and Keith

Hello from Sydney – 27 October 2005

Dear All,

We have arrived safe and happy and find Sydney a lot less busy than Rome and Naples and Europe in general.

We will send a more detailed message to complete our roundup of Europe eventually so you can look forward to a knock on the door rather than more newsletters after that. If you happen to be elsewhere than in Australia maybe the knock will be a long time coming! However we will keep this e-mail address for the time being. We have also activated Gillian's mobile and the number is 0404915449.

We are still in Sydney and leave tonight for the Tullibigeal-Condobolin area to collect the car and catch up with the Helyar clan at the same time. We are going by bus to Orange then will sample the NSW roads by cycling the rest of the way (200 to 250 km). It will be interesting to compare the experience with Italy and elsewhere. For now we still feel a bit like tourists probably because we have been away for so long - it is still surprising to hear everybody speaking Australian rather than the babble of assorted languages and an occasional Australian tourist. We stayed for a couple of nights in a hostel style hotel and many of the other guests spoke other languages so we have been eased in gently!

We have found cycling in Sydney city centre a breeze compared with what we had remembered. The traffic density is much less than most (all?) European cities, the road surface is generally good (no cobblestones for instance), and the traffic is so law abiding. We have not yet become fully used to driving on the left side so have to be extra careful about that.

Looking forward to more personal contact with those of you we have not seen for so long.

Cheers
G and K

Puglia Notes – 2 October 2005

Dear All,

Our last message was from Dubrovnik and we are now (1/10/05) near the end of a week in a timeshare unit north of Otranto in the heel of Italy. We travelled by ferry from Dubrovnik to Bari in Italy then by bicycle down the east coast to Lecce, across the peninsula to Gallipoli (not the Turkish Gallipoli) then around the tip of the heel and up the east coast to Otranto. Tomorrow we head north and west towards Naples and Rome before flying home. This should take three or four weeks so we expect to be back in Australia about the end of October. We decided there was not enough time left to take in Greece and Turkey, so they will have to wait to another time.

Since I (K) am interested in what plants grow where and why I wanted to say a little about this. The first point is the roadside plants that resist the cars at the side of the bitumen - where a cyclists' eyes are focused a lot of the time. A previous colleague of mine, Bob Martin, christened Parramatta grass as roadside grass on the North Coast of NSW because it dominated the 10 to 15 cm at the side of the road being the toughest plant in that area. Well on the plains of Hungary and in this area – Puglia – couch grass occupies this niche and in northern Croatia and Slovenia, wireweed predominates. Maybe the subject deserves a book! I forget what plants were there in Northern Europe. Gill – nettles!

It has been interesting observing the trees and other plants as we came down the Croatian coast and through this part of Italy. The climate just north of Rome is very similar to that at Wagga so it was interesting to observe the commonality of the plants in this area with those in southern NSW. One point of interest is that a weed tree that we are always pulling up in the back yard in Wagga is a common street tree in Croatia from Rejika at the head of the Adriatic to Dubrovnik. On the other side of the coin it appears the Croatians have resisted all introduction of Australian species because the only common tree we saw was the White cedar which is also native to both Australia and Eurasia. We had to wait till we reached Italy before seeing eucalyptus trees, Norfolk Island Pines and an occasional bottle-brush.

I guess it will not be news to reveal that the main land-use in this area is olive growing with vineyards and vegetable plots in a sub-dominant position with very limited areas of pasture. The other feature of the heel of the boot is that the whole landscape is taken up by commercial agriculture with very restricted areas of scrub that might represent the original vegetation eg. steep gullies between coastal cliff areas – even there much of the land has been terraced for olive production.

Other impressions of the area are the influences of many different epochs of history. There are rubbles of the past all over the place representing many layers of history – here Greek, there Roman or remnants of crusader or Turkish invaders and fortifications against all of these plus pirates and cattle smugglers to boot. Whatever town we came to, it seemed we could find some feature to look at or think about. One town featured a castle and a levitating saint; we saw an old Roman harbour carved out of the soft coastal limestone and plenty of medieval castles defending against the marauding tribes that attacked the area after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Comparisons between Italy coast and Croatian coast - the buildings on the Italian side of the Adriatic are crumbling more than on the Croatian side and we think that it is due to lesser quality of limestone. Here there are far more mounds of stones all over the place and far more rubbish lying about. The sea is clear in some places but is generally growing more slime on rocks. There is a greater evidence of people digging holes in the rocks and building "things" on this side through the centuries. English is less spoken, tourist offices are less helpful in general, and the place closes down with a thud about 1pm till about 4pm. We noticed campgrounds starting to

close in Croatia but as soon as we arrived here the next day it looked as though the hordes had deserted the place – mostly everything closed accommodation wise, large tourist car parks and restaurants ghostlike. It seemed strange to us as the temps are still mid 20s and sunny and warm enough to swim – until today when it has rained all day and is cool. It also appears in certain areas that there are lots of unfinished building projects, some lying idle for some years. The food here is definitely more varied and of good quality, and we are enjoying that – not that we starved before by any means!!!!

The roadside rubbish was present in the busier roadside stops in Croatia but in Italy it seems to be an art form. Plastic bags and bottles litter the roadsides and the beach and cliff fronts. If you walk into a bit of roadside scrub the scene is even worse. We have felt this area of Italy has an enormous amount to offer but it has not realised that yet! The coastline is quite varied – generally limestone rocks lining the coast, but there are some decent cliffs, with lots of caves, both natural and human enhanced. There are also some stretches of fine sandy beaches. There is a definite lack of waves, but this allows one to swim and see the bottom at the same time, and this is great. The roads in the small towns are pretty dreadful at times but between are good, and the advantage of the hordes disappearing is that there are few cars - Sat mid afternoon along the coast hugging road had about 1 car per minute! So great cycling as the terrain is generally not hilly down here either.

We are looking forward to coming home, but of course with mixed feelings as we are not yet exhausted and have so much more we want to see. It will be difficult to throw away the gypsy lifestyle too. However with Europe closing down for winter, we find it harder to get cheap accommodation, and less satisfying when you find attractions, and tourist offices, closed, so that makes it timely. We are very keen to see everybody, and to touch base with our investments, house etc, not to say removing the responsibility from those who have been so wonderful while we have been away!

More snippets and a definite date for homecoming when we book (which we will not do for a couple of weeks probably).

Cheers
Keith and Gill

Hello from Krk – 10 September 2005

Dear All,

Krk is an island in northern Croatia on the Adriatic sea. The water here is fantastically clear and blue and the swimming temperature is just right. The sea is glassy smooth - like a mirror in the morning. We are enjoying the drier air of the Mediterranean after so long in the lush and humid areas of central Europe.

From Vienna (Austria's capital) we continued down the Danube cycle track to Budapest (capital of Hungary) with a short detour into Bratislava (Slovakia's capital). From Budapest we went south-west via Lake Balaton, then west into Croatia to Zagreb (Croatian capital). Then west to Ljubljana (capital Slovenia), finally south into Croatia again and to Krk. So we have had a capital tour of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire now divided into umpteen countries that presumably had been coveting their independence for centuries.

A few general comments of our impressions:

Austria: Clean, neat and organised, lots of services and good roads and camping. The Austrians seem to have been very particular to fig-leaf their statues of Greek gods etc. - much more so than other cities. However the city architecture and palaces are impressive but the centre is occupied by a conglomeration of palace buildings rather than a central square. There is a very nice wetland national park downstream on the Danube that was established after protests against development of a hydro scheme.

Bratislava: This city is dominated by a huge block of a castle on a hill overlooking the city. From our approach it was easy to reach and leave the centre on the Danube cycleway on the south of the river. However cycling through the suburbs to the campsite was anything but pleasant because we had to dodge both cars and trams and the road surface was dreadful. However the city centre was pleasant and is becoming nicely renovated - but there is still much to be done.

Hungary: This country is impressive from several respects. Our first tourist office gave us a cycleway map of the whole country - a first in Europe for us. The tourism authority is national which made it easy for us to plan the trip. Other countries mostly have regional authorities who only handle their small area. Agriculture in Hungary was particularly impressive in both scale and quality of the crops. There were large plantings of corn and less sunflowers. I (K) thought of the area as the prairies of central Europe in this case based on loess (wind blown) soils- I expect Ukraine would be equally impressive as a cropping area with its famous soils. The bike routes were good and we kept to them for most of the trip. There were specialist off-road routes in the more touristy areas. The lakes were clean, there was a great spa (lots of hot water spas in Hungary dating from Roman and particularly Turkish times) area and the cakes and coffee were good.

Croatia (known in Croatia as Hrvatske - we can't work out how the English came up with Croatia): We were met at the border crossing by tourist officers offering us information - another first for us in Europe. We travelled on secondary roads near the tollways but they were still busy - we think because the locals didn't want to pay the tolls. Nearly all the campsites in Croatia are on the coast so campsites inland are rare. One night we stopped in Varazdin north of Zagreb which was in the middle of a baroque festival. The floodlit dance groups set up in the open (old moat ditch around the castle) were particularly impressive. For a town about the size of Wagga the number of artist stalls, cafes and entertainment events such as jugglers and street musicians was quite an achievement.

Zagreb appeared generally battered, worn and graffiti ridden but has an impressive central city area full of life. For us it was easy to get in and out because a straight road went straight through without a turn - the Romans must have left their mark!

Slovenia: finding ourselves so close to Ljubljana we decided to go there and found the country particularly impressive. All the campsites were good, clean and organised and the roads were good. The minor roads were good for us with little traffic. English is generally well understood and

Bicycle Wagga Wagga – Ride Report

Where's the Helyars?

spoken. The villages are interesting with characteristic wooden barns and hay and corn drying sheds. As we left Zagreb the countryside changes from rolling plains to hills and valleys as the alpine areas approach. The forests on the hills are still dominated by fir, beech and oak.

Heading south through the limestone areas and caves we entered the Mediterranean basin with its change to a drier climate. From Krk we are heading through the islands to Dubrovnik.

More later, cheers,
Gillian and Keith

Not Flooded Away – 29 August 2005

Dear All

Just in case you heard about the floods in Austria etc and along the Danube, we are safe and sound in Budapest. The river is still rising and lapping at the roadside here, but we are heading inland tomorrow towards Croatia and Slovenia, via the lake. Still raining each day/night a bit but not too bad.

Cheers,
G and K

Greetings from Prague – 10 August 2005

Dear All,

We are in Prague and expect to leave tomorrow - weather a bit stormy and wet the last few days. We shall move south towards the pointy mountains and manoeuvre our way into Vienna in Austria over the next week.

Have been dosing ourselves with info about the Hapsburgs, the Hussities, the Slavs and so on - learning history here in school must be a nightmare with borders (and religions) changing every few years, and the latest changes have only been so recent - it makes one think that Australia is such an old country with its borders defined for so long, and internal wars non-existent (except for those between the original incumbents and the white invaders).

Prague is indeed a city with a mass of beautiful buildings, a facade lover's paradise (not a victim of the last world war in that respect). We had the joy of going to a proms concert in the Smetana Hall of the beautiful Municipal House and it is an elegant place (more so than we were, after touring all day dressed in our sports shoes etc). We were a little bit sheepish among the Prague crowd but sipped our complimentary pre concert champers happily.

Prague has a feeling of a city existing for tourists though of course it is a fully functioning capital city. There are so many tourists (2 more with us) and so much obvious attention at servicing tourists that we have felt a bit uncomfortable - we are so used to dropping into towns that seem to have no tourists in them. One of the enjoyable features of bike travel is this feeling of 'exploration' rather than just visiting the feature sights.

However, we have enjoyed some popular visits though. In a town called Kutna Hora we went down a medieval silver mine which almost made us claustrophobic with its tiny passages and dripping water - we thought that the coats they gave us to wear were to make us feel part of the act but they were necessary to protect our clothes! Also there we visited a church that has decorations made from the bones of some 40,000 humans - in about the 13th century someone brought back a handful of earth from the Holy Land and sprinkled it on the churchyard. This led to a wave of people wanting to be buried here for some centuries. The bones piled up outside the church walls, then inside, till in 1870 a chap decided to arrange them as decorations in the church! There are some huge pyramids of bones as well more elaborate arrangements, and it is quite a sight.

We have found the Czech Republic more advanced in many aspects to Slovakia and certainly Poland. This is evident in the agriculture which generally looks as good as the West of Europe and with a lot of mechanisation and bigger fields, the prevalence of restaurants and camping grounds, and generally good housing. We went to a small agricultural machinery museum and we interested to see the mechanisation that had been here since 1900 - it was not all manual or horses everywhere obviously. Now there are lots of John Deere, Massey Fergusons etc but the local Skoda and Zetor are still about. We visited an interesting Museum of Communism here in Prague - the Czechs' view of an undesirable regime. Most of the people we have spoken to have been happy to be free of Communism, but some of the older folk seem to be having trouble adjusting especially to what they perceive as the misuse of freedom that the young people demonstrate - graffiti on walls etc.

One characteristic of the East Euro nations is the old shells of industries typified by inactive chimneys and buildings - we are unable to identify what they produced, and some are still active. These are a bit like memorials to the past dotting the landscape. In Czech we have found most of the roads lined by apple trees, and a few pears - amazing quantities of small apples that probably mostly rot. Close to Prague we did come across commercial orchards of apples, some well tended, some not.

Riding in Czech has been more demanding than we had expected knowing it was fairly flat - it is, but it has few flat bits. We had days of 80 kms with 1400 metres climb in mid 30s temperatures and thought we had lost our capacity to manage, but cooler weather and less climbs made us feel better.

We have been eating out a lot with the cheaper prices - usually a main meal, and have stayed in more pensions etc, so have been luxuriating in this. In Czech there are a lot of local cycle tourers - more than we found in any country so far - they tend to sleep under 'shelters' rather than in tents, but often have good bikes and gear otherwise. Also lots of lycra here.

Other snippets - less cabbage eaten, and more cakes, in Czech than Slovakia and especially Poland. Cherries and strawberries were plentiful and good in Poland but have barely seen either since, growing or in shops. Gypsies harvest wild berries in the mountains and sell them at roadsides - we met some that were harvesting berries on our hikes (and harvested some ourselves). We saw quite a few gypsies in Slovakia but few elsewhere. Dumplings are common in Czech and Slovakia for both savoury and sweet meals, Chinese food is available in Czech but not in Poland and seldom in Slovakia. Pizzas are everywhere. Beer is the drink of choice everywhere and is drunk from 9 am on (perhaps earlier!). Low alcohol beer is not common.

So saying, perhaps it is time for us to sample some. Hope you are all happy and well.

Cheers,
G and K

Short Catchup from Slovakia - 29 July 2005

Dear All,

We have been enjoying the last couple of weeks in Slovakia and are almost ready to head into the Czech Republic. Now in a town called Zilina in NW Slovakia.

Highlights of our last couple of weeks have been the mountains - especially High Tatras and Mala Fatra national Parks in the north of the country. We had 3 days walking in the High Tatras - almost climbing really, using fixed chains over very steep passes. We stayed at a chateau at 2000m one night - still some snow pockets at that height. The Tatras are spectacularly steep and only about 23km long. Yesterday we had a long day walk around the more gentle Mala Fatras with some beautiful ridge walking, as well as plenty of puffing to get up to about 1800m.

Have also enjoyed some of the spas here - hot springs of highly mineralised water that are very popular with the locals. We have had little contact with tourists here (apart from Czechs, Poles and Hungarians) but have found English is spoken more here than in Poland in general (more German in Poland than anything). Another highlight has been some good interactions with the locals on walks and in pensions where we stayed overnight and good coffee and tea are a little rare in Poland.

Weather now in the 30s and quite sticky with a bit of exercise. We are hoping to have an easy day cruising along the Vah River - have done a fair bit of hill climbing in Slovakia.

More details later, best wishes,
Gill and Keith

To and From Krakow - 12 July 2005

Dear All,

We had a 400km ride over 4 days from Warsaw to Krakow, the first section along the Wista River then across country to Krakow. As you can see from the pace we did not tarry too long anywhere but saw some interesting country and towns. The river flats were thriving with horticulture so there were lots of roadside strawberry and cherry sellers - always a temptation but a bit hard to stop bruising as we bounced along the road. Hence we had to eat them quickly. Gill found that they lasted better if she hung them on the butterfly handlebars - sounds a bit awkward but actually works quite well with the front of the bars well forward.

In this southern section of Poland there is a lot more of the strip farming we described previously. The whole area seems to be subdivided into small plots with very few larger paddocks. Many of the minor roads on which we ride are lined by houses sitting on the end of the plots. So the picture is one of massive ribbon development that can be clearly seen from lookout points. The road signs showing the start of one village often are at the same spot as the sign announcing the start of the next village! Even away from the river many of the crops are horticultural, a better option for small farms, but there are still plenty of cereal crops. We counted more than 15 different agricultural products that we saw within a couple of hours riding so it was very interesting (they are interspersed such a lot too). It would have been interesting to talk to some scientists at a soils and agronomy Institute we passed on the trip to Krakow but we were there on a Sunday so missed that opportunity.

We stayed one night at an "Agrotouristka" (spelt a bit like this) - a place in the country open to guests with meals available. The owner, when he found we were from Australia did not want to charge us for camping, dinner and breakfast!!!! He had been a shearer in Spain so spoke Spanish and one of the other guests spoke a few words of French so we communicated in various modes (our language skills are pretty poor but we can say hello in Polish at last!)

The country is full of enterprise and the dismal poverty we saw when we first came into it from the NW we found was due to the fact that the people there were displaced from elsewhere (Belarus we think). There is an awful lot of new house building, and also renovating. The new houses are almost all lightweight cement blocks or perforated large bricks, and these are then covered with sheets of styrofoam (about 2-3 inches thick). Over this is a mesh then concrete render and paint.

We visited a couple of restored medieval villages but are getting a bit ho-hum about these village squares with their Burgher houses, cobblestones, churches and wells etc. They don't seem to vary greatly across northern Europe and we have decided that the fashion to preserve cobblestone streets, and even to lay new ones, is an excess of nostalgia. As a bicycle rider I (Keith) think they should embrace the 21st century and allocate the cobblestones to history. The best cobblestone street I can remember was in southern France somewhere where they found a section of a Roman road while digging around in the town - it was about 1 metre below the current street level, the bottom of the pit was cleaned up to show the road and its foundations then a sheet of glass was put over it so people couldn't fall in but could still see the road. This bit of cobblestone history didn't cause headaches for cyclists!

We had 4 days camping in Krakow. We had a good look at the city which suffered little damage in the war so had lots of the older buildings intact.

We also visited the salt mine museum that is continuing to develop with displays of the history of the mine, the underground chapel and salt carvings of other historic events. Two hours at 130 m below ground level let us see 1% of the actual mine, which is still active. We visited Auschwitz - Birkenau for a day to experience the depths to which humanity can rapidly decline. Most people know the broad details but seeing the camps, their purpose built facilities and the stories and memorials focuses the mind on the causes and the ease with which people can be made to cooperate with such a scheme when their own life is threatened as an alternative. We were able to purchase a small book written in 1946 by one of the investigators into Nazi war crimes - the revelations to her were some of the first to reach the public. She lived in Warsaw throughout the

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war, but was not a Jew. We also visited Oskar Schindler's factory which just has a bit of the buildings and gate remaining.

Near Krakow and close to our campground is the "Kosciuszko Mound" - this was created as a memorial to the national hero. He is very much revered here and by all accounts was a very humane person, fighting against the feudal system in Poland as well as slavery in the US, and there are memorials to him also in the US. For Poles he is one of the chief symbols of their homeland.

We left Krakow in gentle rain which became more than gentle so by 2pm we booked into a nice hotel, and waking to heavy rain this morning we decided that 20 euros a night was well worth a little R and R. Because the cloud was low we did not see much scenery though we climbed a total of 900 metres in 65 kms, which is more hilly than our usual. However we are heading into the Tatra Mountains tomorrow so will have plenty of climbing to keep us busy! We have had glimpses of forested hilltops with house and agric below, so look forward to this, and to heading into Slovakia over the other side of the mountains. Another language and customs to "master"!

We have been saddened to hear of the bombs in London though our info is sketchy. With some good luck and management it is hopeful that the real causes of this terrorist activity will be addressed.

Cheers to you all
K and G

Hello from Warsaw - 2 July 2005

Dear All,

After last 'newsletter' we visited the Solidarity museum at Gdansk, which was very moving as this strike really started the breakdown of the Communist control in the areas we have been going through. It is a very modest museum really but has enough English (rare in Poland) for us blobs to understand. I (Keith) think the strike and subsequent negotiations on a set of demands far wider than the immediate 'pay and conditions' interests of the dockyard workers, is up there with other non-violent political campaigns such as those led by Martin Luther King and Ghandi. The campaign highlighted the hopelessness of the system so clearly that it eventually folded, even if that took about 8 more years and periods of martial law.

We headed east then to the Great Masurian Lakes area with some long, but pleasant, riding days - 2 days in a row we did 140km and one had 1100m of climbing. The country became gradually more rolling as we approached the old glacial lakes. This area has lots of forest, and lots of lakes of all sizes, and plenty of tourists - we ran into bicycle tourists again in this area. The travellers are almost exclusively German and we are constantly being taken as Germans - menus are frequently written with German, and occasionally with English. Away from the tourist spots it is only Polish with little English spoken also. We have not met another Australian since UK, so they are a bit thin on the ground on our tracks in this part of Europe.

We had a relaxing day going by boat across a few lakes and through canals, which was a nice change but we figured the scenery is more varied by bike. We then headed south to Warsaw, and camped one night in a forest - fairly secluded we thought till a chap walked past us as we were having breakfast! The next night we spent in a lovely 'boutique' hotel - DBB for 50 euros - off the beaten track but a rare find - many towns have no accommodation options at all, or restaurants. It is not hard to find some food in small shops that are found in most even tiny villages, but a meal or even a cup of tea or coffee is quite hard to find away from the big cities. We have found that the big roads (not our favoured routes at all) are good places to find more of these creature comforts. We have had some good meals at truckie fuel stops - always plenty to eat and local food is the only type served. Therefore good places to imbibe some bicycle fuel. We find these stops by navigating so we cross the busier 'red' roads at towns of moderate size.

The 'lakes' district, mostly forest as mentioned, had some grazed areas. As we left that area the land flattened and was dominated by dairy farms. There were some larger ones with herds of 30 to 50 that utilise modern methods including plastic wrapped round silage bales. Many of the herds however were less than 15 cows. The crops in this region were dominated by cereal rye and oats with little wheat - possibly indicating the soils are quite acid, but we didn't stop to measure the soil pH! As we got closer to Warsaw the agriculture became smaller in scale with lots of use of horses and less tractors. We were on one road that had just been renewed and the area looked like a subdivision development with new culvert pipes about every 25 metres in the roadside ditch. Eventually we realised these provided access to separate strips of crop on plots about 2 to 300 by 25 metres. This is very small scale cropping and probably reflected the size of the land titles dating maybe from peasant farming times. We also saw horse powered haymaking in this area.

The big roads can be hellish to travel on but the small roads are usually very good for us and we prefer to go further than fight the traffic. Coming into Warsaw, a motorist puled onto the pavement as we were studying our maps (we have 4 and they are all a little different!). He said "follow me" (as he drove), and guided us through about 10 km to put us on our desired street!

Warsaw is a little amazing - Berlin had lots of reminders of past horrors, but old central Warsaw and the extensive Jewish ghetto (about 1/3 of the city's population at the time) were completely razed into rubble by 1945, and now the Old Town has been rebuilt to it's previous look (from old paintings etc), and the ghetto area is covered with multi-story apartment blocks and parks. These buildings are not the most dismal of communist architecture, though are not exciting in any way, but it seems a fully functioning community again. The Jewish cemetery is huge and overgrown with weeds and trees (probably 60 yr old ones) - there was nobody left to look after it. Now it is a

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chief source of info about families who lived here. A film in the historical museum shows the sophistication of Warsaw life before WW2. The early 1990s has been the first opportunity the Poles have had to regain this. Some chaps dining at our nice hotel said 'come back in 10 years'.

The history of Poland is quite interesting. The country has been squeezed between Germany and Russia and has occasionally been independent. The period after WW1 was one of these independent times. We were also interested to chase up the Kosciuszko name and found he was a General in a Polish insurrection (liberation) in 1792 that was defeated by the Russian occupiers after holding an area around Warsaw and Krakow for three months. During this period they drew up a national constitution that is claimed to be the first written constitution. He also fought in the American War of Independence. So I guess these events were fresh in the mind of Streszleki (I think that was the name of our explorer) when he traversed the southern NSW alpine area.

Off tomorrow heading for Krakow. Hope rain has fallen on those who need it!!!

Cheers

G and K

Berlin and Onwards Berlin - 21 June 2005

Dear All

We promised some impressions of Berlin. The most noticeable thing is that the place is changing rapidly as it has done apparently ever since the war left a lot of real estate free of buildings. Then after reunification there has been a lot of demolition and rebuilding that is still going on. The result is some complete renovation of important buildings such as the Reichstag and the Brandenburg Gate, that were wrecks at the end of the war, and whole squares of modern (mostly glass facade) buildings with obvious input from architects. This contrasts with the utilitarian styles of the 60's that also predominated in Australia. One benefit for us I think was the broad avenues to and from the city area that leave plenty of room for bikeways. We found it very comfortable riding from the campground to various parts of the city- mostly on bikeways and on wide roads without heavy traffic at other times.

The other aspect of Berlin that was impressive was the public displays of the facts of the period from 1933 to 1989 when the wall came down. They have preserved parts of the wall that is covered with art usually with a peace theme. On the old East German side of the Brandenburg Gate, Paris Square has been redeveloped where embassies, hotels and banks have been rebuilt. There was a display in the square when we were there with lots of pictures to illustrate what it looked like at the end of the war. The display included pictures of other devastated cities such as Dresden, Rotterdam and Coventry, presumably to keep the balance of history before the public. In addition we visited the new monument in remembrance of the Jews who lost their lives in the camps (stark and extensive) and a section along a section of the wall devoted to the activities of the Peoples Court, set up by the Nazis in 1934 (operational till 1945) to avoid the normal limits of the justice system.

These courts were used to eliminate any form of opposition to the regime with summary trials, jail sentences and executions. It is impressive that the nation is still keeping the horrors of this period of history clearly in front of the people.

From Berlin we went 35 kms N to Oranienberg where there is a museum of the concentration camp Sachsenhausen - the latter essentially a model for the Nazis with many of the commandants at other C. camps cutting their teeth here. While we were at the extermination area, a huge storm hit and we were trapped there for some time. We emerged dripping and went to an hotel for the night. Then we had some very pleasant canal and river riding to, and along, the Oder River which separates Germany from Poland.

Into Poland - some dismal villages and much more evidence of decay than the old East Germany. Poverty very evident - housing, clothing, markets, shops and for us it is now cheap. Some EU money is evident - a nice lake promenade, occasional roads, but Poland has a lot of catching up to do to reach German standards.

The crops gradually became better and we have seen some that approach West German standards in some areas. There is at least as much cereal rye as wheat but plenty of canola also. We have seen the occasional horse drawn potato weeder and 1960s technology for haymaking. Tractors are mostly small Polish ones (only one John Deere). Small shops are still very evident as primary food shops but big supermarkets are starting to be evident. Some towns are hard to source a restaurant for hungry cyclists, but the coast poses no problems and the low cost means that we have no guilt about eating out and helping the economy in a small way. It is easy to spend 1/2 of what we needed in rest of Europe so far.

We tried some cycle routes - not to be recommended! There is a lot of old prefabricated cement block roadways that are functional but not ideal even for cycling. The biggest roads are too busy for cyclists, but there are plenty of smaller roads that are sealed and have good surface most of the time and have light traffic - this is good as motorists are not very cycle tolerant and can be erratic.

The coast has lovely fine white sand and is quite pleasant on a good day such as today but not warm enough for swimming (saw one person only in today).

We go into Gdansk tomorrow then head east towards the lakes area before south to Warsaw and Krakow areas.

Much cheer,
G and K

Greetings from Berlin - 8 June 2005

Dear All,

On Saturday 4th we arrived in Berlin after a good ride over 9 days from Koln. We averaged 90 km per day which appeals to my (Keith's) statistical aims but left us in bed most of the next day to recover. The 800 km was a delightful ride with bicycle paths in many places. In other areas we followed forest trails, often gravel but sometimes sealed roads, sometimes minor roads and rarely busy roads. The country is so closely settled that refreshment stops were always available. Camp sites tended to be less frequent than in Netherlands or Belgium but were usually of a high standard. There were also 'Nature Hostels' in some places. This is an association of nature lovers that runs establishments similar to Youth Hostels for walkers and cyclists and maybe even car travellers.

At our first camp after we left Koln we waved to another cycle camper as we left. He caught up with us mid-morning and we discovered he was also heading for Berlin. So for the rest of the journey we had a local guide (Enrico). It became a bit of a joke asking him what was the history of the towns and villages we went through. Eventually he said there were too many towns in Germany for him to know the answers so he started making up stories to keep us satisfied! It was great having his company and the capacity to quiz the locals on directions was a great help. He also had good bike maps for the route. In general we followed these so spent lots of time on scenic routes with little traffic and towns to interrupt us.

For the agriculturally inclined the trip from the Ardennes area of Belgium to Berlin went from hilly to rolling plains, from loam and clay soils to sandy soils, from Timothy - Cocksfoot pastures to ryegrass-cocksfoot pastures, from forest dominance to crop-pasture dominance but still with plenty of forest lots, and from very good rapeseed, wheat and barley crops (looked like 10 tonnes per hectare crops and very even) in the old West Germany to poorer crops in the old East Germany. There was a lot more cereal rye in the east also.

Overall the differences between east and west are not startling. There are still more houses that have not been painted recently in the east but the area is obviously rapidly catching up with the west. The old West Germany is spic and span, similar in standard to Netherlands, with well maintained houses and gardens and little or no rubbish along the roadsides. Also the road surfaces of minor roads in East Germany are rougher than in the west, with bumpy, patched up roads that cyclists don't appreciate too much. They even seem to know how to patch roads in the old western area without leaving a bumpy result! The increased prevalence of cobblestones was also not exceedingly welcome. But there was a feeling of more space, less people, and the fascination of seeing patches of the old East German way of life and infrastructure scattered amongst West German efficiency and style - Berlin is a real snapshot of this.

We stopped at Hamlyn (of Pied piper fame), and it was a great example of a town living on a legend, but rather nice anyway. Another town we enjoyed was Burg, and old E German town that still has plenty of the old buildings from past centuries - not glossed up. But it does have some fancy new buildings and tea shops etc. and the older buildings are gradually being renovated.

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Many of our campsites were beside lakes or streams emphasising the plentiful supply of rain and water here (We continue to be saddened by the news of the drought in Eastern Australia). We have even managed one swim but it was a bit cold at about 18 degrees in the water even though the day was over thirty. The water looked clean and unpolluted - compared with some parts of Belgium, and some of the industrial area of Germany, where we saw some very polluted stuff.

Belgium surprised us with its contrasts - some campgrounds should have been closed as they were so bad, but in the Ardennes we had some lovely ones - similarly with housing, roadside rubbish, bikeways etc.

We had some fairly consistent riding after Brussels, with quite a lot of hilly country and a great variety of surfaces. Also we have had only 2 days of summer weather, a few days of nice spring weather and many cooler and wet days. Good riding with the wind sometimes though! We have enjoyed the prevalence of wind generators in Germany (and especially when the blades faced us).

Will spend a couple more days in Berlin then head for Poland, so the next epistle should be from there.

Great to hear from you all
Cheers
Keith and Gillian

Germany - 31 May 2005

Dear All

Access to internet infrequent of late and short today, but we are well and travelling across Germany towards Berlin. Went down to the Ardennes area of Belgium then into Germany then to Bonn and Cologne and now at Hamlyn (of Pied Piper fame). Have joined with a young German chap also heading to Berlin and we are finding travelling together enjoyable.

More later, but still amazed at German bike networks.

Cheers
G and K

Belgium - 16 May 2005

Dear All

We have been out of email contact for over a week now, and are now between Antwerp and Brussels, in Belgium, taking life easy as we recover from colds. The weather turned cold again over a week ago and we had quite a few rainy days so we lost a bit of chirp in general. However we have just been luxuriating in the sunshine, eating and drinking in Mechalan, and are very content.

We left Holland feeling a little nervous that we would not be featherbedded with bikepaths, but have had nearly as good in Belgium, though the quality is down a bit. Belgium takes the cake for the largest number of lycra clad bicyclists so far, but is well down on Holland for general participation. They know who Robby McEwan is!

In Holland the 2 way bikepaths are 3 metres, 1 way are 2 metres, and squeeze points squeeze cars not bikes. We found that instead of following standard signed tourist bike routes we just set a compass bearing for where we wanted to go and a bike path was there anyway. This is also working in Belgium. One has to get route maps to find where these tourist routes go and they generally go in circles to take you back to where you started from, which does not suit us so well.

Our first campsite in Belgium was truly dismal - almost developing world standard, but we quickly found another that gave a bit more cleanliness and facilities - we had been spoiled in Holland we think. Generally we have found Belgium is not as completely manicured as Holland - some rubbish lying around, not so much mowing and so on, and French is now being spoken, though it is still, in the north, mostly Dutch. The signs are Dutch.

Tomorrow to Brussels and then further south and/or east.

Update from Holland - 5 May 2005

Dear All

Our first impression arriving from smoggy England was industrial smoggy Rotterdam, so we headed straight north along the beaches and to see the International Court at The Hague (it had no sign announcing it as such!). Interestingly we found no English language tourist information at the Information Centre, and only maps for sale, rather than a cheap mud map of 'the sights'. People are very helpful though, and a good source of information, and know bike routes.

The flower farms are significantly impressive, and riding through them one can appreciate the perfume as well as the sight. We visited the garden 'Keukenhof' which is a gluttony of the visual senses as it has so much in both variety and quantity of bulbs in bloom, and saw a few of the original types of tulips that had been imported from Central Europe to Holland.

On our first day we looked over a traditional windmill, admiring its construction and the quiet operation of its wooden and leather mechanism. There are apparently almost none in operation still, but they were a significant invention as water could then be lifted 3 metres. A lot of The Netherlands is now below sea level, and it is strange to be on top of a dyke and see the sea on one side with the farms on the other at a much lower level.

The Dutch are certainly used to pushing sand and earth around – we saw a big boat pumping sand back onto a beach on the west coast. This has to be done every 5 years, to cover the stones. The sand is collected out to sea a few km, loaded onto the barge and then pumped back in. The beaches have restaurants, and little beach houses built on the dunes at the back of the beach. They are completely dismantled at the end of summer then reconstructed again next spring!

We are really pleased that we made the choice to come here first after London. It was so easy to get here – just caught the train into town, cycled to another station, then caught the train and connecting ferry. Of course it is flat here also, so an easy introduction back into hauling all our gear, and the bicycle infrastructure is more than amazing.

We had expected Amsterdam to have heaps of cyclists and cycleways, but it is the WHOLE country so far. For once we do not feel a little odd! We now find it highly unusual to share our way with a car, but even on the rare occasions we have done so for a few metres, they are extremely careful of cyclists. We could not recommend a place for cycle touring more, so far, especially for those starting out. We are finding it hard to travel more than 50kms a day, because we are constantly sidetracked by sights, coffee and cake opportunities, museums and so on.

The camping is plentiful and good – we have sampled farm camping, basic commercial to 5 star, and the best we have enjoyed is 'nature campsites'- in nice places with hot showers and toilets, and run with an honour system of putting money in an envelope in a slot, and are not supervised at all. We have found them clean and quiet and also quite cheap. One campsite (a flash one) gave us free camping and complimentary coffee before we left, for being "adventurous, and doing it by bike and not by car!"

We have wandered up the west coast through the quite extensive sand dunes and went to the island of Texal for a couple of days. Texal had it's yearly festival of lighting bonfires all over the island – the kids all making small fires and people cooking potatoes and bread. One bunch of fishermen (commercial) was frying fish for one and all and it was the best fish! They kept pressing us to eat more till we thought we would burst! Texal is famous for its sheep of the same name,

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and Friesian cattle also come from this area. However it was really important to the Dutch East India Company as all ships that went to Indonesia left from here and came back to here. As it was the largest trading company in the world for some time, it was very busy! Now there is an active fishing fleet, great bird watching, lots of sheep and dairy products etc etc.

Yesterday we cycled along the 32km dyke dividing the old Zeider Zee, now dividing 2 huge freshwater lakes, to Lelystad where there is a replica of the 'Batavia' and also a museum particularly about the land reclamation. It has been very interesting to see this country, and learn how it has been managed over the centuries – it looks pretty unlikely that a dyke could spring a leak these days as they look so big and solid. The sea, and lakes, have been as calm as a millpond though.

The 'Batavia' was able to be crawled all over (literally on some decks that had about 1.3m headroom), and we were significantly impressed by the difficulties of sailing in the 1600s and conditions would have been similar to the convict ships it would seem. There was some reference to the real remains of the 'Batavia' in Freemantle, and the fact that the ship's master mistook the surf on a coral reef off Murchison for moonlight which led to the demise of the ship. This replica took 10 years to build, but in the heyday of the Dutch East India Company ships would be built in 9 months and would only be expected to last 15 years!

We are gradually understanding more of the efforts involved in creating dykes, and polders (reclaimed areas), and there are certainly a lot of canals, but little obvious indication of the constant pumping of water into the canals. Big gates let freshwater out from the large lake into the sea at low tide. A new polder was ready for commercial farming within 7 years of draining the salt water (the government farmed it with canola before this).

And just to finish we are enjoying eating a whole lot more new foods - too bad about the spare blubber from winter!

Much cheer from happy travellers,
Keith and Gillian.

We're Away - 25 April 2005

Dear All

We are away! All going well and are in Amsterdam. Phone was cut off before we left London so last minute calls/emails curtailed.

More later
K and G

Scotland Again - 24 March 2005

Dear All

We have just used up the last of Gill's leave on a trip to Scotland's northwest. This time we hired a small Renault "Kangoo" van, and were able to pop our bikes in the back and did not have to dismantle them to fit them in. This gave us great flexibility to get to areas we wanted to see (public transport is quite limited in that area), and cover from the elements when it was unpleasant riding conditions. It did mean that we had a full days travel each way between London and the Highlands, rather than loafing on the trains, but saved the hassles involved with train transfers and bikes, and inconvenient travel times. Probably cost a bit more, but we could recommend this option for short-term car/cycle trips.

We drove to Pitlochry in the Central Highlands the first day and left with a whisper of snow on the car next morning. This increased to pretty solid snow showers, and we were amused to see a bunch of 15 or so cyclists setting off into these conditions from Inverness at 9 am. – they obviously are not a fair weather group. (Of course, Gill was setting off for work in similar conditions the week before, but it always seems more brave when you are in warm dry conditions looking on!). It was great fun travelling along the little one-lane roads in the changeable weather – sometimes very snowy and then almost sunny. The wind became more fierce as well and by the time we arrived at Durness (the most NW town) we were very happy to try to find some cosy accommodation, especially when we saw the windswept snowy campground (which allowed free camping and toilets but no hot water – there was nobody there of course). We found one place – the Lazy Crofter Bunkhouse – which was cosy, friendly, clean, cheap and had only us and one other party each night we stayed so we had a big room to ourselves! It had windows overlooking the sea, so was just what we had hoped for. We woke to snow covering everything but a clear bright cold calm day, with the sun just warm enough to start the melt. It was great for walking and cycling so we took advantage of this. The next day was rainy all day and we walked to a beach that is accessible only by leg or boat – can be crowded in summer but on our day it was deserted. At least we were able to dry out in our bunkhouse. We were tempted to stay longer there but decided to gradually poke on down the coast exploring as many peninsulas as possible, by bike and car.

There were white crofting cottages scattered everywhere – these are quite small with a chimney at each end. Many had little plots of land beside them, and sheep were all over the countryside also. Crofters generally have a few acres of their own land and share grazing areas with other crofters. The sheep were principally cheviots with lesser numbers of horned blackface, and cattle were often the red longhaired highland variety. Some areas were very overgrazed, and with the very wet and cold winter easily became bog holes. It is pretty hard to find native vegetation in Scotland – most of the forest areas are planted pines of different varieties (one deciduous) – and most of the country is heathland and bogs, bare of any trees. This makes for expansive views, which are rare in England due to the hedgerows and trees. We found some very nice sandy beaches, lots of rocky coves and cliffs, and the matrix of interlocking sea lochs and freshwater lochs with a background of mountains and constantly changing sky made for fascinating scenery.

One of the pleasing features of the highlands was that although almost all the highlands had been cleared historically there is now a widespread effort to re-establish woodlands and forests with native trees. Much of the clearing apparently occurred from about 1500 BC to 500 AD but recent clearing of remnant areas of Caledonian pine occurred in the 1700's (smelting iron ore for cannons and cannon balls) and during the World Wars (timber for ammunition boxes!). Nothing like a war to complete the desecration. The efforts to re-establish the forests start with building deer-proof fences around a few hundred or thousand acres followed by planting mostly pines and silver birch. There are lots, probably hundreds, of these areas around the highlands so the scenery will be very different in a few years. The open countryside is grazed by enough sheep

and deer to stop the trees re-establishing and even to keep the heather in a very nibbled condition. However in future tourism will probably provide as much or more income than the established agricultural enterprises so maybe the whole area should be a National Park – it would be unique in Europe.

Fishing has been a traditional industry along the coast but the demands of modern fishing technology on the fish stocks has led to a rapid decline in fishing in recent years. Sooner or later we will learn to manage communal resources such as common grazing lands and the sea in an optimum way rather than competing blindly with each other until the resource in question collapses. Maybe we could learn from the techniques used by the Australian aborigines to manage communal resources without destroying them. On the industrial side there is a burgeoning salmon farming industry that puts cheap salmon in the supermarkets – almost as cheap as chicken and pork and a good quick meal for a camp stove. The young salmon are raised in the freshwater lochs and transferred to pens in the sea lochs to be grown to sale size.

On one ride on one of the isolated western peninsulas we spoke with a lady who ran a craft/coffee shop. She told us an interesting story about how the Gaelic language died out in her village. After the First World War many of the Gaelic speaking veterans did not marry - they lived on their own or with family (often sisters) but had no children to pass the language to. As the Gaelic speakers died the houses were bought by English speaking 'immigrants', the schools taught English and so the language died out.

There was only one night when it was vaguely attractive to camp, and this was the last night when we were planning an early departure so we did not bother. This was also the only night we saw a tent in the full week, and the locals commented on our 'hardiness' after our little jaunts on foot or bike. We sampled the hostels instead, but were disappointed to miss a night in one at a lighthouse (a group celebrating a 30 birthday had booked it for the weekend, and said we would probably be much happier not staying there). The whole country is just waking up after the winter hibernation – most B and Bs had "no vacancy" signs, meaning 'closed for winter', and most hostels and tourist places were opening at Easter. We had a shock at the Fort William YHA – they just had enough room to fit us in, and the place was crawling with walkers lurching out of bed from 4 am on it seemed. It was Saturday night at the start of spring with reasonable weather, but we were accustomed to being practically the only residents.

The days are lengthening at a fast rate now, and we have just had the spring solstice – 12 hours each of daylight and darkness. Daffodils and hyacinths are everywhere and they look definitely happier in the warmer weather than the snow! More birds are chirping, and the willows are starting to come into leaf – soon England will be less visible from the roads as the trees get full leaf again.

Gill has purchased another bike – a second hand English tourer in good condition with some good add-ons for a very reasonable price. We are having a house full of visitors at Easter and are looking forward to that, then we will focus on pruning down our belongings to the bare minimum again and setting off. Gill finishes work on 15th April, then we will most probably get a train/ferry to Holland and start pedalling – nice flat country to start on as London has spoiled us with its flat terrain.

Best wishes,

Gillian and Keith

Snow Here - 24 February 2005

Dear All (from Gillian)

This is our coldest week here so far and we have had some snow over the past 3 days. Mostly it has been in showers and does not settle, but this morning we had a .5-inch layer on the bike track, and it has snowed on me quite a bit on my route home yesterday and today. But I have a warm house to go home to - last Feb we had snow on us, after a downpour, with only a tent and open ablutions to come 'home' to, and nowhere to dry our clothes, and my emotions were vastly different. It is almost pleasurable to get wet and cold if you know there is a sure end to it very soon!

We spent last Sunday cruising around the Brick Lane market in east London - the police had said this was where bike thieves hocked their spoils, and it was certainly an education! The market is mostly stalls of cheap goods like tools, furniture and toiletries etc., but after a while we saw people standing around in 2 particular locations, holding onto a bike and some were entering into conversation and inspecting the bike. Then we realised that these were the touts - mostly young males, mostly a bit scruffy, and some, like prostitutes, were quietly offering "cheap bike" as we went past. It was so blatant! (After our theft in Barcelona we did the same thing at a big market but we could not pick the thieves). There was even a quite old chap there, and I wondered if he was the "Fagan". The bikes were all sorts, none more than 150 pounds, but some in mint condition. Mine was not there but we realised that we should have known about the market last week - the bike disappeared on Sat and the market is every Sunday.

What seemed so amazing is that this scene must have been going on in this area with various goods since before Dickens described these characters and their habits so long ago. The police are obviously knowledgeable but We had registered our serial numbers of our bikes with a Police run scheme that we came across at the London Bike Show, but many of the police had no knowledge of this scheme.

I found myself in a situation of repulsion at first, and thought 'how could I buy someone's stolen bike?', but then thought 'someone has mine', and I felt less troubled. However I still think I could not do it, and have been looking more avidly at other sources of replacement. I do not think I can buy another expensive machine at this point - I feel I am feeding the dishonest people too well. Statistics show that quite a number of people give up cycling altogether after a bike theft, and I do not want to be one of them. (one leaflet I read last night indicated that over 500,000 bikes are stolen in UK each year).

Enough of that. Suffice to say it added spice to our memories of Dickensonian London, and we enjoyed poking around the Old Spittlefields Market afterwards - it is much more varied in it's goods, and well worth a poke around if you have the chance. After this we journeyed north to a little Turkish place we had eaten in when we camped in N London in Nov 03 - a real bargain at 4 pounds a meal and still as tasty.

Whoops - out of time,
Cheers
G and K

Another Canondale Goes Missing - 16 February 2005

Dear All,

This bit written a day or two ago:

We are both mourning the loss of Gill's new bike to some discriminating thief last Saturday afternoon when we were at Tate Britain gallery. We came back to the front of the gallery to find Keith's bike carefully left, but the other one and the lock that was attaching them both to the solid railing vanished. We are consoling ourselves with all sorts of ideas - thank goodness it was not a whole lot of equipment as well, that it was not in a 'foreign' environment, that we had a house to go home to, that we could have been injured or a tsunami could have caught us. The main thing is that it really is just a bike and that if we get too distressed about that it just shows how materialistic we really are! By the kilometres that it gave her in respect to it's cost, it cost between A\$0.02 and \$0.03 per kilometre, so that's not bad either. Also luckily we have Judith's bike here and Gill is able to use it for the present. Savings on travel to and from work for a year amount to somewhere between A\$2000 – \$4000, and this does not take into account the rest of the weekend travel and so on!

Such is life! It is NOWHERE near the drama of the last theft. In fact Gill is still losing more sleep over work frustrations than this.

We had been having a really lovely day up till that point – the bikes give us so much freedom to explore, and now that Keith is back on wheels, we have been going through some areas new to us. Earl's Court is infested with Australians we believe, so we have not been there till last Saturday, and enjoyed cruising along the Thames towards the city from there. We came across the Royal Chelsea Hospital, and found that this is virtually a living museum. The grounds are the venue for the famous Chelsea Flower Show, but the 'Hospital' was built in the late 1600s for war pensioners. Keith is spreading the rumour that it was a present to the army from the newly restored monarch – King Charles 2nd who's father had his head lopped off by Cromwell and Co – because the idea appeals to his conspiratorial nature that it would help to keep/get them on side since they had just finished fighting on behalf of Cromwell's Commonwealth. But back to reality. At present the 'hospital' is home to about 350 chaps who have to be over 60 years old, have no surviving dependents, and have served in the military – they do not have to be disabled or ill. When they come here they live in a stained wooden walled 'berth' which is just like a ship's berth – about 6 foot by 9 foot – just enough room for a single bed, a small desk and chair, and a small wardrobe and bookshelf, and they are issued with 2 uniforms – a black one and a red one (they can wear civilian clothes if they wish but most were dressed in a blend). All meals are served in a grand hall, with soup, 6 choices of mains and 3 of dessert for lunch. So all their needs are met – they have lovely grounds, a club area with cheap grog, and a grand chapel that attracts fancy musicians. There is a museum for visitors and we could see through the chapel and the hall as well, with the pensioners showing visitors around with pride. Each year there is a ceremony which is attended by Royalty, and each Christmas one of the states of Australia supply a huge cake for the pensioners – last year it was Queensland.

We had not yet been to Tate Britain till last weekend either, and enjoyed it greatly. There are free talks on Saturday on some art subject and also on 'the painting of the month' as well as the permanent collection of old masters to modern. At present there is a special exhibition on Turner, Whistler and Monet, but we did not get to that before we discovered the theft - a bitter pill was having to fork out the equivalent of about \$A9 to get the train home! (At least on this train they did a ticket check – quite often they don't!).

Bicycle Wagga Wagga – Ride Report

Where's the Helyars?

We have had no snow in London this winter, yet, and it has been quite mild. A couple of weeks ago it was colder in Wagga and Canberra than in London that day (and it is still officially winter here!). Certainly, it has not been too cold to ride each day, and it has seldom been wet – a drizzle at most if it is damp (usually).

The weekend before we made a trip to the heart of Asian London, Southhall, which is just to the NW of us, but it is not on our way to anywhere on our normal routes. It is like a blend of London and the subcontinent (as you would expect!) – the buildings and roads are London, but the people and shop contents are basically all south Asian, including the habit of shops disgorging tables of goods onto the footpath – all British now of course.

Other news – big discussions for a day or two with Charles and Camilla issues, and then we had the midnight opening of a new Ikea shop with a sale opening at midnight which had to be closed after 30 minutes due to mob madness (6000 people, stabbing, fighting, heat exhaustion, cars left on busy roads once the parking lot filled). Valentine's Day created more madness with flowers everywhere. Tulips have been freely available in shops for over a month now, and in the gardens bulbs coming up. There are even some foolish daffodils in bloom. Some trees and shrubs have also been wooed with the mild weather into shooting leaves. Talking of cold, Keith lost some skin off the tip of his nose from our time in Finland with some frostnip and now sports a Rudolph nose.

Last day for Gill at work will be April 15th, and we are planning to depart the UK the next week, but have not decided in which direction as yet. We have a week of holiday in March before Easter. We are planning to go to Scotland at the moment, but where we want to go is a bit of a train fiddle, so we have not finalized that yet.

Today:

We have just had news that our neighbour died this afternoon – he and his wife have been very welcoming to us, and we shall miss him as we shared lots of little tea drinking sessions, and he was so cheerful in the face of adversity.

With that sombre note, we shall sign off, and hope you are all well and happy!

Cheers
Gillian and Keith.

Kuusamo NE Finland Doings - 2 February 2005

Dear All

We have just returned from a wonderful week in northern Finland. We swapped a timeshare week from Numurkah for a unit at a place called Kuusamo which is about 100 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle and 30 km west of the Russian border.

We were fortunate that the weather was mild in comparison to normal. Mostly it was about -7 to -15 and so we were able to stay outside without hiring extra gear. However it did get down to -25 on the last night when we went for a walk on the nearby lake looking for the Aurora Borealis. It was clear and colder - the conditions favourable to seeing the lights, but we did not see any. It seems they are not predictable, but are not seen so often in January, so we would have been very lucky. The colder days are normally -30 to -40 at this time of year, a temperature that would have made our stay more challenging.

At -10 thermal longs under trousers, two thermals on top with vest and a waterproof, an ear covering beanie plus a jacket hood and thick wool thinsulate gloves seemed OK. But at -25 we needed to add an extra pair of thermal socks, a thermal balaclava or head scarf with capacity to cover the cheeks and preferably the nose as well, an extra layer on top, preferably a 200 rated fleece, and gloves equivalent to about twice the insulation capacity of those good enough for -10.

The first day our flight left Heathrow at 7.30am and took 2 hours to Helsinki. We had about 3 hours available at Helsinki (2 hours earlier than London). It was fun wandering about in the snow around the streets of Helsinki which reminded us a bit of Hobart – small city on a shore (but no yachts). The sea was not frozen. We found the Old Market building by the harbour and enjoyed feasting on some of the local produce and seeing the products available. It was surprising to also see some open air stalls outside selling veggies – they are tough people. There is a lovely shopping esplanade, showcasing the famous products of Finland – marrimecco textiles, italia glass etc. A lot of the shops in the city though are in shopping malls which means you are not constantly taking coats, gloves etc on and off. We were disappointed to be unable to have time to get to the Zoo where there was an ice sculpture competition starting that day – they are then on show till they eventually melt some months later!

By the time we arrived in Kuusamo it was dark, and very white. We had to walk across the tarmac (just like Wagga) and were greeted by a 7-foot high snowman, and inside the terminal by a stuffed reindeer and sled. Kuusamo has a population of about 20,000 but supplied a bus to take us to our unit at the Kuusamo Tropiikki on a lake at the north of the town.

The resort was better than we had expected – we chose it because it was so far north and had an airport so was easy for us to get to. However it had everything on site (apart from a big supermarket). We had a coffee shop/bar that opened late, a restaurant that had superb breakfasts, and other meals for reasonable prices, another bar with sport constantly on TV (and dancing on Sat night), a children's play area, a gym, a handball/tennis court, ten pin bowling, but the best thing was the pool area with waterfall, slide, jacuzzis, sunbeds, steam and dry saunas etc. There was also cross country ski and snowshoe hire, plus about 30 snowmobiles on site. Within about 200 yards we had a cheese factory and a bakery (with sales). There was a 5km groomed ski track next to the lake that was lit till 9.30 each night. In summer there is an outdoor tennis court as well. Kuusamo has 2 other floodlit ski tracks, good shops, a big information centre that puts Wagga to shame, and is generally a pleasant town.

We walked the 6 or 7 km to town (the town is spread out, a bit like Australian towns – maybe town planners are affected by the amount of land available, but actually Finns love to be surrounded by space) to stock up on some food as we had a kitchen. Daylight was a bit longer

than we expected – from about 9am till 3.30pm. However after a leisurely start to the day and our prolonged peering in the supermarket (one of the little joys of self catering in other countries is the food purchasing), we arrived home at dusk!

We hired snowshoes next day and walked to a reindeer farm 10 or more km away. The snow was very deep and soft and even with the snowshoes we sunk to our knees going cross-country. We were glad we had our gaiters to keep the snow out of the top of our boots. The temperature is so low that the snow does not melt and consolidate even on the warmer days. Without snow shoes it seems you sink right through to the ground, or at least well above the knee. We just headed west on a compass bearing to a road about 6kms away, then thankfully took off the snow shoes and walked on the side of the snowploughed road (much easier walking). We overshot the farm by 1.5 km as we did not recognize it. Eventually we found a person who spoke some English (not a common experience outside of a shop) who explained how to find it, so we dragged the farmer from his lunch and he showed us the reindeer who had come in. The animals roam freely but come in to the farms to be fed when the snow gets too deep, and they find it difficult to find the lichens that they eat. Also there is a roundup at some stage by a group of farmers who bring them in to a central spot where they sort them out by ear tags (we found this out later from our friendly ski hire chaps – our farmer spoke 2 words of English to us “no money”). We retraced our steps (much easier over our earlier snowshoe trail) – it took us 6 1/2 hours for the journey and we had no real stops as it was too cold to linger. We only had a muesli bar each on the trot, but enjoyed our trip away from any people and any noise in general – such a contrast to London. It was beautiful – snow resting on the trees, and piled a foot or two high on buildings and horizontal surfaces. We walked across frozen lakes and through forests but saw no wildlife and only occasional tracks.

Another day we hired skis for a night and a day. We managed to get quite warm going around the groomed trail in the evening – it was superb and well used by the locals. The next day we decided to ski to the ski resort at a place called Ruka that is 27 km north of Kuusamo. We had been told there was a groomed trail all the way and we couldn't make any mistakes, but the high season does not start till mid Feb when all trails are groomed, so we followed snowmobile trails and sometimes ploughed through virgin snow. The further we went toward Ruka, the further it seemed to be away - the snowmobile tracks were not marked on the map. Our aim was to avoid the soft snow on the cross-country trail but unfortunately the tracks wandered all over the place and were rough and steep in places. One of the things we learned about cross country skiing in this type of snow away from the groomed trails, is to make sure you go in a group of 4 or more and then ensure there are at least 3 or 4 people in front of you to set the trail in the soft snow – especially when you are on skinny skating skis! This applies to skis or snowshoes. After skiing for about 30 km Gill was pretty cold and we still had 5 km to get to a warm place, so we found a cleared road back to the bus route and hailed the bus home to the comfort of the sauna. We had the same problem of not having good enough gear to keep us warm enough to stop for a rest, and did not warm up skiing as much as we had the night before. However the temperature had dropped more than we had realized also. We were not in danger as we were close to roads and houses but one does not like to flag down a car unless desperate, and we were not that. Luckily it was beautifully calm almost the whole time we were in Finland. When we went out knowing it was -20 or below, we took much greater care to close up all apertures in our clothing and cover our faces, and did not stray far from somewhere warm.

Interestingly, our ski hire chaps thought we were quite tough ('weak in the head' Gill said) and only charged us 10 euros each for the skis (it should have been more like 20 or 30 for that time), and we did not meet any others doing our cross-country bits (skis or snow shoes). So if any of you want to come this way or simply to look at the type of things they offer, here is an advertisement for them (www.rukapalvelu.fi). They also run reindeer, snowmobile and husky safaris. Incidentally, we did not find where we could hire 'backcountry' or 'telemark' skis. Our chaps rang around for us.

Other snippets

- The downhill resort, Ruka, is hosting this year's world freestyle skiing championships.
- The lakes had about 60cms ice (usually 1m at this time of year) – we were a little concerned at first for our safety before we learned how thick the ice was. We had walked across lakes without other tracks and noted that our snowshoe tracks sometimes exposed water and slush. But eventually we learned that some water flows onto the top of the ice from fishing holes or from other sources, so there was still plenty to support us!
- The pelts of the animals such as bears, wolves, reindeer are so thick – even fox pelts would be more than twice as thick as Aussie foxes. A reindeer skin would be sufficient as a mattress, and the wolf skins were luxurious. The soles of the feet of these animals were also covered in a thick layer of fur.
- We did not see everyone on mobile phones, nor did we notice any mobile phone shops (Finland is the home of Nokia, and apparently the most advanced mobile use in the world).
- Tropiciki had a male only and female only sauna, but also a mixed sex steam sauna and swimming costumes were banned from these areas. It was almost a pity to have to get into the things to swim!
- We made friends with a lone German lady, and were practically the only people speaking English that we came across (apart from the reception and tourist services) – she had really not been able to find others to speak to and she was fluent in at least 4 languages, and the place was pretty busy. Though we were amongst tourists we did not feel it.
- The local wildlife includes elk, reindeer, lynx, fox, wolf, bear, squirrel and some large birds called capercaillie (metso in Finnish) that were reintroduced back to Scotland some years ago. Unfortunately most is pretty hard to find and we only saw a few birds (small) and a squirrel. We could not identify the few tracks we saw in the forest – the snow was too soft to show definition.

Each day we went for walks and it was so crisp and clean outside – even when snowing it was so gentle. Most days were not sunny and in fact the sun was almost no use – it only came up to 15-20 degrees above the horizon and was almost impossible to even imagine it having any warming effects, but it did not seem to matter. The snow was so dry with it being so cold, and it was just fun being outside in it, and not getting wet! We did notice once the temperature dropped there were few skiers on the tracks. We almost felt whimps not taking our bikes – lots of the locals were pottering about and none of the bikes were locked.

It was also luxurious for us to have such a cosy and varied indoor environment, lots of time to read and do puzzles, and lie around like slugs.

Coming back to London we found it a bit shabby, dirty and noisy.

Best wishes from us,
Gillian and Keith

November Doings - 16 November 2004

Dear All

We have some good news that we have been gradually working for since last Christmas – after some persistence we have been paid about 2/3 of our loss in the theft of Gill's bike and belongings. The insurance company eventually agreed that we were not being reckless, and agreed to pay this amount if we did not pursue it further, and we felt happy enough to agree.

We have booked a week in Finland in January – if you can't beat winter join it! We will be about 100 km from the Arctic Circle so are hoping to see the Northern lights, some reindeer in their home country, and maybe a wolf. We will certainly have a sauna and hopefully some skiing. There won't be much daylight – it is dark here at 4.30pm now so we think there may be about 4 hours of light near the Arctic Circle.

It rained solidly on Gill coming home last week. With the added dimensions of real cold, wind, fog it should become more testing – rain and darkness makes the journey 50% longer in time even on bike paths. Her kit includes 2 rear lights (bike and helmet), 2 front lights (solid and flashing), reflective fluoro leg band, reflective and fluoro vest over red jacket with reflective bits. Pedestrians all wear black, no reflective bits, and hide their eyes under umbrellas so provide a real risk for and from cyclists (hence a slow pace).

We have heaters on in the evenings now, but it is not too cold yet. We had to wait an extra hour on a platform for a train last Sun evening after visiting a new "Wind in the Willows" attraction at Henley-on-Thames, and that got a bit cool. The night before this there was a train crash (which killed 7) not far from there, and is thought to have been caused by a suicidal act. Our train was reported to be held up by a second suicide threat.

The area was a continuous explosion of fireworks Fri and Sat nights for the past 2 weeks. They take Guy Fawkes seriously here, and it was compulsory to celebrate the failure of the attempt to blow up Westminster in 17 something, until 1859 or 1959 (two recent 'authoritative' statements in the London press). Usually an effigy of Guy Fawkes was burned on the bonfire – and we thought it was just a good excuse for us kids to get involved in controlled pyromania. We enjoyed a bonfire and fireworks display put on by the local Council. The Hindu and Sikh festival of Diwali culminated last Friday and the same explosion of fireworks activity resulted. We just left the curtains open so we could see the results of the backyard efforts.

It is now 12 months since we spent a month in the tent in London. We think it is a good idea that we have a house this year. Not having to look at other campers in nice snug caravans with heaters as we walk between tent toilet/shower blocks and tent, is attractive. But we will get back to last years habits of visiting museums and other under-cover attractions that we have been saving for the winter.

Last weekend we decided to go on a long river walk – we had clear skies for 2 days (almost amazing!), but quite crispy temperatures. On Saturday we walked all the way in to Hyde Park and further, along the Thames Walk which basically follows the river. We must have covered 25-30 km we reckoned. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and managed to partake in some very pleasant refreshments periodically, and some fireworks. Sunday we were less ambitious as Keith was a bit sore after that, and we did not want to slow his progress, but we did manage to cover some gentle shopping, a Finnish festival, a movie, and didn't get home till 9.45pm.

Enough for now
Cheers
Keith and Gillian

An Update on Keith - 6 November 2004

Dear All from Gillian

Thank you for all good wishes after Keith's demise. He is doing heaps of things and not feeling sorry for himself at all, just glad it was no worse.

We went to the fracture clinic yesterday, and I was able to see his X-ray for the first time - he has done quite a 'nice' job, with two breaks, and a displaced fragment in the middle. The doctor said he thought it would heal without intervention and will review in one month. Keith is much more comfortable, is becoming quite adept with his left arm, and is well able to look after himself and do lots of jobs already, and walk long distances quite briskly. We may even venture out somewhere over the weekend on public transport.

Guy Fawkes time here! Fireworks are legal and sold everywhere so should be a big bang. Hope we may make it to a public bonfire tomorrow night. Time change last weekend - we now get up an hour earlier and it's nearly dark when I am coming home before 5pm.

Enjoy yourselves.

Cheers
Gillian (and Keith)

Keith takes a fall and a Trip to Scotland - 30 October 2004

Dear All from Gillian

Along with an attached file of our Scottish travels, there is a little news. On Wednesday morning Keith was riding into an intersection and a car failed to give right of way, he skidded, fell and broke his right collarbone by trying to dig a hole in the road with his shoulder. The road didn't give way either. He was very brave getting himself home and to the hospital and back. Then they just took some x-rays, found the bone in bits and told me to go home with some painkillers; it would fix itself! I thought that is a bit weak but when Gill got home she gave the same high tech advice. So much for the fancy medical science, I might as well have been serving with Alexander-the-Great 2300 years ago!

So he is a bit grounded at the moment (feels like a holiday, an excuse to divest responsibilities but don't tell Gill), and his house duties very limited. Fortunately it happened after our holiday, and not when we were travelling. Also our life is uncomplicated by commitments so I can easily do the basics of cooking, shopping etc. till he recovers somewhat, and also he is able to look after himself while I am at work. And we are not in a tent, but have a roof and heating and shower and kitchen and all those luxuries. We did put the heater on last night for a bit but that was the first time so far – every public place has become a furnace with the onset of the cooler weather.

Keith will send his own message sometime (has now left some embedded messages), but for now he says he is enjoying his extended holiday (when he does not move or laugh too much).

Hope you are in good shape,

Cheers,
Keith and Gillian.

Trip to Scotland- 15-24 October 2004

This is a bit verbose and may be rather boring to those who have not been, those who know it well, and those who find travellers' ramblings boring. Hopefully several of you will have some fond memories also.

We hired a car and set off at 5.15pm on Friday after Gill finished work. Leaving London was slow even though we are only a short distance from an entry point to a motorway out to the NW of the city, then we ran into very heavy rain. However we kept buzzing along the motorway and managed to reach the Scotland border and a hotel at one of the service areas (Gretna Green) by 1.30am. After the traffic lessened with the later hour and the less populated areas it was quite enjoyable travel, even with the rain.

We set off the next morning around the SW coast (after finding that the Gretna Green blacksmith was the popular marriage celebrant from the mid 18th century, marrying 16 yr olds legally without parental consent). The great indentation of the Solway Firth has a huge expanse of mud flats at low tide, and it was difficult to see the water. We soon started to see the first of many of Scotland's golf courses (they say the game was invented here and was well established before Columbus hit America), and the first of many castles. The ruin of Caerlaverock Castle perches overlooking the mud flats, and presents a fortified face to the east, the only vulnerable aspect. It, like many others, has had several periods of restoration over the centuries, but now merely sees tourists. There are lots of castles that are not maintained at all, and some that have uses such as accommodation. Scotland has hundreds.

It is hard to travel far each day as one is constantly tempted to stop. We had only travelled about 25 miles before we reached the town of Dumfries, and found it was where Robbie Burns lived the last 10 years of his life – he was only about 37 when he died. Since he is one of Scotland's heroes we visited the Robert Burns Centre to bone up on the poet. He was a bit of a womaniser, with a very forgiving wife, liked a tippie, and worked as a taxation agent after trying farming (not having the confidence of making his living by his pen). He was very popular around town, and was a very prolific writer (unfortunately in an antique English). Scotland is trying to make a huge festival around his birthday on Jan 25. We all know some of his works, even if only Auld Lang Syne.

We were next 'trapped' in a small town called Wigtown which has reinvented itself since 1998 as the 'National Book Town' and now boasts 24 bookshops. Since this area is not high on the tourist agenda, it is amazing that change can happen so swiftly. Of course we had to go inside one, and it was a huge rabbit warren of second-hand books, so that was the last we saw of daylight for ages! You could spend a whole 10 days in this one town. By the time we reached the coast at Stranraer, we had exhausted our first day and just had time to get the tent up in a campground by dark!

We were the only tenters at any site we stayed at, but were pleased to find some sites open still. The week was generally cold, and fairly wet, and many people apologized for the weather (it apparently was a bit colder and wetter than usual for this time of year). After our 6th night we woke to find a pole had broken and poked through the top of the tent which was disappointing as we have no idea how it happened. It had rained during the night but had not been very windy. After that we stayed in a couple of hostels and a B and B, and will try to mend the tent back here. Our accommodation ended up averaging about 16.5 pounds a night for the two of us (the cheapest B and Bs is about 35) so we did not spend exorbitantly. Our favourite camp was a 'wild camp' in a beautiful forest overlooking a valley in the highlands. In the morning we looked over the fog in the valley below. Scotland's hills have a lot of planted pine forest, almost no native forest and MUCH heathland mixed with some grassland. The lowlands are rolling farmland, and the north and west has a lot of bog.

We couldn't face a city so soon after we had a taste of countryside so bypassed Glasgow and headed NE to the Highlands near Pitlochry, fortifying ourselves with Scottish kippers and fresh tatties and other vegs. For dinner and bacon and duck eggs (all bought at a farm shop earlier that day) for breakfast. This was serious tourist country, and very enticing with lots of beautiful scenery and plenty to interest the tourist, but we settled for a visit to the Scottish Crannog Centre, and a tour and tippie at the smallest distillery in Scotland (Edradour). A crannog is a wooden building built over a lake, and have been occupied from 5000 years ago till the 17th century. Bracken was used extensively to line the floors, and thatch the roof, and gradually built up a layer of crushed bracken in the water under the crannog. As the original house poles that were driven into the clay lakebed rotted, they were supported by stacking rocks around them. Over time the rocks and bracken trash built up. Crannog sites can be recognized today as small islands on the lake, or a pile of stones or are just partially preserved underneath the cold water of the Loch. Archaeological dives have permitted the recreation of one of these fortified dwellings that housed up to 25 members of an extended family plus animals, and it gave us an insight into a side of life that we had not appreciated. After a very cold time in the crannog we were ready for the Scotch, and primed by the free tour and taste we felt no guilt in purchasing some for our cold nights.

After this we were treated to some beautiful country with the autumn colours in full glory. There were real advantages to travelling here in autumn – less tourists, lovely colours, no biting midges, no snow yet (well we did not see the bit that fell while we were there or see the frosts) – but the downside is the short days. It was light enough to see easily about 8am, but getting dark by 5.30pm.

Our next mission was Aberdeen and just west of here as this was ancestor country for Gill, and we stayed at the Skene campground in Kirkton of Skene where the Skenes of Skene are buried, close to the Loch of Skene (her brother's name is Skene). We chatted with a local history buff who invited us into his house which reminded me of a museum of 1950s and earlier, then went into Aberdeen to the library to get some more info. We used the 'Park and Ride' scheme to go into town – many towns in UK have this – you can park for free at special parking areas on the outskirts of the city and for a small amount for each carload, catch special buses into the city. This is a great way to keep cars out of the centre. It was bucketing down with rain and dark by 5pm with the heavy cloud so we drove north and camped along the coast (snug in our still intact tent!).

We had decided to get up early and have a 'full Scottish breakfast' in a town to see what it was like. The next town had a gas works and power station (North Sea oil and gas) and a quite fancy pub for the business visitors to town. Breakfast cost us 5.50 pounds for the two of us!!! (cereal, juice, fruit, sausages, bacon, eggs, black pudding, baked beans, toast). The price of a coffee on the motorway is 1.90! We did not eat again till about 3pm, and then only a cake between us. By this time we had completed a tour at Findhorn, a place we had wanted to visit for > 20 years.

The Findhorn Community began in 1962, when a couple, their 3 children, and a friend went to live at the Findhorn Caravan Park (about 45 km NE of Inverness on the coast), and began to try to be as self sufficient as possible for economic reasons as much as because one of them was 'getting guidance'. Their extraordinarily successful garden attracted attention, and this and their spiritual approach attracted like-minded folk to join them. One of the original founders is still alive (87 yrs old) and living at the site, which is now a village. It supports a large shop selling books to groceries, a multifaceted organization that has educational, conference and entertainment facilities and has quite a number of permanent residents as well as staff, visitors in residence and 'blow-in' visitors like ourselves. There is a pottery, art centre, café, sanctuary buildings, garden etc. and is still evolving. Many of the buildings were inspirational and adventurous and had good environmental design as a feature. Many people have given, and are giving, greatly to the infrastructure and the development of the Community. We first heard about it in late 1970s, and it was great to see it flourishing and so much more complex than it had been then (from accounts).

Before Findhorn we had visited the town of Keith (a rather drack place), and the fairly impressive Baxters Visitor Centre – here we were keen on purchasing as food is one of our best delights. They actually make more than 40 different soups, plus a wide range of chutneys, condiments, jams etc. from the humble beginnings in Mrs Baxter's kitchen in the countryside, back in the mid 1800s. We also saw an occasional fishing harbour with a few boats but it certainly does not compete with the fishing activity along the French coast – one person told us 'the fisherman have been too greedy, overfishing to keep their big houses and fancy cars to impress everyone' and she sounded quite bitter.

The next day we decided we should visit Pringle Weavers (being acquainted with one of their jumpers that had failed to wear out) in Inverness, and found a kilt historian there who loved to inform all and sundry about the true Scottish history which is that the clans rarely fought each other, and were a model of a social structure much more egalitarian than the feudal English (though this was not taught in English schools in the past, or present). As with our travels everywhere, we are stimulated to read more of the local versions of events. The rest of the Pringle Visitor Centre was much like all the other Visitor Centres, overbrimming with consumer goods, souvenir stuff, café. Since it was raining cats and dogs it was a convenient stop but we got sucked into loitering. Nevertheless we made it to the most NE point of John O'Groats, still in inclement windy conditions, after seeing the surf along the eastern beaches – yes, real surf! We did not spy any surfers, but did see several cars with surfboards on top. We feel somewhat ashamed that we did not dip our toes in the sea, but mostly we were rather grateful to jump back into a warm dry car! We found it difficult to feel that we would rather be on bikes, so that was something! The locals were all rugged up too, and cyclists of any sort were a rare sight (we did see 4 or 5 tourers in the south west on the weekends, not carrying tents). Our last Sat in Scotland we saw quite a lot of day cyclists – it was our most sunny day and we were in a high population area.

We had now consumed more than half our time, and were a bit jumpy about how much we would miss, so made our next day a commitment to travel lots of km., right across the north and as far down the west as we could. We started as soon as it was light enough to see and were lucky to have a relatively clear day as this was a spectacular trip! Inland was a giant bog, but beautiful in its' autumn tones and punctuated by lakes of all sizes, and the coast has small sandy beaches, and inlets and peninsulas that beg to be explored. The towns are small, the road narrow (single lane with passing places), and tourism much less evident. We loved it and kept 'ooing and ahing' all day. This was a day that made us wish we were cycling. By dark we had reached the more widely visited, but still beautiful area around Fort William and Glencoe, and there was not a dull moment all day – by the time we revisited the highlands a bit further south we found them too grazed or pine forested, the vegetation less varied and the colours less dramatic. Later, en route through England we made a side trip through the Peak district and found it decidedly uninteresting in comparison to north of Inveraray.

The next day we enjoyed a lot also – around Glencoe, Oban, Inveraray etc (we did a fair bit of wiggling about, circled Loch Lomond etc), then through Glasgow centre, ending up at a place called New Lanark by dark. This place is a World Heritage Site and is interesting from a social perspective – it was once the largest cotton spinning complex in Britain, but the manager of the mill from 1800, Robert Owen, set up worker housing, a cooperative store, the world's first nursery school for children, a sick-pay fund and more. The town is beautifully restored in a lovely location on the River Clyde, and has a Youth Hostel in one building, a fancy hotel in another, visitor centre/museum in another, permanent dwellings in others. We stayed in the hostel but regretted not spending half a day there (things often open late i.e. 10 or 11 am and we were gone by 8 to get back to London that night).

Bicycle Wagga Wagga – Ride Report

Where's the Helyars?

The motorway was fast enough to allow us a detour to see Blackpool, and a little of the Peak district (as mentioned). We felt no desire at all to stop even for a snack in Blackpool – it is full to overflowing with razzle-dazzle entertainment parlours for the masses, and masses were there – if that is what it is like in chilly autumn, summer must be hell on earth!

Back to London and we are dreaming of the beautiful Scottish NW and scheming to get back there. Other snippets of Scotland in general: – We were surprised by the most frequent road kill – pheasants, the amount of grey stone buildings (houses only seemed to come in grey or whitewash with some red sandstone buildings in the south-west), the amount of planted foreign pine forests and the scarcity of other forest. The heathland was spotted in many areas with the scars of management. We think it was due to areas sprayed with roundup to try to encourage grassland to replace the heath. In other areas there were fences, that appeared to be for keeping deer out to allow the woody vegetation (heath, trees) to take over. It was also possible to find bargains in Scotland (of all places). We enjoyed the oatcakes, the shortbread, the whisky, the venison, the lamb and beef, the salmon, etc. We found it less expensive than London (of course), the people chirpy, friendly and not at all dour, and we were a little sad to come back to the Big Smoke. Still it was nice to know we had a snug home to come back to – nearly cool enough now for a heater!!

Visit to Ireland - 17 September 2004

Dear All,

Gill has just had a week off work while Tricia, Keith's daughter, was here from Sydney. We all had a lovely day cycling from here up the Thames to Windsor Castle, looking at various sights, picnicking at Runnymede and generally having a relaxed day.

Trish and Gill caught the train back but Keith travelled by bike and just beat us home. The train travellers disembarked at Twickenham just after a Rugby game ended, and had a battle getting through the crowds out of the station! The train officials said they did not advise travellers to get off at this station, and we can well understand why, but had been oblivious to the circumstances beforehand!

Gill ended up the day with some stomach "something-or-other", spent a painful sleepless night then 6 hours in A&E at the hospital, hoping like heck it was not something nasty. It wasn't but she had to lie low for a couple of days, while getting back to normal. Keith and Trish were able to get out and about thank goodness.

We all flew to Dublin early on Tues morning, picked up a car at the airport then spent half a day fighting our way out of Dublin – roadworks are all the go in Ireland as it leaps and bounds from being one of the poorest countries in the EU to the second most expensive. We had a chance to use Euros again, but were surprised to find speed limits in miles/hour, cars measuring miles/hour and miles but distances listed on signs and maps in kilometres! Whilst it is still expensive to us Australians, it probably is not as expensive as here (one gets a bit tired of noting these things all the time). Petrol was about 1 euro/litre, camping about 15 euros, coffee about 1.60 euros (about \$1.6 to 1 euro). One night we camped for zilch – could find no one to pay!

From Dublin we headed south through the Wicklow mountains then did a circle west via Carlow, Kilkenny (camp), Clonmel, Mallow, Killarney, Kerry loop (west coast camp), and back to Dublin through Castlemaine (birth place of wild colonial boy!) Tralee, Limerick, Lough Derg (camp), Tullamore (bit more developed than Tullamore, NSW), over 4 days. We hope we saw a pretty representative cross section of Ireland. Back in Dublin, Trish stayed with a friend for 2 nights and Keith and Gill camped at a beach just north of Dublin. We were not tempted to swim anywhere, but had fabulous weather. The last couple of days were cool and a bit showery, but not enough to bother us at all, so it does NOT always rain in Ireland as everyone says!

We found the people very inviting and friendly – just saying hello when walked into a little shop in a little village, as if we were friends. We found no leprechauns. The architecture of houses was similar in many ways to England, though there were more single story dwellings, more different styles, and more modest houses on bigger gardens (like Australia). We also saw a lot of corrugated iron – mostly on farm barns where it is common. There is a much more adventurous use of colour on houses than England, and especially in comparison to northern and central France, and some towns are ablaze with multicoloured buildings and it looks great. Many of the public buildings, churches etc are in dark grey limestone of differing hues and were attractive also (especially when freshly cleaned of sooty build-up!).

Ireland, as alluded to before, is full of activity – building houses and roads, serving endless tourists, travelling on the roads in tractors, cars, trucks, horse drawn caravans, and more touring bicycles than we have seen practically anywhere. The roads were not a very high standard in general, and some were unappealing for cycling (too busy, poor surface, poor verge, ho-hum scenery) so we were not too unhappy at leaving our trusty steeds at home. Of course there were some really lovely bits, that had none of the above.

We were surprised to find SO much bog. We looked down on a lake on the first day and found the water looked black (but there were no tee-trees). Within minutes we discovered why – we had hit the bog country, and found it creeps high on the hillsides – not just in the flat bits or hollows – and there is plenty being harvested all the time. The peat is covered by a thick heath vegetation. Slices are cut into the hills, and the grooves are easily visible. The heath grows back or the next layer is harvested until the mineral soil layer is reached. The peat is sold in ingot-like slabs for burning (like BBQ fuel, at service stations) and apparently it is smokeless and has a rather pleasant earthy smell. It looks like a slightly oily compressed black earth.

In the bog there are all sorts of goodies, and they are digging stuff up all the time. At the museum an attendant told us three new pieces arrived within the last week. In the museum we saw a 15 metre long, 1 metre wide dugout canoe, a human, some clothing and several kilograms of gold, as well as heaps of other items – all over 2000 years old and all dug out of the bog. The gold ornaments from the Bronze Age were habitually thrown into water as some kind of offering (cf. coins in fountains) so many have been preserved in the bogs and recovered, often in hoards, in modern times. When the last body was found, the police were called as it seemed a recent death but the body was more than 2000 yrs old! The one displayed in the museum is rather desiccated (better for display as it is not confronting to children). Cold bogs low in oxygen have marvellous preserving properties!

The gold items in the National Museum were Celtic in origin – lots of solid arm bangles, flattened collars (similar in shape to the ones given to some esteemed Aboriginal men in the past in Aus.), some very intricately made hair ornaments, some dress fasteners, some waist bands, some gold foil covered lead rings and other objects, and big circular boxes worn in an enlarged ear lobe hole (like some African tribes). The latter sometimes had little balls in them to make a gentle sound as the head was moved! And more! They range in age from 2200 BC to about 500 BC, and some are truly beautiful. Both the number of objects and the level of workmanship startled us.

The Museum also has on display some extraordinarily detailed pieces of medieval church metalwork – the craftsmanship that had developed with the Celts in their westernmost outpost was obviously still highly developed by the middle ages when the repository of classical knowledge had moved from Rome to Moorish Spain and the Christian monks in Ireland. We also saw some beautiful calligraphy in some of the illuminated Christian manuscripts here and at a collection in Dublin Castle (called the Chester Beatty Library which is well worth a visit also – this was a private collection of goodies from many countries, donated to Ireland in 1960s by an American who retired there!)

The Museum had a good display of the 1916 uprising (read Roddy Doyle's 'A Star Called Henry') leading to the formation of the Republic, and the Post Office still has pock marks from the fighting then (and inside has the statue of Cuchulain mentioned in 'Angela's Ashes'). Lots of food for thought about the mixture of barbarism with the development of self-determination and democratic systems.

Also in Dublin we found the Library which had a display about the controversial publishing of James Joyce's 'Ulysses' – finally published in Paris. The reading room there is referred to in his novel – one day we will read the book! Also, we found that rabbits had been introduced to Ireland by the Normans soon after 1066, and that Ireland had some giant deer (nearly 2 metres high at the shoulder now extinct) that had an antler span of 4 metres, and more!

A couple of things amused us – we saw 'The Australian Woman's Weekly Potato Cookbook' on sale in a tourist office (talk about selling coals to Newcastle!). We were on a bus when a motorcyclist apparently did something stupid, and the bus driver yells "you feeking eeigit" and gives him a lecture, twice, out the window, very loudly.

North of Dublin we visited a place called Newgrange which is one of 3 principal Neolithic passage graves. They predate Stonehenge by more than 1000 years, at about 3200BC, also predating the Pyramids by 6 centuries. From the outside they are grassy mounds, surrounded by big standing stones. The 19 metre long, 2 metre high passage leading to the grave chamber (perhaps 6 metres in diameter X 6 metres high) is lined at sides and top by huge stones, as is the central chamber, and the ceiling of the latter is truly awe inspiring. During the winter solstice (19-23 Dec), the sun penetrates over a carefully placed lintel to the central chamber for 17 minutes each day!!! The eastern horizon, the top of the lintel and the floor of the central chamber are in a straight line. Several of these mounds are thought to have been burial sites for the ashes of cremations of important people. They are also a type of calendar. There is much more of interest, but you had better just visit if you can (if not, find some reading on these amazing and not highly well known places). Some of the Stonehenge stones are bigger, but this place is so pristine inside – the outside has an interpretative recreation, but the inside only appears to have the grave goods removed.

Overall a good time in Ireland but lots more to see if we had a couple of months or more to spend there – life is still a bit short.

Best wishes to all from Gill and Keith

Our Life in London - 16 August 2004

Thought it was about time for a review our life in London. Weather was quite hot recently – only about 30 Celsius but humid and sweaty when you ride or sit inside the buildings designed for coolth, without windows to let in the breeze. It is sunny to boot, and we had some big storms – lightening hit somewhere very close to my office, and the fire alarms all went off immediately. After an evacuation and one hour we got back inside. There was lots of confusion about who is supposed to do what, and one fire engine came, but only for the building close to ours so could not clear us to go inside. Most people were quite concerned about the lack of training.

Still on weather – the days are getting noticeably shorter, and it is dark about 9.15pm now. I have become quite anxious about the disappearance of the warm long days as life will change greatly when that happens. Cycling to and during work is still very pleasant, but I know it is going to be more testing. There is still plenty of time at present to enjoy the outdoors after work. A week ago we walked partway to Richmond to see “Magic of the Dance” (Irish tap dancing), had a picnic dinner at Osterley, another evening we explored Osterley Park by foot (and found ourselves in nettles and blackberries and amongst horses tethered with long chains).

Recently Saudi Arabia opened local Syon House and garden to the public, and put on a display of craft, dance etc in the surrounding parkland – all free! This is quite remarkable here as most houses and fancy gardens have entry costs (Syon is usually about 8 pounds). Naturally we took advantage of it and found the house to be quite splendid inside, though it is very plain outside. It sits on the Thames opposite Kew Royal Botanical Gardens, and in fact the river frontage is the only non-tamed section of the Thames in London. The gardens sport 16 hectares of some lovely environments and a very grand conservatory with bananas even! The Duke of Northumberland and family still have a residential area within the house, but some grand rooms can be hired for “corporate functions”. It appears the Saudis wanted to create a bit of local goodwill. The place was well stocked with security guards.

We have continued to poke about, on cycle, upriver to some other areas that we had not previously explored and found a large sculpture park at Twickenham, and some more riverside tracks etc - most of the river front has a walkable/rideable path on both sides which is fabulous. Wagga cannot boast the same. As we continue to explore on foot and by cycle we keep finding all sorts of nooks and crannies, as there are lots of public paths sneaking through housing areas.

We are starting to feel a bit local now that we can have tea with our neighbours, give advice (a little) to visitors, and travel around quite large areas without a map. My work helps me travel a lot in an area about 8X4 km, and I am enjoying meeting the locals. Many are Caucasian but several are Asian (i.e. Indian, Pakistan etc, as distinct from the "Far East") and others. At present I am working to help set up an Asian rehab unit, so will meet many more. It is situated in a residential home for older folk and our unit will share space with an Asian day centre, which has 10 clients each day, 7 days per week.

My work is good as I am doing the kind of thing I enjoy, and I am feeling a little more au fait with how to get help when I need it. At the same time though there are some very frustrating things such as an inability to get a doctor to check people at our rehab unit so we waste weeks of potential rehab time; having to allow for temporary carers to supervise exercises rather than someone you can help understand the important aspects of an exercise that make it actually work; loads of paperwork. There are some very good things – we can get follow-up rehab supervision at home for a couple of weeks on discharge, including using public transport; some well trained assistants and carers help a great deal to cover the load. There are very long waiting lists for some therapies, but no lack of self care items going into homes – I have seen several electric "stair climbers" to take someone in a seat to the second floor, and other quite expensive modifications. Many people need 2 walking frames, one for downstairs and one for upstairs.

Also at work, I have been continually challenged by the 'boxes' that services are in, criteria for inclusion and exclusion, and how to find the correct service to a particular client need. So much time and money is wasted by the fragmentation of services, combined with written rather than written/verbal information. It took me in total about 2 hours to see and finalise paperwork for a chap today who had been referred for a longer walking stick. When I finally saw him I found the one he had was the correct height! We have just implemented a pre-assessment telephone interview with the referrer to try to cut down on time wasted getting to an assessment just to find the criteria are not met! There are lots of timelines and targets to be defined, but it seems at times that this takes precedence over real outcomes. For instance, we must discharge people in our unit within 6 weeks, so this, rather than outcomes, focuses discharge date. In consequence, people have stayed 6 weeks even if we have not progressed (largely waiting for medical info), and others have been discharged despite needing a couple more weeks to make their improvement sustainable.

Last weekend we hired a car, and drove to Wales. We left home at about 4.45pm and were inside Wales and in bed at a campsite by dusk. We got up> at dawn (about 5 am) and travelled to the walk start in Snowdonia National Park before the masses arrived. We had a fabulous walk over several peaks, and it gave us a new respect for walking here. We did some 'scrambling where you will have to use your hands a bit', and found it was not for the faint hearted. We never got to the finger tingling fear stage but it would not have taken much more. It certainly would have been more "interesting" in the wet and fog or rain which is the norm. As it turned out we had a PERFECT day weather-wise and got sunburned. We did a lot of up and down both rocks and shale slopes and were extremely stiff for 3 days afterwards!! We were not the most slack people on the mountains, but our efforts paled against others we met running some of the tracks and another team doing 3 times as much as we did. They were climbing all the peaks over 3000 ft in the region.

We climbed 4 in 8 hours at a leisurely pace, they were climbing about 13 in a wider area over 24 hours. The record, by the way, is about 4 hours for them all! However our bicycle legs we were sufficiently exhausted to demand an ice cream then a quick drink in a pub frequented by Edmund Hilary and the like (these mountains were used by Hilary and team for training before they conquered Everest), before finding a campground. We didn't take a stroll around the town before bed!

Next day we explored Caernarfon Castle, the Island of Anglesea and the slate mines – north Wales is almost totally slate. The castle is one of Edward the 1st's string of castles around the north coast of Wales designed to keep the Welsh under control (13th century). They were eventually successful but there were slaughters perpetrated by both sides before hostilities ceased and Edward had his son born in Wales and declared Prince of Wales – hence the tradition of Princes of Wales (usually non-Welsh heirs to the throne) being invested in Caernarfon Castle.

This weekend we stayed in London. There are heaps of things happening in summer all over the isles, and of course London has the lion's share. We sampled an excellent outdoor concert of Cuban music close to here on Sat night and a large Asian festival (mela) also very close. The highlight for us was a superb Pakistani concert, but seeing the Asian locals at play was fun too. The weather is warm enough at night to enjoy being outside and there are almost no flies and other night insects to disturb a party atmosphere. Picnics abound at outdoor events, and it is extremely relaxed and pleasant to do likewise. In the evenings, we walk or ride to most things, or catch a bus some of the way. We get a pompous high when riding past the unfortunates trying to leave these popular events sitting morbidly in their cars stuck in traffic jams!

Enough rambling.
Hope you are all well and happy
Cheers,
Keith and Gillian.

Summer in Britain - 9 July 2004

We went with a friend into town, had a picnic in the sun at Embankment Park with a bottle of vino, then went to a play in the West End theatre area of the city. The play was called "Guantanamo". It was terrific - very good acting and the text was based on actual interviews with detainees and families. What gave it extra spice was that the ethnic parts could be played by ethnic actors. It was of course damning the system of detention on flimsy or no evidence, with no access to lawyers or trials. You may have heard of it as it has become a bit of a focus for discontent.

Last weekend we went to the coast at Brighton. We were going to catch our local train to a station out of the built up area then ride, but our branch line was closed for engineering works, and we ended up riding the whole way. There is a big ride from London to Brighton each year, and this is about 56 miles I think. We did not have a proper route - just followed our noses to get out of town then a road map. We ended up doing about 120km for the day by the time we caught the train home that night as accommodation was scarce (maybe non-existent) and we had not carried the tent. The weather was just short of a gale, the beach is just rounded stones with a concrete path so people can walk by the beach, but the place was abuzz and looks interesting enough to make another trip. There is amusing advertising at present - clothes for a "long hot summer", "keep cool with....". We had NO desire to touch the water at Brighton, but we did wear our jackets!

Hope you are all fit and well
Cheers
K and G

Londres calling, just showing off my miniscule Latin - 30 June 2004

This is a short note to apologise for sending our PBP report to everyone and not just to the cycling enthusiasts. I (Keith) sent it by accident. I am still not sure how it happened but it did, so you were all deluged with cycling trivia.

Here is a bit of London trivia that might or might not be more interesting: We have just had our first ride with a 'local' CTC (Cyclist's Touring Club) group, local in parenthesis because the closest group is 18 km to the north-east. That's not far but we think it is, because we now expect

everything to be 100 yards down the road. In total we did about 90 km including the 54 km ride through what I am beginning to think of as the green tunnel of England. This tunnel passes through frequent small to largish (100 to 200 ha) forests, often with a blackberry under-story, and roadside verges with trees or hedges. The latter are often just high enough to stop all but the tallest looking out. It was quite relaxed with stops for morning tea at a golf club, lunch at a nice country pub and then afternoon tea, cake and scones at a church hall. Overall, a very picturesque ride with lots of conversation and 8 to 10 new and friendly acquaintances. So life continues to be pleasant.

We are enjoying the local area and last weekend had a ride across Richmond Park to the All England Tennis Club at Wimbledon. The idea was to find out how to get tickets to the tournament without emptying the bank excessively. It was raining a little that day so we saw a lot of disappointed ticket-holders. We were able to find that they provided bicycle racks in a reasonably secure area opposite the court enclosure. This was on a public golf course that is used during the tournament as a parking area and is supervised to some degree by parking attendants. To get one of the tickets available on the day (the outer court, cheapie tickets at 15 pounds for the whole day or 9 after 5.00pm) you have to queue from about 8.30 am to have a good chance of getting in. As an aside, London is blessed it seems by quite frequent public golf courses. There are 8 courses on the map in the Richmond-Wimbledon area, I don't know what the public/private split is but I think the average golfer gets a nice return on their taxes. Incidentally for Wagga cyclists, we rode through the MIDDLE of 3 golf courses on Sunday - there was an occasional small warning sign but no barriers of any sort between us and the greens, tees and fairways.

So, loaded with all this intelligence on Wimbledon, we rode a different route home via Wimbledon town area (looked at shops and had beer and chips with disappointed aspiring tennis watchers) and Wimbledon Common. The latter is an area of about 200 hectares that looks as if nothing much has been done with it since it presumably was used as a Common when Wimbledon was just a village on the outskirts of London. There are horse tracks (no bicycles please) and other walking and cycle tracks wandering through the area. The vegetation varies from grassland that is occasionally mown, woodlands and some areas of quite thick forest. All very unkempt looking but nice to ride through. It is impressive to us that such areas have been preserved from the grasp of developers in the middle of a city such as this. Overall the ride from our place at Isleworth to Wimbledon takes about an hour, with half to 2/3rds of the distance in parkland with little or no competing traffic. All very pleasant.

Keith had a good time at Wimbledon yesterday the second week of the tournament. The queue time was 2 hours after arriving at 8.30 but the first matches only started at 10.00. There was plenty of opportunity to see excellent tennis on the outer courts (three main courts are reserved for high priced tickets that are mostly sold out or allocated to groups before the tournament) where lesser lights like Wayne Arthurs and P (Paul?) Hanley were playing in the doubles, and others like Marie Pierce (cool French performer who seemed happy whether winning or losing) and Katherine Sprem (a Croatian who put Venus Williams out in an earlier round) were strutting their stuff. Plebs like me on a 15 pound ticket could watch the big screen showing the Centre Court match from 'Henman hill'. It was enjoyable to be among several thousand people watching the Henman v's Philippoussis match. There were enough Australian yahoos in the mob to make the cheering and banter an enjoyable part of the event. I am a bit sorry for Gill, who has to keep earning the money to keep me in the manner to which I am becoming more accustomed, but she seems to put such events into the football ya-ya category so doesn't feel she missed out.

Cheers for now,
Keith and Gill

Update on Bits and Pieces from London - 9 June 2004

Today it was sunny and at least 32 degrees, so everyone was talking about how hot it was. Outside there was a nice breeze, but many buildings are not built for air-flow, and are quite unpleasant. Our place has some good big openable windows and we can get a nice breeze so we are very comfortable at this temperature (I, Gill, came home at lunch today).

We have had 3 weekends since we last sent a message - 2 in London and one away. One weekend in London we explored Kew Gardens (need a big full day to get around that) on one day, and shopped at trendy Richmond then rode around Richmond Park the other day. We also treated ourselves to dinner at a local Indian (since we live close to a big Indian area). You really need a bike to get around Richmond Park as it is so big.

The other weekend in London (just past) we explored along the Grand Union Canal (which runs from the Thames (close by here) to Birmingham and has a lot of the old tow path still cycleable). We did not go more than about 15 km as it is punctuated by barriers that involve dismounting and squeezing through a hole big enough for a pushbike but not a motorbike, and it is rather filthy (both water and rubbish lying around). We came back via Heathrow, since it has a bike path from our home right to the terminals! There is a lane (each direction) through a tunnel under the runways that takes cars and bikes but bikes have priority! There are other car only lanes of course.

The next day we went to just the other side of Kew Gardens from us to visit the London Wetland Centre. This is quite an extensive area that has been man-made from old reservoirs. They have created mini environments typical of several countries and have some of the plants and birds from those environments in them. Other birds can visit these areas at will but some are captive (not sure how - maybe the wings clipped but it was not obvious). Then there is a large area with several hides where you can see what species are coming and going, plus interpretive areas re wetlands. This place really deserved several hours.

The weekend we went away was a long weekend with the Monday a holiday. We hopped on a train at 6.45 am just 2 minutes ride from home, and hopped off at a small station close to Stonehenge at 8.30am. Then it started to drizzle but it kept the Stonehenge crowds at bay and we had a good wander around, then rode to Salisbury (market and Cathedral with one of the original copies of Magna Carta) and then on to Shaftsbury where we had our first BandB experience of this trip (it was very good and a bargain at 40 pounds for the 2 of us!). We did not take the tent for the first time, and felt a little apprehensive. We had booked the Sunday night at the "Helyar Arms" Hotel in Yoevil. Keith wanted to check out the area his ancestors came from. We spent all Sunday afternoon and evening poring over gravestones in 3 cemeteries, and all the next morning as well, and we found lots of interesting things that we detailed to the Helyar family but will not do so here. We did find TS Eliot's ashes at a small church that had had a Helyar Archdeacon, just next to the manor house where the Helyars were "Lords of the Manor" for about 300 years. William Dampier also came from that very small village! Keith wants it recorded that the link with this part of the family is not yet clear and that he is disturbed to find they were a bit grand and also were involved in the slave trade (I think he would be happier to find a real convict). We did find a bridge that had a plaque threatening deportation for life to any felon found damaging that bridge - it seemed such a peaceful countryside and there was not even a spot of graffiti!!

We were going to take in a Country Fair at a Shrewsbury castle but decided against the crowds and settled for another lovely abbey and a coffee in a pub! And then we caught the train all the way to our front door (almost), so it was a very satisfactory weekend.

Enough of my rambles
Cheers
Gillian (and Keith in principle)

Hello from Warkworth Gardens - 3 May 2004

Dear All from Gillian (who has missed out for a couple of weeks)

We now have a computer so can communicate with ease. It was a second-hand one and had some viruses but after installing a Norton's anti virus package, a scan this morning showed we were all clear so hope this is so!!!!

We have now had our roof for 9 nights and it feels like 9 weeks - doesn't take long to get used to it again! As soon as we dropped off our gear last Sat. we went out and bought 2 sets of double bed doonas, sheets, pillows, towels as well as saucepans, coffee maker, some cutlery and odd kitchen things, all in one load on our bikes Then we went to our local Tesco superstore and filled up with food (heavier than the previous load and just as bulky!). Then we went to our local Homebase for a bit more. This weekend we went to 2 "car boot" sales close to here and bought a computer desk, some more kitchen things, and a framed Monet print for the wall. Also we went into the original "big smoke" (named after the famous London fire), on Sat. and found one of the dept stores with sales on glasses. So now we are quite functional.

We were able to do all this within a 3 km radius, and our supermarket is only a couple of hundred metres away. Distance to my work base is about 1.6 km, closest subway is 1.6 km and closest train station is about 200m. So we have good access to services, and are on the edge of a very Asian area (Asian here means primarily Indian, Pakistan, Bangladesh) so have good local Asian food too. Not that we have explored much yet as we have been busy getting set up. Keith has been working hard getting the computer and getting it functional, as well as all the other house chores etc.

This week we had an over night visit from a friend who lives just outside London and he and Keith had a ride in the nearby Richmond Park, we visited a nephew, Tim Helyar, had some dinner and collected some goods we had stored with he and his partner, and have had some Wagga friends visit for dinner!!

I have been of to work each day and enjoying it. 2.5 days are spent visiting people in their homes, and 2.5 days are spent in a rehab set-up situated within a hostel type environment. Most of the clients for both are elderly and it suits me very well. I work 36 hrs per week which translates to 8.30 till 4.30 for 4 days then 8.30 till 3 on the other day (since I have sworn to not do any overtime, and the culture is not pressing me to do this anyway, I should be able to almost maintain holiday mode).

I have not yet decided that it is necessary to buy a car for work, and we do not need it otherwise. There is a hire car place about 300m away for here, the trains are handy and we can also ride into or out of the city. Keith went into the city and found it took about 10 mins more than subway or train. We had a downpour storm going over to Tim's the other night but we have a house now with a washer and drier so what does it matter! During the week it was showery some days but everywhere is warm and it takes no time to dry out the trousers, and the jacket keeps the top dry - the clients enjoy me coming that way I think.

Our accommodation is pleasant - quite quiet really but there are overhead planes buzzing around. We are within a stones throw of a 6 lane arterial road but really don't hear it. We have some lawn and a little shed for our bikes. We have a bird's eye view of the clock on top of the Gillette tower (factory very close) and this is lit up at night so we have no need for a clock! Our street is small and there is no through traffic, and the neighbours are very quiet also.

Bicycle Wagga Wagga – Ride Report

Where's the Helyars?

So all goes well. Today Monday is a public holiday, and normally we would have been off like a shot, but I found that I can take my holidays as they accumulate so we are going to have long weekends when the other people are working! Already I have accumulated 1.25 days holiday. We also have a bank account as of Friday but I may not get paid for 6 weeks (just missing the pay period), and pay is once per month.

Will just sign off now as we have a little job to do - giving ourselves a hair cut with our new clippers! We did our last cut in Barcelona with borrowed ones but with the cost of one cut we are set up for the year! For those who are doubting our outcome, Keith has experience from earning pocket money at high school from haircuts, and he has guided me.

Much cheer and thanks to all for cheery messages
Gillian, and Keith who has edited.

Resident in London - 23 April 2004

The primary purpose of this message is to let you all know that we now have an address and a telephone number that will be operative from 24th April. This address is in the west London area with the closest rail stations being Scyon Lane (country rail system) and Osterly (Metro system).

Tomorrow night will mark the finish of 9 months camping so it will be interesting to see how we react to a house again. It may be that we will have to pitch the tent in the back yard (there is a patch of lawn) to feel comfortable. The semi-detached house has 2 double bedrooms so we are equipped to host as many visitors as desire to turn up, so long as you all do not come on the same day! There is room for two in the spare bed and the floor is available for any excess if you are willing to sleep on our camp mattresses, cushions, etc. in the living room. We would love to see you and invite you to use our place as a base for your London touring. We are very close to the train system so it is easy to access central London or the country rail system.

Gill started work last Monday. The job is part community visits and part operated in the West Middlesex Hospital and some aged care facilities. So far everything is rosy and it seems to be possible to commute by bike and to do the community visits by bike also. We are getting to know the road system around here and seem to be able to find reasonable cycle routes with not too many places where the traffic is dangerous.

We like the old Roman road routes (4 or 5 radiating from central Londres) because they are straight but sometimes are also busy roads. It seems the Anglo Saxons did not know how to build a straight road because the old Roman road system on the map of Greater London look to me to be the only straight roads in the system. I would like them to be reserved for cyclists only! At any rate if we wait long enough, say 20 or 30 years, there may be no cars on the road because of the fuel prices - lets hope. It was interesting to see Shell inflating their reserves. I wonder whether this is actually denial of the fact that reserves are running out rather than falsification of records for the sake of keeping the share price high.

That's enough from me - us (KH is secretary now) for now. Cheers to you all,

Back to England - 14 April 2004

The end of a saga today as tomorrow we fly to London from Madrid with a 5-year work visa in Gillian's pocket and a 5-year dependent spouse visa in Keith's pocket. We only intend to stay one year but the 5-year multiple entry option gives us lots of flexibility for the future and is some compensation for the winter of camping in France and Spain! So if any of you wish to repeat this effort please feel free to do so, or organise yourselves further ahead than we were led to believe was necessary.

Bicycle Wagga Wagga – Ride Report

Where's the Helyars?

Keith is looking forward to being a househusband over the coming 12 months and hopes that the cleaning, cooking and shopping will take 10 minutes per day so he can play other games as well. Gillian is looking forward to having all the cleaning, cooking and shopping done by the time she gets home from work, as well as having the weekends planned for both of us (or at least a good range of choices). The job that she will be doing is quite similar to her previous work at the Forrest centre in Wagga Wagga - gerontology and community work but through a University hospital (more about that when she actually knows what she is to do!).

Madrid has been safe whilst we've been here and we have used the train network quite a lot. There has been obvious presence of security personnel at the stations, and the British Consulate as well. We have seen some tributes at workplaces of killed employees that has been sobering. We have not been to Atocha station however.

The weather is still cool (10-15 max) with frosts in the morning the last 2 or 3 days and a biting wind a lot of the time. But we are enjoying our last days of Spanish eating and drinking (2pm to 4pm 3 course lunches which include a full bottle of wine). Tapas and maybe some Sobriano brandy in the evening. Our alcohol intake is going to suffer a swift decline with the costs involved in Britain, but that is of little concern to us.

Will send a further missive when we have some accommodation settled.

Till then we hope you are all well and happy,
Cheers
Keith and Gillian.

Plans at Last! Zaragosa, Spain - 1 April 2004

Unbelievably (it seems), after 6 months of waiting, Gillian has a job in England. It has taken exactly 2 months for the process to be completed for appointment to this position. Now we have to wait for a work permit (about 10 days we are told) then a work visa (one day if we go to Madrid we are told) and then we can go to England.

This whole process has been incredibly frustrating, and more than once we have felt like abandoning the idea, but all the time we thought that the process would be over in "no time" or a few days. Then we got to the point where we had invested so much time, energy and money in the project that we felt committed to it. Even this morning we almost gave up!!

For better or worse, we told them she would work for 12 months (but that was 3 months ago!), and now are regretting this decision. However we will make the most of it, and probably soon will send a cheery email. We also committed to purchase of a car for this job, which is in the west of London not too far from Heathrow. So we do look forward to seeing GB on weekends, and also look forward to visitors. We will send details of our accommodation when we have procured some!!

We are sending this from Zaragosa - we came here by train from a place called Tureul which had poor internet etc facilities. We were snowed in at Tureul for the weekend (unseasonal weather all over Spain) then steady rain on the Monday so gave in to comfort with the train. Both Tureul and here have some interesting Arabian style architecture, but little from the original Moor occupation, prior to the Reconquista. Most of it was built by Moor architects and artisans who were permitted to stay.

We have not exactly been wearing our tyres thin from too much travel, but we did have a few great cycling days on quiet roads and a rail trail. The campgrounds are STILL not all open even though we are entering the second month of Spring tomorrow. It is unbelievable that we have

spent the WHOLE of winter in Europe, basically on our bikes and camping. We certainly haven't met too many others (in fact none that come to mind) doing the same.

Off to celebrate with a good dose of tapas and vino.

Back in Spain - 13 March 2004

Just a quick note to let you all know we were not on a Madrid train on Thursday. We are now in Taragona about 100 km south of Barcelona and enjoying looking around this area. We have about 10 days before the next saga in Gill's job process after which we may be heading for England again if all goes according to plan. In the meantime we intend to cycle across to Madrid and to see some of the Spanish countryside in the process. By then we hope the terrorists will be targeting somewhere else (lets hope it is not Australia) or will have been caught!

Elections are being held in Spain tomorrow, so we are getting as much info as we can about events, but not speaking the language is a bit frustrating (a lot of info here is in the Catalan language and we get confused!)

Cheers for now,
Gill and Keith

Back in France - 21 February 2004

Just quickly - we left Barcelona a couple of weeks ago and took a bus ride to Andorra to avoid nasty roads, spent 3 days there then travelled over the Pyrenees (2400m) into France. Thence to Montpellier to see some friends there (Nortons, who are thriving, and were great hosts), do an extra trip to visit Roman ruins, then back on the road south to Narbonne. Still waiting on job adverts etc in UK, but plan to catch a ferry from Bilbao when we go back to UK.

We enjoyed the mountain scenery and cycling beside skiers.
More later
Gillian and Keith

Barcelona - 2 February 2004

Gillian has registration approved so we are now proceeding to get work for her in UK, but will probably stay out of the country until all the paperwork is complete (perhaps a month??). Hope to get on the move again but will stay in Barcelona till Thurs this week.

Love to all of you
Keith and Gillian.

Barcelona - 8 January 2004

We are now just about recovered from our wogs (everyone at our bike shop had it too), and Spain is getting back to business after the fiestas. There is an extra holiday here on Jan 6 to celebrate the visits of the 3 wise men to the baby Jesus, and this is the major present giving day with parades the evening before throwing lollies to all the kids (and us). We were still out in the city at dark on the 5th and were able to see a bit of this (we missed the rest of the fiesta season hibernating in our tent)

We are now just about recovered from our wogs (everyone at our bike shop had it too), and Spain is getting back to business after the fiestas. There is an extra holiday here on Jan 6 to celebrate the visits of the 3 wise men to the baby Jesus, and this is the major present giving day with parades the evening before throwing lollies to all the kids (and us). We were still out in the city at dark on the 5th and were able to see a bit of this (we missed the rest of the fiesta season hibernating in our tent).

Bicycle Wagga Wagga – Ride Report

Where's the Helyars?

We have basically reequipped, and are fairly satisfied with our replacements so far, and are at least able to return to our travels. Very soon we may do so but we haven't got bored here yet and are now ready to do a bit of touring. There is a big bookstore here with lots of English novels and I picked up one today by Robert Hughes (Australian Robert) called Barcelona which delves into the history and art of the place so I may not be able to leave till I've read it!!! It is a lovely city, and we do enjoy it despite our early experience here.

The weather is cold at night but not quite a frost, but we are at sea level. During the day it is cool to warm but generally sunny and the sun appears about 9 till 5 so days are delightful in general, and it is quite possible to eat comfortably outside in the sun at lunchtime. Usually about 13 to 15 degrees I think. We have had a few cafe stops over the last couple of days and yesterday rode north along the coast a bit.

We have found supermarkets where one can wait in the warm sun while the other shops and an internet spot where we can bring our bikes inside. Some of the sporting shops also allow you to take the bike inside which is great for us, so we are riding almost everywhere again now. Usually a day in town gives us 40 km. Barcelona has huge wide streets with good bike routes and many shared pedestrian tracks right through the city. It is very fashion conscious, and all the sporty people are decked out in matching gear, there are lots of cosmetic shops and perfume shops and hundreds of clothing shops. At least it has been possible to restock with quality gear here.

No news re my UK registration. If we don't hear soon I am inclined to give it a miss and go to Turkey where we hear that everything has NOT closed for winter - that's the big problem with the rest of the continent here.

Hope all the festivities and New Year have and are going well
More sometime
Keith and Gillian.

Barcelona - 30 December 2003

Christmas day was a perfect day here, just north of Barcelona on the beachfront - a thermometer against a white wall registered 30 degrees in the afternoon!!! We were surrounded by new purchases, including my new bike (which is the same as the old one but has some new features), so had no need for presents.

It was marred by Keith coming down with a nasty cold from which he is still recovering. He has spent the best part of 4 or 5 days in bed and is not yet well. We have to move from our room with its extra comforts tomorrow, into our new untested tent, so I hope he is feeling better for that! The campground had about 6 other inhabitants when we arrived but over the weekend following Christmas about 100 camping cars arrived, and the place is now cheek to jowl with them and has only room for a few small tents (mostly from Italy)!!

We have replaced most of the necessary items that we lost - this involved, amongst other things, 2 sleeping bags, a tent (I had the poles of the old one), stove, plus all my clothes and personal items and bike and all its bits. It has taken a marathon effort to track down equivalent items to our tried and tested gear, but so far we have been fairly satisfied. The credit card has had a shock - in fact it was blocked by the bank who picked up the change in spending - that was overcome by a phone call with the fraud department but it was very comforting to know that they can pick that up!

The theft was amazing - we had just arrived in the central plaza from the airport, having reassembled our bikes at the airport and coming into town on the train (which is inexpensive and has classical music playing!). I went over to a taxi driver to get directions to a hotel, and leaned my loaded bike against a tree which was about 2 metres away from where I was standing. Keith came up and we were both concentrating on the directions, there were few people about and not

a "loitering lot", it was lit, and open and quiet, and about midnight. I turned around and thought it was a joke that my bike was not just beside me, but there was no trace! Needless to say we are paranoid now - I have come to town by train even though it is a nice bike ride. We won't leave them even locked in the street here. It's such a shame as Barcelona is really well set up for bikes with a good network of dedicated tracks throughout the city.

Thankyou for all the personal messages, and we hope that you have all had a lovely time with family and friends over the festive season. Keith was not too enthusiastic about all the goodies to eat and drink, so I had to have the lion's share, and we have strung them out for the past few days. We are not sure how the Spanish really celebrate as it was not public. However there were more cyclists and walkers out and about along the beach, and the beach road. Between us and the beach there is about 20 yards of campground entrance, then a 4 lane BUSY road, then a 2-lane railway, and then a walkway - access to the beach is via tunnels and stairs under this conglomeration of traffic every 200 - 500 metres. We resent the cars but the train is electric and very unobtrusive. The beach has sand (white but a little gritty) and some small breakers usually - the water is lovely and clear. The town, El Masnau, is just an extension along the beach of Barcelona, but winds it's way up the hill behind, and shopping there is an adventure as it's so pokey and it's not clear how to find even the post office!

Must sign off and pick up our last big purchase - down sleeping bag good enough for snow.

Cheers from me, and Keith in his absence
Gillian.

Hello and Now It Is December - 4 December 2003

Yes it's December and we still are no closer to solving the work muddle than we were 3 weeks ago, and it looks like unlikely that we will have it all organised before mid January at this rate. Still have not heard from the registration people, and then it will take a week to get a letter advising me and then it will take 2-3 weeks to get a visa because everytime a letter has to go from one office to another in the city it takes days! We are hoping to act as courier services to speed things up! We had a long chat with the agency person yesterday and decided to stay here until the registration decision has come back. After that it may be possible to apply for other jobs and my being available for interviews is helpful for that. Without the registration, both the jobs I could have had (most likely) are lost because of the delay, and it is silly to continue with interviews expecting the decision to come the next day. We have taken to visiting the offices to try to put a face behind the phone calls.

We had a weekly bus pass last week which we used far beyond its value, and it was good as it was quite wet. This week we have travelled the 18kms or so in to the city and back by bike - its a good adrenaline rush mixing it with the traffic, spiced with dark and rainy conditions (especially with glasses says Gillian) but there are many cyclists doing likewise! We have worn one map out, and visited the Ritz again last night for a new free one. We have purchased better and very bright coloured rain jackets and confidently venture out. It gets dark here at 4pm so we are always coming home in the dark. Interestingly it is often better at rush hour once we have cleared the central area as there is often a lane solely for buses, taxis and bikes.

We have been dropping into museums and galleries when we get free time. The important ones are free and have the added bonus of being warm and dry. Apart from that they are huge and excellent, and we feel very privileged to be free enough to take them in manageable portions. There is really not of day to fill in as travel takes 2-3 hours on the bikes or bus (bike is a little faster than the bus) and it takes forever to navigate around the one-way streets - at least it is possible to become instant pedestrians which makes it less troublesome than car travel. There is quite a lot of distance to cover sometimes also, but again, bike is easier than pedestrian or bus.

Weather is unpredictable. We have had about 2 mostly clear days but generally they are grey with scattered showers, some heavy, most light. Fog this am but also frosts last week. Our campground is next to a golf course and is quite large in itself. It has an adjacent leisure centre with cinema (the big gym is closed though, and is joined by the Lee Valley Park, so this area frosts much more than the reported London temperatures suggest. We can travel all along the 30 or so km of the Lee Valley Park on an old tow path made into a bikeway, but it's surface is extremely patchy and there is every form of obstacle known to cyclist along it's route, so it's recreation value rather than commuting. Apart from that much of it is industrial so the views are not superb. The area here (Edmonton Green or Picketts Lock for those who know London well enough) is working/industrial. The shopping is cheap (and shoddy) and there is rubbish everywhere (as for much of our route to the city), but it has this fantastic library that we use each day for internet, and of course it is warm and dry, and clean too.

It is strange for us to be spending so much time in the one spot, but we think it is the best option at present, and it's not too conducive to pack up and move when everything is damp all the time anyway. It costs about \$25 per night just for the site but that is a bargain for accommodation around London, and it has a heated cooking area, a good laundry, and heated bath area so is excellent. We are still adjusting to the increase in costs here. 1 euro was about \$1.60, £1 about \$2.30, but everything costs about the same as Australia provided you forget the £ or euro sign e.g. a coffee is about 1.3 euro in France and about £1.3 in England, and so on.

We came across a Vivaldi concert last Sat night at St Martin in the Fields - very pleasant to be able to go to such a famous place for lovely music, but in reality we could have done as well or better in Wagga as we couldn't see the performers anyway. "Stones in his Pockets" is playing here and we are half tempted to see if it is so much better here in this Mecca of theatre than in Wagga! Of course there is a bit more choice here!!!!

This has been Gillian's rambles while Keith does more on our Paris Brest Paris ride. Hope all of you are exceedingly well and happy and are ENJOYING the influx of the festive season. No idea where we will be at Christmas as yet - not in the same spot as it closes for Xmas! Will send more news as it comes to pass.

Hello from Londres - 22 November 2003

We have now reached the warlord kingdom of William the Conqueror, just in time to join a protest against the latest international warlord George B. About 100,000 to 200,000 took part in a march through the heart of London. We found it a relaxing way to get a guided tour of the city and to add our miniscule contribution to the cause of looking for a better way than warlordism to govern our 'civilisation'. Just before the protest the streets from Buckingham Palace to the Tower were virtually cleared of cars so we had a dream ride around the major sites!!!!

We went by train from Weymouth to a place called the Lea Valley Park that runs for about 30 or more km (north/south) just east of the city of London. We have our tent there in a campsite that has heated bathrooms and a heated room for cooking/eating so are quite comfortable. We cycled in and out of the City yesterday which challenged our direction finding along the poorly posted bike routes but we made it! It has been mostly grey weather but a bit of rain as well and not too cold "very mild for this time of year".

Gill has had 2 interviews - one near Cambridge and one in west London. Both went quite well so may have a job by Monday but still await the Registration then the work visa paperwork. In the meantime we are enjoying the facilities AND the food in England (more multicultural than France so we are getting some of our usual foods).

St Malo, France - 15 November 2003

We have been a bit silent of late - energy into matters of keeping warm and dry and finding campsites. The days are short so we find we do not have a lot of time for other matters.

We have been mooching along the Normandy coast and generally enjoying the change to coastal from rural. The last week we have taken in big doses of the Second World War along the D-Day invasion area. There are lots of museums and cemeteries, and other reminders of the massive loss of life and the huge significance of this.

Tomorrow we catch a ferry from St Malo to Weymouth in England, so ending our lovely long stay in France. We are thinking about all the good food we are leaving behind, and all the great bike opportunities, but are looking forward to a new adventure.

France has to be close to cycling Utopia, except now that our accommodation options have narrowed and we have been forced into hotels! We have had some good experiences there though and our most expensive night has been in a youth hostel! It is not too hard to get accustomed to a dry and warm environment we have found.

There has been no place in France that has not been interesting or scenic and we have now clocked up 7000 km. It would be hard to recommend a particular area to come to specifically. We have found the tourist offices very helpful, and have used their maps or a Michelin map, and very rarely the Lonely Planet. It is recommended that you travel here with a bike though (of course we would say that).



Cheers to all of you and if we get a better computer connection in Britain we will try to send more personal messages. Any news we get from home is always exciting to us.

Connelles, 100km NW of Paris - 22 October 2003

We stayed here 2 nights with the Glastonburys. Really enjoyed 4 days travel together with them & we enjoyed together a fantastic hotel meal (the best either of us have experienced), some great Gites D'etape (accommodation for wakers & cyclists only), some fabulous cycling, our first night in a Formule 1 hotel for both of us (emergency accommodation for us a week or so later, in between late & early trains) & shared some stories & information which was helpful to us all. France is almost a cyclist's heaven being so cycle friendly & with much great food. Do come! & please send BWW news.

16 October 2003

Despite the French campgrounds closing, the days getting shorter (light at 8am now), some rain and cool weather, we are enjoying ourselves happily. Came from the Central Massif to south of the Dordogne and across to Bordeaux region. Tonight we have our first train journey - from Bordeaux city to Rouen in Normandy. We have a unit there for a week from Saturday. We see this as a "holiday" - a roof, kitchen and sheets.



24 September 2003

We are at present in Clermont-Ferrand toward the centre of the central highland area. The roads are now hilly (500 to 1500 m) and quite challenging but the views are great. This area is dotted by volcanic cones and a couple of high ones. We had the first frost this morning and were caught with cold toes and fingers. We need to use warmer gear but haven't yet needed the best sleeping bag.



Over the last couple of weeks we have travelled from Orleans on the Loire with its canals, chateaus and lots of forest and farmland. Then south through the forests of Sologne (hunting season for deer and boar had just started - not wise to camp in the forests at this time!). Then to the Brenne area with dozens of lakes and lots of water and other birds. Had one night camped on a dairy farm and enjoyed the fresh milk and cheese, 2 nights free at 'closed' campgrounds and one night with a hospitable drunk chap who offered to put us up when we asked in the bar where the campground was located. In the morning he turned out to be quite nice and he led a group of walkers on a scheduled 10 km walk which we joined and enjoyed.

Have now clocked up 5000kms since arriving in France. Keith has now lost almost all his fat and Gillian a bit also so Keith thinks this will be to his advantage so that they both run out of energy at the same time in the afternoons. In the meantime Keith is eating hard!

Paris-Brest-Paris – a belated report received 26 June 2004

[Read the report here.](#)

9 August 2003

It does get hot here - 40 degrees Tuesday and nearly that all the rest of the week! We are feeling it like everyone else. Also very smoky atmosphere - our news is poor but perhaps from fires in Portugal?

Just a week and a half to the ride (the PBP), and it still seems a heck of a difficulty to ride that far. We have covered about 220 km of the route so that should help with our navigating for that section. The terrain is hilly and we have found ourselves quite slow compared with some of the rides we've done in Australia - not many long straight stretches. To balance that there is a lot of variety so it is always interesting for us. We met our first other rider in the PBP today - it was a great psychological boost. He was doing a long training ride - we had full packs and were nearly finished our day's ride by then. We are both well again (got rid of the colds) and are certainly stronger, but we have done little night riding here and it's a long time since we did much real distance i.e. greater than 250 km/day.

It has been great to be able to ride over here though - we have gained a lot of confidence in getting about. It's still easy to get a bit lost but the signs are good - there are just so many places to remember! It's still fun doing the grocery shopping getting to know what we are buying! and we are great connoisseurs of the patisseries! The countryside is always interesting and there are villages every few kilometres (not all with patisseries however). With the heat and more need for water, we have also found this to be difficult to find, and have had to resort to knocking on doors!

Our French is still woeful, but we are getting by admirably with the patience of the people we meet who have usually tried to meet us halfway on the language barrier, and often apologise for their poor English!

Sorry we cannot reply individually to all your greetings and news - it is fantastic to get even a quick "hello", and thanks to you all. We hope to get a bit more access to computers as we go, and to give more snippets of our life on the road. We are happy nomads, and our camping lifestyle is not unpleasant at all so far.

We are wending our way back towards Versailles for the start of the ride now. Think of us at 10pm on Monday 18 Aug (French time - 8 am Tues in Oz) as we head out towards the coast. We are hoping for strong easterly winds for 2 days then strong westerlies, and cool temperatures.

26 July 2003

We are gradually racking up our riding and enjoying ourselves at the same time. We are camped on the route of the bike ride we are doing (the PBP), and yesterday rode in to the start/finish line. Stayed at one campground and rode around for about 4 days and are doing the same here. Tomorrow we want to get to the start of the last stage of the Tour de France, but are finding it a bit difficult to find info about the street route.

First rain yesterday and today but gentle so has not worried us too much. Are happy today as we found a great supermarket and a great internet cafe - they are hard to find.

Still have a lot of work to do on the required fitness level and are still getting rid of colds but are feeling good.