

Bike Traces

2020



Luc Peters

Looking forward or looking back on adventures always seems great, a lot of memories and maybe even some sort of satisfaction of having faced the challenge successfully. However, enduring them is a totally different ball game. In other words looking forward and looking back is different from actually encountering it. I remembered these words by RUSH drummer and lyricist Neil Peart (1952-2020) on the morning of our departure of our biking adventure. The reason might be that the body doesn't suffer in advance or hindsight, but surely when going through the motion of pushing the pedals forward.

Biking is cool to talk and think about but actually doing it is something else. Again the body, which, when it comes to biking has to rely on the available amount of HP, which is not to be mistaken with horse power. It is just human power. Whether this power is impressive or even sufficient in our case is yet to be seen. Whether there is a significant difference between 'man' power and 'woman' power is something that should go unmentioned I guess, or something I shouldn't even go into, or in the words of Jerry Seinfeld as stated somewhere in season 7 of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, probably my favorite sitcom: "never disturb the exotic bird". Whoever the bird may be: male or female is anybody's guess. I'm staying out of this.

Whatever the case may be and whatever will happen is still dwelling in the unknown as hindsight is not in sight yet. It is still unavailable in other words, and, again, our bodies aren't suffering, yet. The only things we do have now are high hopes and maybe the necessary amount of ignorance needed to embark on adventures like these. Again, whether or not it will be a real adventure is unclear. But then you never know. The only thing we know for sure is that we had some basic training, some mere 450 km, where we explored the surrounding areas in order to get used to our bikes and the routine of following certain bike tracks as laid out in the 'fietsknooppunt' app.

These bike tracks supposedly reveal some beautiful places along the way. Furthermore they avoid busy motorways or the hustle and bustle of too much traffic. They should bring us to the quiet areas within nature which not only reveal its beauty but also open up spaces for contemplation. Whether or not the body allows us to contemplate is yet to be seen. Well, whatever the case may be, our trust lies in these bike tracks as supplied by 'fietsknooppunt'.

We have packed our bikes with all the stuff needed for conducting this tour. This involves clothing and some technical stuff like cameras, tablets, binoculars, but not too much. In my saddlebags there are 2 books, carefully selected, something which is never an easy choice to make. I came up with: Paul Auster's *4321*, and Hans Blumenberg's *Höhlenausgänge*. 2 thick ones so I do not run the risk of running out of reading material, something that would be detrimental.

I already started in the first one which has been on the shelves for almost 3 years which might be considered strange as Paul Auster is one of my favorite writers. It might be the bigness of the volume, some 1100 pages, that made me let it wait for the 'right' time. The other one: *Höhlenausgänge*, almost 900 pages of German philosophy is something which I'm very curious about. This is because of my interest in caves and how these played a relevant part in human history and more specific in the 'evolution' of (wo)man. From a philosophical point of view the example of Plato's cave is close at hand, but also the one from Bataille and his passion for the cave paintings of Lascaux in France. Having written about caves in my newest book *On Noise!*, it is a topic that remains to haunt me and that is just what it should do. So I'm looking forward to digging into *Höhlenausgänge*.

I also have this idea that movement changes the way you think or are able to comprehend certain things. It can bring certain things, thoughts or ideas to light that would otherwise remain hidden, somewhere in the shadow of thoughts, resisting

appearance. The body and the way it is set in motion should weaken or evaporate this resistance. The nice thing about all of this is that you never know in advance what will happen or which thoughts will materialize. It is all about surprise and that's probably the way it should be I guess when indulging in adventure.



Starting out this tour, together with my wife, my princess, resonates with my thoughts on a bike tour I did in the sweltering summer of 1998, all the way from my home in Heerlen (NL) to Tourette-sur-Loup, a small town a little north of Nice in France. A town that was visited by the way by one of my favorite directors: Canada's own David Cronenberg. That previous tour involved the barbaric tendencies of slaving ourselves down 100 km a day on our bikes, fully packed with tents, cooking gear, which we never used, clothes, food, books etc.

Now 100 km might not seem much, although the bikes were pretty heavy and the temperatures were hugging 40 degrees

Celsius, and maybe it indeed isn't much until you reach mountain ranges like the Jura in the middle of France and especially the mighty Alps. Damn, these are pretty big, and the more you ride up the mountain, the steeper it gets. In our cases the experience was enhanced by the fact that the route was unknown to us, besides having a sense of direction, so after every hairpin bend we wondered whether it would be the top of the mountain or not. In almost all of the cases the answer was negative. This suggests a lot of excitement and a lot of sheer endurance. The latter involves shutting off your brain time and again and desperately trying to deny the suffering of the body. In just a single case the body was stronger than the brain and it directed me onto the soft shoulder of the upward mountain road where I tried to grasp for air for some 2 very long hours.

Anyway, this tour in 2020 will hopefully be different as we will be moving in flat areas, the proverbial lowlands. It should also be different as we decided that it should first and foremost be a vacation. So although it is all about pushing the pedals in a forward motion, it should be mainly about relaxation. This seems a contradiction or even an oxymoron and it most certainly is, but then life is not about making sense, but about moving into the unpredictable and sometimes even the unwanted. But hey we're optimists and know that evil demons are allergic to good vibes.

Day 1
Heerlen to Roermond
56,27 km

After the obligatory pics in front of our house with our fully packed bikes it is kick off time. We start moving in a dreary setting while my wife is suffering from a brutal tooth ache. What to do? Cancel the trip? Wait? Or maybe start and see how it evolves? The latter option

is chosen and so we move on the already explored path of the first leg of our trip, and then slowly move into a little piece of Germany, before entering the lowlands again. The biking goes smoothly and we behave in a rather careful mode where we do not want to put too much pressure on our minds and bodies. Let's treat the muscles kindly and not get over excited so to speak.

Somewhere halfway we move into the city of Montfort where we finally encounter a food place and treat ourselves to toasted ham cheese sandwiches. While lounging and munching on the terrace some old time cars cruise by one of which we assume to be a 50's Pontiac. For the last 10 km to Roermond we are directed onto some dirt back gravel roads. These take our attention away from the nice scenery and put our focus on the treacherous gravel before us. We move along the waterfront and enter the city on our way to our first resting point: the Van der Valk Orange Theater Hotel somewhere in the city center. After checking in and putting our bikes in the private bike parking we slip into something more comfortable and move to the terraces surrounding the cathedral for drinks and some small bites. Wanting some decent food we settle for a Mexican restaurant where we wolf down some turkey enchiladas while noticing that the small bites before might have been not so small after all. We have to get used to a new rhythm I guess. And then, unfortunately: the tooth ache has decided to move along with us, damn.

Day 2

Roermond to Thorn to Roermond

40,94 km (97,21 km)

After a night of throwing up my princess decides that the only option is to go to the dentist in Heerlen, by train that is. I drop her off at the station, have breakfast in the hotel and wait for her to return. We decide to stay another day in Roermond so she has a chance to get

some sleep and regain her strength. Besides that they predicted rain which is never a welcome guest on a bike trip.

One more day in Roermond gives me some time to read 4321. Nearing page 200 I still do not really have an opinion, which can imply that I still need to digest it or maybe it just doesn't move me as much as his other books like: *The New York Trilogy*, *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance*, *Timbuktu*, *Oracle Night* or *Sunset Park*. But then there are almost 900 pages to go. Reading it also ignites my curiosity about the Blumenberg book. Reading always carries my thoughts in all kinds of uncharted directions which makes it an enthralling adventure. You never know what to expect.

On the other hand lying in our hotel room, immobile, and looking at our bike saddlebags makes me a little uncomfortable and yearning to move again. I guess patience is a weird thing which you might be able to train, and which I even try to enjoy in some sort of way. This is not about doing nothing but about trying to discern how nothing can be an enjoyable state of being. Shaking off the urge to do something in order to escape nothing. Nevertheless restlessness kicks in. Maybe it is our bodies calling for action.

This might be the reason why the idea of drawing a small circle came up. This involves moving from Roermond to Thorn, the white village, a place that has been on our mind and is now within moving range, 40 km to and from, which makes me recognize that moving in circles, even when these are twisted, is different from moving in straight lines, even when these are crooked. Going back implies a melting of start and finish and this repetition changes my mental state. It shapes some kind of pressure where the excitement of the new and unexpected is erased.

Having said that, we still enjoy the beautiful waterfront while we're moving our bikes towards our base camp in Roermond. After that we start hunting for food in the market square. Italian food, pasta is what is supposed to be the perfect fuel for biking, at least

that is what we heard, so we're sticking to that imagery. Our choice is thus an easy one.

While hanging around on the terrace of the restaurant we see these massive amounts of birds moving into weird almost vortex like formations. We wonder what kind of birds these are: crows? starlings? According to people next to us the right answer is indeed starlings, and we're fine with that. Why argue about the unknown? After wolfing down our food and pounding down our drinks we head back to the hotel in order to lay our weary bodies down and rest, awaiting a new dawn.



Day 3
Roermond to Venray
74,26 km (171,47 km)

The 75 km stretch comes unexpected. We had been calculating, with the help of Google maps and concluded, maybe a little too hasty, that the biking distance between Roermond and Venray amounted to some 50 km. Based on that number we already booked a hotel in Venray. On drawing out our route through the 'fietsknooppunt' app we suddenly learn that it is 70 km, in the end a total of 75. I always have these doubts on the human capacities of calculating or handling these weird and artificial numbers and this again is a slight indication of this. It also shows that some more precaution might come in handy.

The day starts in good spirits and it is astonishing how the routine of packing becomes this motor skill, almost like a second nature. So here we are all packed up and ready to go and decide to pump a little bit more air into the tires, resulting in one broken bicycle valve. Luckily bicycle repair man lives around the corner and helps us out.

The journey is a beautiful stretch, partly along the Maas, through beautiful fields and farmland. Endlessly pushing our pedals in a foreword motion and having a little bite and drink in Grubbenvorst. Many bike tourist on our route, most of them electrically driven. Many implies maybe too many. In the end, after 75 km we enter Venray and drop off our stuff at the Witte Hoeve hotel. After unpacking and showering we head for the local brasserie, not the Zappa one as described in *Joe's Garage*, for some food and booze,. The staff are young kids who seem extremely shy but very friendly. After that we walk through the city center and have one for the road in the hotel bar, which is jam packed with just us.

So after a few drinks we move to our bunks a little earlier than expected.

Day 4
Venray to Nijmegen
55,25 km (226,72 km)

The road to Nijmegen. Moving through fields and woods, beautifully illuminated by the sun. I immediately feel that if I would point my camera on this enchanting play of light and shadow this would resolve in enthralling images. The big IF.

Again many bikers are on route and as usual most of them electrically driven. We have become a rare species, these HP driven bikes. Also a lot of Ortliebs' on our route, something which we refer to as the Ortlieb family, a group of people that can be easily recognized by their gear, in some way they resemble Harley riders I guess.

55 km is the distance we cover, something that that was calculated beforehand as 48 something. Again the playfulness of numbers. These never exactly give us what we want from them. What is this magical attraction of numbers as they always trick us? Why do we still put our trust in them, or have we lost our way in this?

Losing our way is definitely the case on entering Nijmegen, a city that I should know quite well, and I even think, or maybe just believe to know quite well, but still I get lost and have to call in the arms of google maps, which helps us out until we reached familiar places that lead us to our resting places for our weary bones and iron horses.

The city provides us with a place for food and drinks, something we welcome gratefully. After wolfing down our food: fish & chips and pounding down our drinks we move for a last one, one

for the road I guess, before crashing in our bunks in the Mercury hotel next to the train station.

In the morning we have to wear plastic gloves for breakfast, a new Covid measure. During the night I spent a few hours reading in *4321*, which reminds me somehow of the Linklater movie *Boyhood*, with the difference that *4321* tells these various different stories which are the same and then they're not. Almost as if you come to a fork in the road and then there is the choice of which way to go. Any which way is correct but leads to a different outcome. As a writer you would normally choose one of these. However Paul Auster describes these different options which amount to 3 so far. The first is when the warehouse gets robbed, the second when it gets burned to the ground and the third when his father gets killed in the fire. But still this is only trying to figure out the plot, like a detective mode.



Day 5
Nijmegen to Hoenderloo
51,39 km (278,11 km)

A fast ride out of Nijmegen, driving across the magnificent 'Waal' bridge, moving through its center as the bridge is in for a paint job. Meaning the cars move to the side and the bikes through the center. After that we move along the Waal and its smaller brothers and sisters roaming through beautiful and peaceful landscapes, where it is just bikes and nature. As the heatwave is coming up we witness a lot of action along the waterfront, although we are moving quite early.

This brings us to the city of Arnhem, entering, again via a bridge, the famous one which used to be a war zone during WW2. It makes you wonder what is wrong with *homo sapiens*, or is it *homo destructor*, as Michel Serres proposed. I guess it is the latter, although the landscape, now, is breathtaking.

After the city we move along the river again, going up north towards National Park the Veluwe where we booked shelter somewhere in the woods near Hoenderloo. A long last stretch wears us out before reaching the resort where we have to wait for 2 hours before our room is ready. Luckily there is a sunny terrace and Stephaner Weizen Hefe, which is supposed to be the oldest beer in the world, which makes me feel sorry for all the people living before that.

Anyway the room is spacious and gives me some time to 'munch' on 4321 before the dinner and some Fawlty Towers style bar service. A young guy working there introduces himself and I ask him if he is Mr Fletcher (the name of the resort) himself. He denies but informs us that white chocolate was invented by a Dutch guy. Just the information we need I guess. After some more bar action we decide to hit the hay.



Day 6

Hoenderloo to Hoge Veluwe to Hoenderloo

46,70 km (324,81 km)

A day of rest, not the Sobchakian day of rest, but our day of rest. So we're allowed to drive the car, or handle the oven, things we do not do, probably because we do not have a car or an oven with us. We only got our bikes and as the day of rest doesn't contain any restrictions for us we decide to grab them and cycle through national park the Hoge Veluwe.

This results in some 50 km tracking through woods and tundra like surroundings, hoping to spot some wildlife, like wild boars, deer or even beavers, knowing that we will not see any of those. The only wildlife we encounter is the tamed or docile kind, namely humans on electric bikes. By the way their taming has not always been successful although we really have no reason to

complain. The only thing to complain about is the heat, some 35 degrees Celsius, which could be worse but also better. Anyway, we enjoy the enchanting and deserted landscapes and I take some pictures trying to capture the enigmatic play between light and shadow, again.

While moving around we are impressed by the solemnness of these mighty trees. Being in nature probably makes us even more aware of their beauty and grandeur. They have been on our planet long before we started to move around and will probably be there long after. It is maybe their mightiness and imperturbableness connected to their grace that makes us quiet out of respect and wonder. They provide some sort of stability being firmly rooted and not so easily disturbed by whatever is going on, or so it seems. Maybe they shape some sort of stable entity in a world moved by turmoil, although they companions are treated in a very disrespectful way most of the time. Maybe we have lost some sort of connection to the trees, some lack of empathy through which we have forgotten the relevance of our mighty companions that provide shelter, shadow, warmth but most of all our oxygen that enables us to live. No being or becoming without trees.

We trudge back to Hoenderloo and surrender to some serious munchies on a shadowy terrace before slaving our way back to our resort between the trees, where we enjoy the terrace and the 20 minute wait for our well deserved beverages. Sometimes you have to bite the bullet and roll with the punches. It also makes me wonder, constantly, how my new friend Ferguson, from 4321 is doing. Well I guess I have to wait it out then.



Day 7
Hoenderloo to Ellecom
24,25 km (349,06 km)

Leaving the Fletcher resort Hoenderloo for the Fletcher resort Ellecom involves a 25 km stretch through the woods in still mild morning temperatures. During the day the heatwave is hitting us severely and rising up to some 35 degrees Celsius. Although, again what is the real use of these numbers besides giving a small notion of what our bodies might endure, and I don't need to go into the difference between sun and shadow and the way in which these disrupt all indications, in order to stress the artificiality of numbers.

Still, moving through these woods on our bikes with a little wind caressing our bodies is pretty pleasant. Apparently we're not the only ones who enjoy this although we are about the only ones who push our bikes forward manually and not electrically. The

popularity of the electric bikes causes an annoying congestion of the small bike lanes.

Anyway on our shortest route so far we reach our destination before we really get going and we are feeling ready to enjoy a 2 day lockdown of lounging, reading and doing nothing, maybe some swimming. Although we booked our hotel in the wrong direction, Rheden in stead of Rhenen, we are pretty convinced that we will enjoy this break.

And then I wonder about *4321*. How will this weird story progress? Will it progress? How can I even describe what is going on in that book? I almost reached page 400 but am still not really sure what to think about it. It is definitely a book where the story, although it is there, doesn't really seem to matter. It is like this vehicle for talking about certain ideas in life or some things that happened in American history. It is maybe comparable to other Auster books as it is not plot driven but mainly thriving on the notions of chance or (bad) luck. All those things in life which can happen despite all the efforts to prevent them and occur in such an unannounced way that we never see it coming. Maybe it is about the urge to predict and know, which turns out to be insufficient in the end. Whatever the case maybe the book tries to lure me in and crave to know what will happen next. On the other hand my longing for Blumenberg's *Höhlenausgänge* increases slowly.

Day 8

Day of rest in Fletcher resort Ellecom

Relaxing at the amazing resort, reading Paul Auster *4321* and moving with the unfolding of the story. I notice that I lose track a little bit here and there and wonder if the various stories remain consistent, or if the inconsistency spreads out further in the various stories themselves, just like life. It can take all kinds of directions that do not have to make any sense but which happen nevertheless.



Day 9

Ellecom to Veenendaal

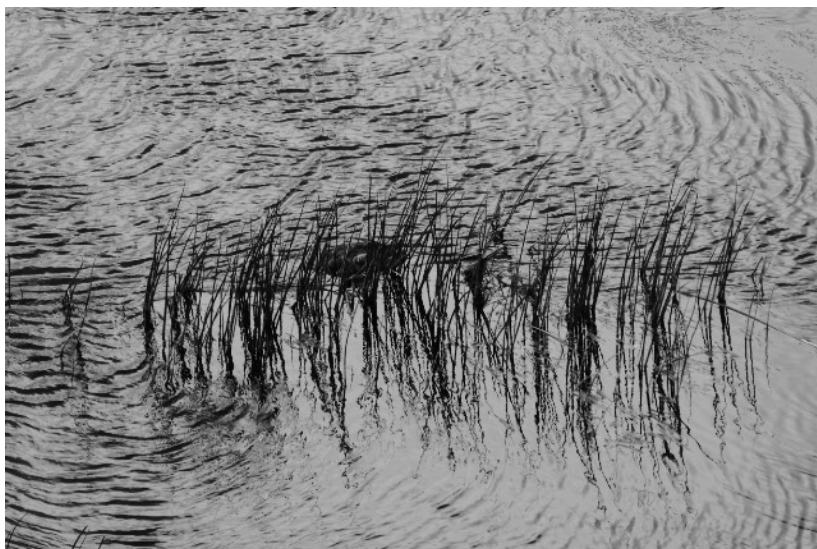
48,38 km (397,44 km)

Moving from Ellecom to Veenendaal in another hot and steamy day. Moving through woods and an endless stretch in the middle of nowhere with nothing else but some remote buildings. The last stretch is another endless and tiny road towards our destination. Strange how roads can seem to be never ending when you're longing for the end.

The Van der Valk Hotel is brand new and shining and has one the most pleasant rooms ever. The hotel is, as all other places, under the strict lockdown regime, resulting in us answering the same questions again and again which might leads to some irritation for my side and my own Larry David moment when the guy working in the restaurant, asks, after 3 others doing the same, if we are

staying at the hotel and how many of us are there. My answer is 10, while my wife tries to ignore me and remain friendly. The waiter however answers that he does not know whether more people are coming with us. My answer is 281, after which we can enter, at last.

For dinner we choose the city itself and some small restaurant that serves 'world tapas', and a lot of beer. The evening ends with some bottles of Duvel at the hotel bar and me being allowed to take one up to the room. The idea of enough is enough is always replaced by 'one for the road'.



Day 10
Veenendaal to Utrecht
58,06 km (455,50 km)

An almost 60 km stretch through woods, the military city of Soesterberg and along endless highways into the suburbia of De Bilt

and in the end Utrecht where we make a pit stop at the Tivoli music center for some Vedett extra white and a tuna melt. As there will be no Le Guess Who? festival this year it is a pretty grim experience despite the sunny and sweltering weather.

In the afternoon we go for a swim in some sun baked water resort next to Utrecht and get our sensitive skin roasted. The heat wave surely amplifies the urge for water and going under in it.

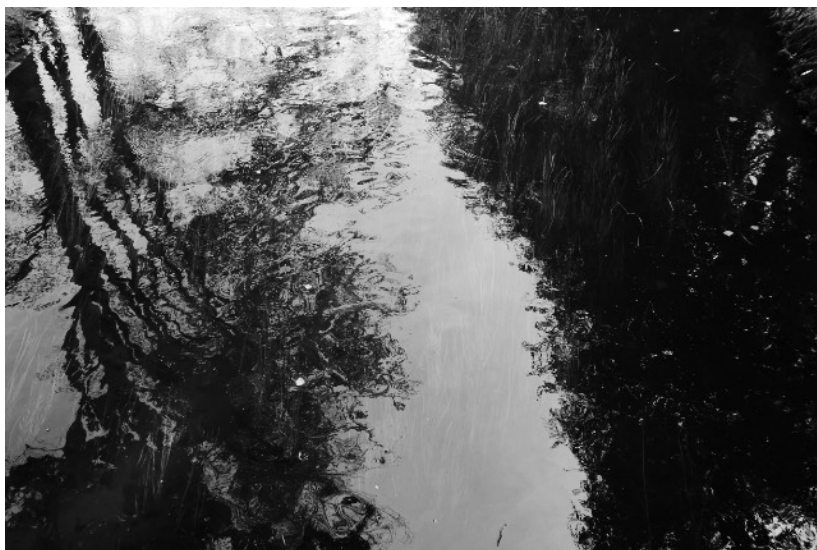
Day 11

Another day of rest.

Relaxing, hanging out, and reading some more *4321* which still hasn't got me totally excited. The book moves through American history from various point in an ever fluctuating memory of an imaginary life of Archie who wants to be a writer and therefore changes his name to Isaac, as it apparently sounds better and gives more of a writer impression. Never thought about this, but it suggests that writers are confronted with some of the same dilemmas rock stars or actors are facing, namely to have a cool sounding name or not, just like the mr. Brown discussion in *Reservoir Dogs*. Mr. Brown sounds like mr. Shit, whereas mr. White is a cool sounding name. The aural attraction of the name seems to be crucial in how one wants to present themselves to the public.

I remember having a similar discussion, well a few times as a matter of fact, in the organizations I work(ed) for. An employee should have a cool sounding name, referring to the accompanying job (description), and this should provoke a cool and self confident feeling, implying that it is not just the job one is executing but also and maybe even predominantly the images it gives off. Obviously this is a highly subjective perception and thus always contains a moving insecurity. So it is not just the suit, the posture, the voice, the skin color, the odor or the strut, but also about the name.

So the name Luc Peters garbage man is different than Luc Peters Head of Bureau X, or Luc Peters, Manager, or Luc Peters, Consultant, or Luc Peters Writer, or Luc Peters Philosopher. The last one might be the most problematic, and on the other hand, writing it down in such a way makes the difference pretty small, so my argument is rather weak, although, as an escape, I might have chosen the wrong names. Maybe it is just my reasoning. In practice however I have seen enough people who just hated their job name and even felt (slightly) humiliated by it. Well the thoughts one gets when biking across the sun drenched country.



Day 12
Another day of rest.

In the still blistering heat we take the liberty and the luxury of one more day without riding our bikes. Hanging on the beach doing

nothing besides drinking cans of Heineken and eating some potato crisps is giving our red hot burned bodies some badly needed relaxation. The beach and water have a certain kind of magnetic magic that attracts large crowds who lay around on the grass fields, totally bored. Meanwhile lots of kids are working intensively in the sand, shoveling, building and crushing the structures in the end.

In the evening we go out for dinner in a nice little restaurant next to the river Vecht. De restaurant is pretty busy which means we have to wait for 1,5 hours for our food which isn't really spectacular, to say the least, resulting in some fiery discussion with the waiter that ends in a friendly atmosphere. Apparently that is what summer does to us: it calms us down.

Meanwhile the reading of 4321 is progressing slower than I assumed. Not a real page turner I guess and not delivering the goods I was hoping for, or maybe even expecting. Raising the bar can be a risky operation sometimes.



Day 13
Utrecht to Wordragen
69,80 km (525,30 km)

Moving out of the beautiful and vibrant city of Utrecht. At the outskirts the usual shabby industry that apparently amplifies the economy. Well, whatever the case may be it shapes the surroundings of this city as well as many others.

After Utrecht it is green grass fields torn apart by endless bike lanes which we gladly follow with the help of the numbers of the so called 'fietsknooppunt' route. Although it is sometimes a serious search we nevertheless manage to roll through the landscapes quite easily. Taking a food stop in the center of Leerdam to fuel up a little bit we realize that the trip goes super swiftly. Two river crossings provide us with some extra adventure and wearing the unavoidable mouth masks that give that great gangster image. Some elements of the corona measures are really cool. It is like a pharmakon, or as Dutch legend and the greatest soccer player of all time Johan Cruyff would argue: 'every disadvantage contains an advantage'.

Anyway, we move on to the world of the Bommelerwaard, a small patch of the lowlands caught between the dikes that help the inhabitants to keep their head above water. Long stretches of farmland shape a beautiful scenery while we slowly but deliberately move on down to the home ground of my wife, the small town of Wordragen where the family farm is still there. With the threat of heavy weather which never materializes, we reach our destination after 70 pretty pleasant miles. It is there that we spent the night and where I watch the champions league game of Bayern against Barca and seeing Barca lose 8 to 2. My favorite team torn to shreds and the mighty Messi not being able to turn it around. Something which should bring me to 4321, but then I'm just too tired to read.

Day 14
Wordragen to Goirle
47,44 km (572,74 km)

The route starts with roads made of bricks, not really crotch friendly I guess. We move through the cobblestone capitol of the world Heusden, a touristic magnet for all the right reasons like old buildings that look old and of which it might be assumed that they are actually old. Apparently old towns are very popular and attract massive amounts of tourists that are willing to go all the way to become part of it even if it is just a very small moment in time and even if it includes the obligatory tourist routine of being ripped off.

Anyway if the latter is true is beyond my perception as my attention was mainly focused on finding our way and battling the cobblestones. My wife drew my attention to a small shoe shop in which she bought shoes when being just a kid, so some form of authenticity was certainly there. After the 'cobblestoning' there are wide open fields and endless bike roads that slowly move us into the city of Tilburg where we pass the 013 concert hall and the Willem II football stadium.

Some amazingly huge mansions later we arrive at our destination. A destination in which I will lose the battle against massive amounts of Belgian beer, like Westmalle, Duvel and some which names my memories refuses to cough up. Despite the amazing barbecued Weißwurst and some other food which I cannot really remember I end up sleeping on the new sofa, still in my bike gear with some slight recollections of watching a live show by Queen on youtube. I guess the image of Freddie's mustache is quite difficult to erase.

Day 15
Goirle to Valkenswaard
55,75 km (628,49 km)

The day after is indeed the day after implying that the booze or its remnants have occupied my legs and gut. All the demonic vibes crawling out of and onto my body. But as a true professional I keep my chin up and move on in high spirits listening to the birds sing and enjoying how we move, slowly, through the fields and woods towards our next destination. It feels good to be back in the saddle again and moving in the outdoors.

Our destination is the small city of Valkenswaard which means that we neglect Eindhoven and already move south, a tiny bit, slightly hugging the Belgian border. Trying to enjoy the beautiful scenery mainly shaped by farmland and farmhouses, my thoughts are mostly occupied by the shower and my attempt to get rid of two days of sweat from my body and slip into something a little bit more comfortable.



In the end we roll into Valkenswaard where we booked a room above an Irish pub. Normally I love hanging out in these places, but now it feels kind of odd when trying to get back to clean and normal. But the room is nice, the shower great and the people are friendly, and yes the beer does what it has to do.

The evening consists of Hoegaarden, spicy burgers and the Europa league game between Sevilla and Manchester United, a game that Manchester loses as they miss their chances for making a goal, something Sevilla achieves to do. In the end the team that scores the most goals wins, meaning that it is not about playing great, although that might help and for me as a viewer the only interesting aspect, it is about the result in the end. The only exception might be the 1974 Dutch team with Johan Cruyff that lost the World Cup final against Germany but their playing and approach to football made a big impression and turned out to be extremely influential to this day.

Anyway, while watching the game I'm also listening to the music being played, classic rock, almost like an American radio station. I hear all these songs from way back when, songs like: *Life in the Fast Lane* by the Eagles, a really amazing song that I used to listen to many times as a kid. At a certain point I got fed up with the Eagles, but hearing it now, damn. Another one is: *Reelin in the Years* by Steely Dan, a band I only started to listen to some years ago and which still makes a big impression. And then, almost inaudible: the bass playing on Fleetwood Mac's *Dreams*, truly amazing and so original. I must have heard it a million times but apparently never noticed it. A little later on they play *Go your own Way*, and again that bass, damn. When I get home I have to listen to it more carefully and try to figure out what this guy is doing. Or is it the beer? No it can't be. Only one way to find out.

Day 16
Valkenswaard to Thorn
58,73 km (687,22 km)

After the weary and torturing track of the day before, which was also the day after, this day seems more prosperous. The breakfast in the bar hotel, the Irish pub is ok, especially the coffee. For some reason the quality is far superior to that of the hotels.



The beginning of the stretch is pretty confusing as we cannot find the starting point very easily, and after that we somehow loose our track again so recalculating seems to be the name of the game. In the end we get back on track and move through woods, endless fields and even an Abby on the Dutch and Belgian border. Big shields and wires inform us that this was the place of the so called

Death Wire, an electrically charged wire intended to kill anyone who wanted to cross the border in WW1, and it certainly performed its task the shields informed us.

The problem back then was that Belgium was occupied by German troops while the Netherlands remained neutral which led to a situation in which people from the occupied territory tried to flee to neutral land, just as smugglers tried to earn a serious buck this all to the horror of the German occupiers who decided to close the border by means of the Death Wire. The Abby was in the middle of all this and the only option for the monks, Benedictine ones, was to flee to the safe and neutral haven. Negotiations intended for their return failed so during wartime they remained on neutral ground leaving the Abby deserted till the moment they returned after the war. A very impressive scenery stressing the idiocy of wars but especially of borders. Apparently borders are not meant to protect but to kill, besides the fact that the danger is always within the borders and never on the outside.

Luckily the Death Wire is reduced to some small samples and some shields while the border is now open, and safe and we are able to move around freely which brings us to some more beautiful scenery and from Belgium back to the Netherlands. We drive by some heavy industry in the Weert area before we decide to have our lunch break, after which it is more woods, fields, some chapels, and a wide variety of big mansions. It seems that the bike route via fietsknooppunt moves through all the poshy neighborhoods. Areas we would normally never visit as these are remote and slightly hidden.

In the end we enter the nostalgic town of Thorn, for the second time on this trip, and search for the Fletcher hotel where we will be residing. After the check in we try to even the fluidity levels with the help of Weizen and Aperol Spritz. After we enter our rooms and after a shower I switch the Ace Frehley shirt for one from RUSH, with the logo from their very first album.

Dinner in this beautiful place is next to the monumental church where we also ate lunch during our first visit. An option this time is to have a surprise menu which my wife considers to be a great idea. However I am not really thrilled about these surprises as I assume it must imply leftovers. As I do not choose the surprise my wife also cannot go for the surprise as it is meant for the whole table. My suggestion that I move to another table does not solve this problem. It remains unclear what the criteria are but surprises are out this time.



Day 17

Thorn to Heerlen

59,39 km (746,61 km)

Waking up in yet another place, another bed, another hotel. Luckily in Thorn church bells are pretty dominant so when I'm able to count

7 strikes I lose the point of staying in bed and decide to rise and maybe shine. The old school bathroom guarantees a minimum of water pressure which gives a new challenge to taking a shower, maybe it is more like trying to catch the water drops. The result in the end is not really satisfying and sometimes you can reach the conclusion that the challenge is just plain impossible.

The track started in the white city where we immediately lost track. It is astonishing to experience how the same mistakes are always made, over and over again, as if no option for learning, double loop, or triple or whatever loop is possible. But then the solution is always found, in whatever way, so any upheaval is superfluous. Riding through the beautiful scenery on the Belgian side of the border.

I sense the last kilometers ticking away, but then it is still a 60 km stretch. It is a strange feeling to think about concluding this trip or maybe even any trip. It creates an unrest, like a fusion of joy and disappointment. The latter because it is almost over, the former because home is within reach and where the heart is as Zappa would probably say. It also seems clear that as soon as home is reached the urge of leaving again becomes dire, again. So it is like ouroboros, the magical snake biting its own tail. Knowing this doesn't make it easier but that's not the point.

After a while we start to notice some familiar ground. We rest in the city center of Sittard where we eat some food and wonder whether heavy weather is approaching. So far it isn't. We move on and via a detour we are driven to some serious climbing, the Kollenberg. However what goes up must come down and speeding downhill we notice that the detour was completely unnecessary. Climbing just for the fun of it, because it is an option, or so it seems.

Considering climbing we haven't seen the last of it and one part near Oirsbeek is one of the steepest I have ever encountered in the neighborhood. Luckily for us we are on the downhill side, which luckily doesn't go up for us. But we wonder who ever thought to

include this in the bike routes. While wondering we are surrounded by fire truck sirens and we notice the strong and uncomfortable smell of gas, which makes us want to move on and ... lose track again, in such a way that we cannot find it back. But then we are on familiar ground and we are able to switch routes and find our way home no matter what, concluding the twisted circle of start and finish. Home at last or so it seems, implying the end of yet another adventure.

Total Distance: 746,61 km.



AFTERMATH

Arriving unpacking, checking the house, going out for dinner, drinking, chatting, crawling home again and passing out in our own beds. The house looks familiar although it is always a matter of reacquainting I guess. Finding out that the washing machine is

‘fucked’, so another challenge. Maybe this is a reason to leave home, to evade all those hassles that try to impact your life negatively. All those things you do not really care about, washing machines, toasters, ovens, computers, but are still needed to function in a ‘normal’ way. All this technical stuff designating our lives but so incomprehensible. Maybe for this reason I crave books or vinyl records or cd’s, or DVD’s, or my bike, although it is too technical for me to understand.

While checking the photographs I took with my simplistic but very sufficient camera, of which I always use the same preset, dynamic monochrome, I notice some really cool pictures of which I get really excited. They add a wonderful touch of black & white magic to the memories of the bike trip. They are always different than my imagination but add this special flavor that apparently only the camera eye can provide.

These are different from the images I took with my iPhone, posing in front of the signs of the places of arrival. I sent these to some close friends of which I’m pretty sure that they appreciate the adventure and in some way move along with us in their minds and imaginations. Maybe I will even share these thoughts with them. Almost like Neil Peart shared some of his travel memories in images and words. Neil’s words and music have also travelled along with me, in my head, although a few time I watched some RUSH clips on YouTube in our hotel room: *Under Lock & Key*, *Mystic Rhythms*, *The Big Money*.

And then one might wonder whatever happened to 4321. How did it end? Well, without beating around the bush I already argued that it is not so much about the story, but more about certain thoughts that spread their enigmatic wings while the story unfolds. As mentioned Paul Auster’s books are not exactly plot driven. A nice example is given in *Oracle Night* where a certain twist of the plot comes to an end as it refuses to make sense anymore. Well just an example I

guess. In 4321 he moves through his idea of American history and all its potencies whether materialized or not. It resonates a bit with *Underground* by Don DeLillo, his good friend, although *Underworld* immediately grasped me and made a bigger impression. Well, I'm losing track here myself. Anyway to make a long story short: I didn't finish it. As a matter of fact I got to somewhere like page 750 which equals the amount of kilometers we've driven. A page a kilometer it seems.

After getting back home it is therefore my idea to finish the book knowing that the best is yet to come and on the other hand when I read his previous book *Sunset Park* I wasn't totally thrilled, but on reading it for the 2nd time I was blown away. Sometimes things need time to digest or perception might shift under the influence of time and space.



And then the rain, the minute we open our backyard door on arrival, it's starts pouring down, relentlessly, pounding down, brutal, cold,

but we are inside, dry, worn out, but in some sort of way satisfied, I guess. And that's how these things can come to an end, almost as if the rain was our protective companion along our way, waiting for us to be safe, before it allowed itself to pour down, like the mother of all downpours. The power of rain, of nature which accompanied us on our intense trip through its beauty and powerfulness, shaped by a Big Bang and carrying us along, protecting us, nurturing us and most important enchanting us.



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