

Edinburgh to Germany for Christmas by bike

☒ Fearless and Unique. One man. One bike. One gear. And a long way home for Christmas. Markus Stitz is taking the (vegetarian) haggis home and will cycle for 13 days from Scotland's capital all the way to Erfurt, the capital of the German federal state of Thuringia. On two wheels, in winter and with only one gear. We suppose this is one way round potential airport closures, but it is not for the faint-hearted.

If it all sounds a wee bit crazy, it is nothing but normal for the German, born and bred in Thuringia who has lived in Edinburgh since last June. "It might not be the easiest way to get home in time for Christmas, but it's a pretty unique way and a real challenge for me. I can't wait for the adventure to start."

Markus came up with the idea back in 2008, when living in New Zealand and cycling from Auckland to Wellington, breaking all his personal bests on the bike. Two months before he got hit severely by a car on his road bike. To get back into training for mountain bike races, he needed a longer tour to regain his fitness. On day two of the trip he broke his personal day best and cycled 165km with knobby tyres and a lot of luggage, followed by an average 130km per day over often undulating roads and with fierce headwinds. "It was the start of summer in New Zealand, and the days were pretty long. But while cycling I thought about what it would be like to do something similar in Europe, with short days and freezing temperatures. When I broke my personal record again this year with cycling 300km in one day in the Scottish Highlands, I needed a new challenge and an idea for a new Xmas tour. So I remembered my old plans and had my idea. I just needed something to make the whole thing unique."

Choosing a singlespeed cyclo-cross bike for the trip added the unique bit to the journey. "I lived in Wellington, New Zealand, from 2007 – 2009 and was fascinated how much the biking scene there was influenced by singlespeeds, and I wanted to give it a try. But with three bikes in the flat there was simply no space to add number four, so I left it back then. With my new job at macrobert in Stirling I need to commute every day now and needed a sensible bike for winter, simply for getting to the train stations and back. A bike without any fuss that works. So I finally bought a singlespeed."

Markus is used to taking cycle touring a bit further and is properly prepared for the upcoming challenge. "My cycling trips in Scotland have been pretty unique this summer, so I came up with describing them as race touring trips. Essentially I had no time for longer tours with working two busy jobs at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and Edinburgh International Festival, so I had to squeeze in as much as possible in the weekends. Doing more than 400km in two days is probably not what people understand as cycle touring, and adding the Scottish weather in made them real adventures. But as my body was coping very well, I came up with the idea for this Christmas tour."

After some research Markus was set on the route: The first leg is to cycle from Edinburgh to Newcastle Upon Tyne, as he studied in nearby Sunderland in 2003 and is quite excited to return. From Newcastle he will take the DFDS Seaways ferry to Amsterdam, from where he will cycle two days through the Netherlands to the German border, and down the river Rhine to Cologne. From there his route is depending on the weather, but he is aiming to stop in Ilmenau on 22 December, where he studied from 1999 – 2006 and produced his own music festival for five years. "I always remember the wonderful time I had in Ilmenau, so the wish to pack it into this challenge was obvious. And with Thuringia's capital Erfurt only 50km away,

the plan was finished: to cycle from capital to capital, right in time for Christmas. And with all the wonderful Christmas markets en route it will be a special tour." Markus will set off in Edinburgh on the 11 December, and is planning to finish on 23 December right in front of Erfurt's world-famous cathedral. The remaining 90km to his parents' home are an add-on to be home for Christmas Eve, with plenty of room for Christmas dinner.

"I wasn't sure whether taking a bike with only one gear was the right choice, especially after having successfully cycled more than 10.000km on my other touring bike. However, part of the attraction for me is to do a grassroots trip, and after testing the new bike I was in love. And thanks to the recent adverse weather conditions I had the chance to test the bike in the snow as well, so I am looking forward to the challenge to come."

Apart from the personal challenge Markus tries to raise one pound for each kilometre cycled for the Bicycle Empowerment Network Namibia (BEN Namibia). It was in Hamburg (Germany) that the idea for BEN Namibia started, when Michael Linke saw an abandoned bicycle chained to a lamp post, and started thinking about the possibilities of shipping bikes like this to developing countries. The charity's main focus in Namibia is a Bicycle Empowerment Centre program, a network of independent, community based bike shops that are supported by local grass roots organisations. BEN Namibia provides a shipping container, an initial stock of bicycles and spare parts, tools and training in mechanics and business skills to groups of local people at each shop. They run it as a business, paying wages, resupplying bicycles and spare parts and supporting other community projects from their own income. 25 of these shops are established and BEN Namibia aims to set up another five in Namibia in 2011. The established shops require very little support, and over the next two years the charity aims to make the network completely independent of BEN

Namibia. "I was fascinated by the idea of supporting BEN Namibia from the very first moment I contacted Michael, and I am hoping to raise enough money to support them." More information can be found online at www.benbikes.org.za, donations can be made online on Markus' blog via PayPal.

Everybody can follow Markus online at Twitter @reizkultur He will also aim to update his blog daily with reports and pictures at www.fearlessandunique.wordpress.com "I am looking forward to having many people travelling with me online, and I am quite stoked that Alastair Humphreys wished me the best of luck and is following my progress, after being inspired reading his books."

The ride is supported by DFDS Seaways and Montane. Montane, based in Ashington near Newcastle, create lightweight and breathable clothing for mountain climbing, running and biking, providing Markus with some warm stuff for the trip. "I didn't really have time to actively look for sponsors, but I am more than happy about Montane's support. And I am looking forward to be contacted for more support."

Itinerary:-

- o 11/12 Start in Edinburgh
- o 13/12 Ferry from North Shields to Amsterdam
- o 14/12 Amsterdam – Hilversum
- o 15/12 Hilversum – Nijmegen
- o 17/12 Cologne
- o 22/12 Ilmenau (route between Cologne and Ilmenau is flexible, weather permitting)
- o 23/12 Erfurt
- o 24/12 Schwobfeld (optional)