

Arjen Wielaard and his girlfriend Eline moved to Norway early 2006. Martin De Boer, his wife Grada and son moved to Norway also in 2006. Colleagues Arjen and Martin enjoy the Norwegian outdoors and especially mountain biking. Their mutual goal in the 'Birken' is to beat the guys from Shell Oslo. Their individual goal is to beat each other. So far Arjen takes the lead 2-0.

Across the years, the 91km Birkebeinarrittet has evolved to become the biggest mountain-bike race in the world. It began like this. In the year 1200 there was a civil war in Norway. Countless conflicts of varying scale took place in a fight to gain control over the country. One of the factions fighting for the throne was the Birkebeiners. They were often in such dire straights that they had nothing but the bark of the birch tree to use as footwear. It is to this footwear that the Birkebeiners owed their name. Later, the word birkebeiner (birch leg) became used to describe a man strong in adversity, never daunted by trials and hardship.

King Haakon Sverressøn of the Birkebeiners gained power over most of the country when he died in 1204. But in Viken and over Oppland, in the East of Norway, the Baglers were the strongest party. The Birkebeiner King left a son behind called Haakon Haakonsson. He was born only a few weeks after his father's death. The Baglers saw him as a dangerous rival contender and were after his life as well. The Birkebeiners had to bring him to safety and decided to come together at a little farm in Lillehammer on Christmas Day in 1205. They stayed there in hiding over Christmas and decided on how to bring Haakon to safety in Trondheim. It was too dangerous to follow the normal route up the Gudbrandsdøl valley, so they travelled over the mountains to Østerdalen valley in the east. This journey was heavily affected by bad weather and difficult snow conditions; so the two best skiers, Torstein Skevla and Skjervald Skrukka had to go ahead with the young prince. The two suffered immense pains from the wind, frost and snow but they reached Østerdalen, where local farmers took

care of them and showed them the way to their destination in the north.

Behind this brief account of the saga lies a deed of braveness and strength that has appealed to sportspeople of all ages. Many generations have been inspired by the two men that struggled ahead over the mountains in harsh weather conditions without thinking about turning back or give up. Today, the historic rescue of prince Haakon is honoured by three annual sporting events through the same treacherous mountains and forests. There is cross-country skiing race ('Birkebeinarrennet'), a run ('Birkebeiner løpet') and a bike race ('Birkebeinarrittet'). All three events start in Rena and finish in Lillehammer and real heroes do all three in one year. Present-day Birkebeiners are required to carry a 3.5kg backpack that symbolizes the prince, who later became King Haakon Haakonsson. Under him an end was made to the civil war and Norway had a period of great success during the Middle Ages.

On a more personal note, an increasing number of Shell staff have participated in this race (approx 180 last year). Last year was also the first year that A/S Norske Shell participated in the event as a sponsor. The company is committed to Birken - as it is an opportunity for employees from all Norwegian Shell locations (Oslo, Stavanger, Aukra, Kristiansund and offshore Draugen) to get together for some good quality teambuilding. It is recognised that keeping fit and healthy is important and also a great way to reduce stress.



It's all downhill from here...

For many employees the Birken is their main sportive goal for the year and an excellent motivation for exercising during winter, spring and summer. It's an amazing experience riding with many other bikers and being pushed along by a wave of supporting "Heia Heia's" (well known phrase of encouragement).

A few of the Shell participants share their Birken stories:

"My husband gave me a bike for my birthday four years ago. I started biking to work and I really enjoyed it. I joined the Shell Cycle Club and the following year I decided to try the Birkebeiner race. I had heard it is a fantastic race, and it was! It was such a great feeling crossing the finish line and the first thing I thought was 'I want to do this again next year, and I know I can go faster!' I am constantly improving my biking skills and will be participating in the Birkebeiner for the third time this year. My target this year is the 'merke' (a

reward if you finish within 25% of the winners time)" Eli Bøhnsdalen

"Shortly after joining Shell I appreciated the alternative of cycling to work. Appreciation quickly changed to excitement, especially after joining the Shell Cycle Club. My first Birkebeiner experience was last year, and I was amazed at the fantastic atmosphere throughout the race with locals cheering and playing music. Not to mention the beautiful scenery! The race was definitely challenging, but after meeting up with the rest of the group at the finish line I could already confirm that I would do this again... absolutely!" Elisabeth Currais

"Before moving to Norway I decided to buy a new mountain-bike. The sales-man was very enthusiastic about biking in Norway and showed me a magazine featuring the Birkebeiner bike race. I told him I wasn't planning on doing something extreme like that, but within 12 months I completed it for the first time. I'm truly addicted to racing now and this year will be my third time!" Martin de Boer.

This year's Birkebeinerrittet will be on August 29th. A/S Norske Shell has managed to secure 250 places for their employees. By early April approx 14,000 Birkebeiners will have signed up for the race.

One of the great things about Birken is that anyone with a bit of training can do it. Your personal Birken goal could be: ride for fun, ride for the 'merke' (finish within 25% of the winners of your age category), beat your colleagues, or ride to win. Regardless of your goal it is a great experience. Participating in the world's biggest mountain bike race gives you a great feeling of satisfaction; and sharing your fresh experiences with colleagues and friends at the finish line over a drink, certainly adds to that feeling.



# WORLDLY LESSONS

Marwa Abd El aziz is 26 years old and is from Egypt. Along with her husband Medhat Nabet they relocated to Stavanger, Norway in January. This is their first expatriate posting with Shell.

Marwa and Medhat.

## MARWA RAMADAN

It was late at night, and I was watching the beautiful lights of Cairo slowly disappear, leaving my family, friends, work and memories behind. It wasn't my first plane trip, but it was so different. It felt like heading into the unknown...

Upon arrival, I found my husband waiting for me at the airport, and before we left he warned me to zip up my jacket. We both laughed thinking of the warm weather in Cairo.

Walking out of the airport made all the difference. It was very cold, the air was very pure and smelled unique; you could feel the beauty of nature in it, and the peacefulness of the place. This was my first impression, and it lifted my spirits significantly so that I actually forgot about being cold.

On the way to my new home, I looked out the window trying to familiarise myself with the

## *“First thing I had to do was to stop comparing”*

city. Involuntarily, my mind started comparing everything: streets, houses, people, and traffic. Not a single landscape was at all similar to my country. I have to confess the difference was astounding and a little bit scary, but I was still in a good mood.

The first four weeks went by quickly. I was super busy organising my new house, exploring the shopping areas, trying to get used to public transport, and observing people (from toddlers to very old people). It was exactly here, that my first impression was confirmed. The beauty of nature and serenity of the place was reflected in people’s behaviour. They simply build their relationships on trust which automatically leads to decency, respect, security and the relaxed pace of life. I was very happy and this lifestyle really appealed to me.

After a while, after the fascination and excitement started to fade, I began to feel lonely and out of place. My mind was full of contradictions. I knew Cairo’s crowds annoyed me, but I actually missed them. I missed hanging out with family and friends. I missed the language, the conversations, and the laughs. I missed Egypt!

At that time, I just wanted to have the option of going back especially since I was trying so hard to find a job, but couldn’t because of the global economic recession. Moreover, my work experience wasn’t related to the oil and gas field, which is the main vein of Stavanger. Seems pessimistic, doesn’t it? Life goes on and I had to adapt. First thing I had to do was to stop

comparing. I’d had enough and I knew the differences. Secondly, and the most important was to start networking which I believe is a key element.

Socialising and interacting with people unveiled many opportunities and allowed me to recognise more and more nuances this cosmopolitan city had to offer. We started going out in groups; hiking, skiing, road trips and also began sharing ideas and experiences. We were bridging cultural gaps and this broadens your perspective. I started seeing things in a different way. Actually the real advantages of this peaceful life is the value placed on work /life balance. I now understand why people leave work at 3pm. They simply treasure family. I used to work 12 hours a day. I currently know how the simple act of cycling to work can be very useful to employees’ health and well-being. I have learned to value time and how a one-minute delay can affect my entire journey.

Being an expatriate wife is a double-edged sword. Either you become resilient and accept change and benefit from it or you will really miss out on a lot and feel like you are paying the price for your husband’s career, which is not true. I see travelling as the best way of learning. I am eager to learn more and would be willing to pass on the lessons I’ve learnt to the people in my beloved country.

# ENERGY, VISION & MODESTY - NORWEGIAN STYLE



Richard (left) encourages the next generation to ski Norwegian style - and has trouble keeping up!

Richard Drabble puts together some researched facts and offers some perspectives on Norway and finds it a remarkable act to follow. Richard lived and worked in Norway with his family from 1991-1994 and 1996-2000, based respectively in Stavanger and Oslo. He is now in upstream projects based in the Netherlands. His wife Belinda is co-author of 'Living in Norway'.

## RICHARD DRABBLE

What is the defining characteristic of a nation? Economic, social and environmental performances are important, and Norway is a leading example here. Yet these are driven by the attitudes, values and skills of the people, assisted by geography and the bounty of Mother Nature. More on this, but first some background.

Norway is a constitutional monarchy under King Harald V and Queen Sonja. It is a large country with an extensive coastline facing the North Sea, the Norwegian Sea and the Barents Sea; home to Norway's famous fjords. Yet a small population of just 4.8 million equates to only 12 people per square kilometre. Compare this with the Netherlands at 395 people per square kilometre, 250 in UK or 112 in France.

GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita ranks number two worldwide and leads the US, the Netherlands and the UK by significant margins. Domestic electricity production is 99% renewable; yes 99%, based on hydro-electricity and thanks to favourable geography, usually ample precipitation and good engineers. The economy is well diversified, based on fishing, agriculture, forestry, pulp and paper, mining and minerals, manufacturing, metals, shipping, services and of course the big one, oil and natural gas.

Norwegians have historically ensured their links internationally. The Vikings did rather well and their determination lives on, these days in a friendly and non-confrontational manner, yet with a direct and astute approach to business. The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded annually, on 10th December, in Oslo. And each year the Norwegian people send to Britain *the* Christmas tree for Trafalgar Square, marking their gratitude for helping King Haakon VII and his country's resistance movement during the Second World War. Such teamwork enabled the Heroes of Telemark, a handful of tough Norwegians, to divert the course of history away from the ultimate terror. Ray Mears' book *The Real Heroes of Telemark* is compulsory reading.

Before getting down to business, it is interesting to understand the Norwegian concept of 'Jante' Law, a guiding principle in education and behaviour. It teaches the people about humility, modesty, not to flaunt wealth, not to think that you are smarter than others, not to laugh at others and so on. No wonder that Norwegians take pride in their honesty, simple tastes, avoidance of ostentation and sincerity in personal relationships. At the



mining town of Røros in eastern Norway, the people built a beautiful wooden church, complete with a special gallery for the Royal family. But the Royals always sit in the pews, with the people because after all, they are people too.

So what about Energy? Apart from near total self-sufficiency in hydro-electricity, offshore oil and gas were discovered in 1968. Early developments included Ekofisk, which still produces prolifically today, followed by Frigg gas and a raft of other famous fields such as the iconic Troll development, Oseberg, Statfjord, Draugen, Sleipner, Åsgard, Kristin, Snøhvit and Ormen Lange, to name a few.

A network of major underwater oil and gas pipelines delivers energy daily to the UK and Europe, partly via onshore treatment plants at Kårstø, Kollsnes and Nyhamna. The technological achievement behind this is a major story in its own right and an inspiration to present and future generations. More is to come, as greater water depths, greater distances and new technologies are tackled.

Norway currently produces about two million barrels of oil per day and, whilst this is currently

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in decline, it is being offset by steady growth in natural gas production as new fields are developed. Natural gas output is forecast to rise to over 100 billion cubic metres this year, with a possible peak of 110 billion cubic metres in 2011. This could be extended depending on discoveries offshore northern Norway and in the Barents Sea.

As of today, Norway supplies about 20% of Europe’s natural gas (UK included), the rest coming from Russia, Algeria and further afield shipped as Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG).

From this, you can understand how Norway has become an economic powerhouse, with a GDP of over \$370 billion in 2008. But Norwegian vision and economic prudence also ensures good investment, the so-called ‘oil fund’.

The ‘oil fund’, until 2006 known as the ‘The Petroleum Fund of Norway’ and latterly re-named the ‘Government Pension Fund – Global’ was started in 1990. The aim is to receive and invest significant oil and gas revenues in global equities, bonds and real estate, for the benefit of future generations. The fund was valued at \$325 billion at the end of 2008. It is the world’s second largest sovereign wealth fund after the United Arab Emirates.

By investing overseas, the Norwegians have managed to avoid feeding too much money into their economy, hence maintaining a steady, healthy pace of growth. The invested wealth will provide future income for a gradual transition to long term sustainability whilst also safeguarding the Norwegian social model. Over 50% of the

fund is invested in global equities. It owns shares in nearly 8,000 companies, amounting to about 1.3% of European stocks and 0.8% of global stocks. The balance is mainly in government bonds, notably UK, Germany and Italy. The fund is permitted to take up to a 10% stake in individual companies. The largest holding at the end of 2008 was in Royal Dutch Shell plc, followed by Nestlé SA and BP plc.

But the fund was not immune from the latest global turmoil. It lost 23% of its value in 2008, though the fund still grew overall, thanks to record investment from the high oil prices in 2008. It remains to be seen how the fund will be used in future, a hot subject in Norway. Suffice to say that it is a useful buffer in times of economic hardship, with the possibility to inject stimulus money as needed, without heavy borrowing. Who knows, we may find that the fund will be buying more debt from selected governments, in which case it will be win-win for Norway...we send money for gas and more money, via taxes, to pay off our debts!

Meanwhile the Norwegian spirit lives on, in sport, in engineering, international relations, political, economic and environmental prudence. Is there anything else they do well? Yes. They know how to party. And families are important. They work hard and play hard, understanding that life is not a rehearsal. Finally, they make great jokes about their Swedish neighbours, a reciprocal tradition, from whom independence was gained in 1905. But that is another story.