



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

ANY child of the fifties has a nostalgic and fond recollection of the Beatles' music of the Sixties and I found myself humming the tune of one of their plaintiff ballads from the ground breaking "Rubber Soul" album, "Norwegian Wood", appropriately enough in a Norwegian wood last weekend...

I was in Bergen with my good friend Tom Christen, and his friend Sunniva, whom I had met in Russia earlier this year as we fought our way to the top of Europe's highest mountain, Elbrus, at 5642 metres. Six months later we had the rather simpler task of enjoying ourselves on a hike on a mountain in West Norway. I had flown in Bergen on a quick flight from Gatwick (£74.00

Norwegian Wood

return!) where I was met and treated like royalty for the entire weekend. Bergen is on the Unesco World Heritage list for its collection of colourful homes dating back to the fourteenth century. It is a city of 200,000 lucky inhabitants, where its' pretty but functional harbour attracts cruise ships and tourists in their droves, particularly in the summer time. The city

which has more of a town like feel, is tailor made for some spectacular walking. But as walking a sport, I hear you harumph into your cornflakes? Well, yes is the definitive answer. Walking briskly for 3 miles will burn as many calories as running 3 miles. How come? Because running 3 miles will burn up calories for only 24 minutes but walking 3 miles will take you an hour. The health benefits of walking have long been recognised. As we have some of the finest walks on our door step this side of Jupiter, there is no excuse for not opening up our lungs on Benone Beach or on top of Binevenagh mountain or in the Roe Valley Country Park.

The major hill, known as Floydlen. I saw lots of runners and was rather envious of them. I remarked that I was amazed that we hadn't seen any mountain bikers. Lo and behold, two appeared inside a minute. One of them was a friend of Tom's, called Andrew from London who had forsaken the city of Johnson (Boris) for the city of Grieg (Edward), composer of the Pier Gynt Suite. I hoped Andrew's brakes were working as he had a long steep descent to look forward to...

There are seven mountains around Bergen, known as the seven summits. There are also seven summits to represent the peaks of the seven continents in the world. They are Mount McKinley, known as Denali (Alaska, North America); Aconcagua (Argentina, South America); Elbrus (Russia, Europe); Mount Kilimanjaro (Tanzania, Africa); Everest (Nepal, Asia); Mont Vinson (Antarctica); and Carstensz (Irian Jaya, Indonesia, Oceania). I have been fortunate enough to tick off two of them as has Tom, but he is going for his third summit - South America's highest peak. This is a four week trip at least due to the vagaries of the weather. Whilst not technical, it stands proudly at 6960 metres (22,837 feet in old money) and because no one climbs Everest in January or February or any of the other thirteen 8,000 metre peaks in the Himalayas, when Tom

summits there early in the New Year, he is guaranteed to be at that moment the highest human being on the planet!

Tom has invested in the right gear and the right boots (as the cold there can kill you) and is now working hard on his fitness. He works in an oil rig in the North Sea which is obviously tough, but has great time off which he uses to his advantage to get in lots of hikes.

Bergen in December has only 6 hours of daylight so we were up against the clock when we got to the top of the first ridge of this semicircle which we were attempting on top of the peak. After two hours we gulped down some very welcome nosh to fuel us for the next three hours. There were heaps of lakes up there which reminded me of the lochs of Donegal and the views over the coast were just astonishing. They say Norway has 75,000 salt water islands and 83,000 kilometres of coast line and it is a very attractive combination, particularly when seen from height. I was amazed there was no wind up there and I was lucky that I could get away with a pair of trainers (as I had somehow managed to leave the most important bit of kit needed for a hike - my hiking boots - safely nesting in my back porch as I stumbled out of the house at 4.30 a.m...). There were bits of ice here and there to remind us to watch our step. Every few hundred meters there were stone cairns which looked like

trig points, so if you got lost in the deep snow of a Norwegian winter, you just had to follow the route from one of these to the next. In the distance we could see the North Sea, the provider of so much of Norway's wealth (but not if oil continues to sell for less than 70 dollars a barrel). I am not a Game of Throne's fan but I thought this would be a fantastic back drop for films of that type. There were also lots of hostels on exposed ground for walkers to shelter in overnight. Tom was able to buy a key for ten dollars a year and if you stayed overnight you signed the visitors register and paid on an honesty basis. There was a lot to admire in the Norwegian way of life.

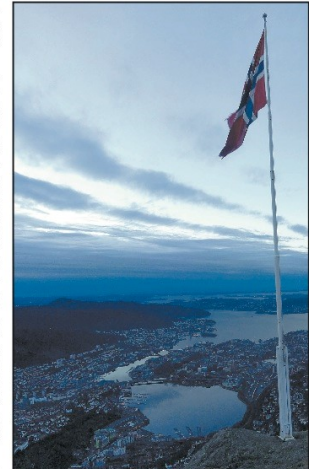
We were basically walking from one TV mast to another on a semi-circular trail. While we eschewed the funicular on the way up, we had the option of taking a cable car on the way down. Five and half hours after we started Tom treated us in the warm restaurant with a panoramic view to a beer (£7.00 for a small glass so maybe I won't be applying for Norwegian citizenship after all). There is no defining path from Vidden so we didn't feel too guilty about taking the easy way down in a cable car. This reminded us of our last trip on a conveyance of this type - a cable car down from 3,000 metres in the Caucas Mountains after we had conquered Elbrus. We moved quickly there from a land of ice and snow (and balaclavas and

gloves and thermal shirts and big coats) to a temperate land of sunshine. The contrast in a 10 minute cable car ride was vast. On that occasion we were all hampered from 7 days at high altitude and jaw dropping levels of exertion. Here, as we watched the sunset over the Norwegian coast line in the area known as Vestlandet, we still felt we had earned the right to some R & R and some great grub. We had a firework display in the middle of town to enjoy to kick off the Christmas season. "Takk" (thanks) to my host and "Morna" (goodbye) to the land of the Northern Lights.

My next job now is to find a 57th different country before my age catches up with me again!



It's amazing what you will find in a Norwegian Wood! wk5022



Norwegian flag fluttering over Bergen. wk5024



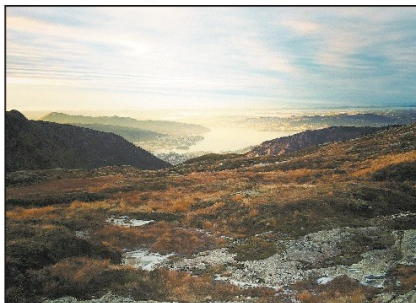
Bergen Harbour. wk5019



Tom and PJ at the end of fjord. wk5025



Near the finish line! wk5018



Picturesque view from the hillside. wk5020



Bergen from the hillside. wk5023



Mountaintop lake. wk5021