

the vikings

ARE COMING,

and this time they
are bringing the kids!

Part I: Denmark – Italy By Chris Paton

During the interview for an outdoor education job, Lars Simonsen, 38, from Denmark, secretly hoped that he would not get hired, and that Plan B would be the only option available. Plan B involved a kayak expedition that would transport Lars, his partner Suzi, 37, and their two kids – seven-year old Tiuri and five-year old Liva – 8,000km from Copenhagen to Istanbul. The usual critics thought he was crazy, family and friends shared mixed thoughts, yet strangely enough the career guidance counsellor approved. Lars listened to the feedback from the director and accepted his rejection with a sense of adventure: it was time to get to work.

They're now in Santa Margherita, near Genoa, Italy,

having travelled 4,000 km since first floating the kayaks on May 3rd, 2014. I caught up with Lars to discover more about the planning, preparation and peddling – yes, peddling – involved in this epic, 17-month adventure.

Most families would be put off at the thought of such a long trip with two small children, but for Lars and Suzi the special preparation required when travelling with kids involved little more than being flexible. Lars planned for six months, focussed on Istanbul. "After failing to get a real job, I didn't look for a job for the next half-year; I just planned for this trip." Road maps and Google were essential to the planning phase, and the GPS was sponsored by GARMIN.

Previous adventures cycling with Tiuri and Liva in Australia and travelling through South America had proven that, with flexibility, anything was possible. What was more, Tiuri and Liva had a way of opening doors and breaking down cultural barriers that made travelling that bit easier. In fact, the biggest consideration when planning the trip was what form of transport they should use.

Having paddled a Hobie sit-on-top kayak with Tiuri and Lars' mother around Møns Klint in Denmark, Lars appreciated the speed and stability of these kayaks. Lars talked to Hobie and worked out a sponsorship deal for two Mirage Tandem Island kayaks complete with outriggers, a sail and decks for Tiuri and Liva to play on and do their homework when conditions allowed. The kayaks could be sailed and paddled, but on the canals and rivers Lars and Suzi preferred the Mirage Drive – a paddling system that works like a set of flippers. The 1,700km they peddled over two months with the kids in Australia was about to pay off. However, the kayaks were going to be that bit heavier than the bicycles. Fully-loaded with gear, water and food for five days, the kayaks weigh 150 kilos each. Regardless of the weight difference, Lars believes that, "Travelling by kayak is almost the only way to travel through Europe and really experience nature, and it's probably also the safest way. If you know what you are doing it would be safer than cycling down through Europe.

Safety on the water was one of Lars' primary concerns and would prove to be one of the more exciting aspects of planning, especially when choosing and trying different buoyancy aids, safety lines and drysuits, especially for Tiuri and Liva. Liva is a small, thin girl and her parents thought that finding a drysuit for her would be the greatest challenge. But it was Tiuri's drysuit that proved the most difficult to find as he was between sizes. They only found one only a few days before they were due to set off.

LAUNCH DAY IN MAY 2014



COPENHAGEN TO GERMANY

Travelling from Copenhagen to the German border, the family got to grips with handling the kayaks in strong winds and wet weather. They stopped at various times to be interviewed by the Danish media. They caught up with family and friends at different points along the way before leaving Denmark and entering the Kiel Canal. They were the first to navigate the canal in that kind of kayak. The ships sailing through the canal are so big they push a bow wave ahead of them

that leaves a trough a metre deep behind it. Peddling in the middle, Lars and Suzi used all their energy to just stand still, like peddling uphill, until the peak of the wave at the stern of the ship picked them up and they would surf along in the ship's wake.

Several ships sailing the canal blew their horns as the family sailed alongside them. A police boat was dispatched and Lars wondered if the trip was going to come to an abrupt end less than 100 kilometres from the family's home country. The children clung to their mother, frightened that the police were going to take their father away. There are strict rules on the canal and travelling under sail is prohibited. This was to be the first, but not the last time, when the family were stopped by the local police. Fortunately, the police were charmed by the kids and slightly awed by the family's undertaking. An appropriate fine was agreed, and Tiuri and Liva were invited onto the police boat as they escorted Lars and Suzi.

The family travelled mostly by canal through Germany, but going out onto the North Sea at times to get around points and to explore interesting areas, such as the Wadden Sea, recommended to them by people they met on the way.



spend the night and dry their gear. This became a common and welcome experience, especially as the children seemed to attract people curious about where they had come from. The most common question was always "Where did you park your car?" "In Copenhagen," Lars would reply.



As their adventure unfolded, the family found a rhythm. Getting up around eight each morning, they would take their time having breakfast and packing the boats. They would have lunch before getting on the water and would peddle, paddle and sail for three to four hours before stopping. They chose their locations carefully and, allowing time for bad weather and extended visits in specific areas, they enjoyed the hospitality of local people who invited them to



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THE NETHERLANDS TO ITALY

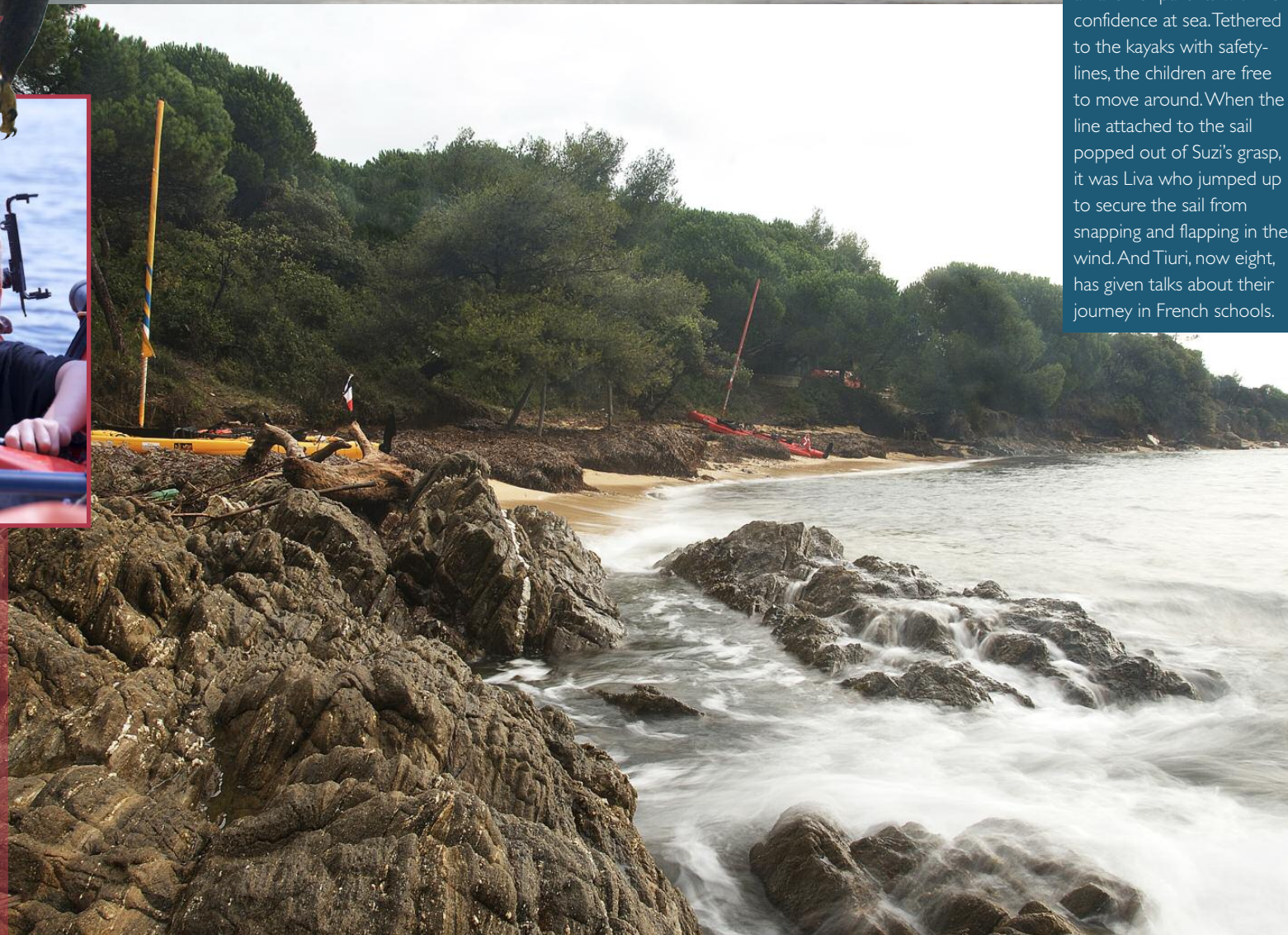
By June, the family had reached the Netherlands, Suzi's home country. Paddling through the low country, they enjoyed, once again, local hospitality and the growing fervour of excitement surrounding the football World Cup. Belgium introduced the family to canals and locks. But in France, in just one day they descended 80 metres, travelling through 26 locks over six hours. What started out as merely interesting would prove to be the greatest test of morale for the family as they continued through the lock system of the canals of France. With their sights set on the Mediterranean, the family slogged through the French countryside enjoying more hospitality but they were still desperate to reach the sea.

Wind-bound by the Mistral, the family were resupplied by firefighters training nearby, sharing water and food at the end of each day. Liva's birthday was fast approaching and pink flamingos were at the top of her wish list. As the family reached the coast, Liva woke up to a flock of flamingos just 100 metres from their tent. Life was good.

Often, it was the people that the family met that put them in touch with the media. It wasn't just kilometres that the



Now six years old, and halfway through their journey, Liva continues to amaze her parents with her confidence at sea. Tethered to the kayaks with safety-lines, the children are free to move around. When the line attached to the sail popped out of Suzi's grasp, it was Liva who jumped up to secure the sail from snapping and flapping in the wind. And Tiuri, now eight, has given talks about their journey in French schools.



family were leaving behind them, but a trail of memories, articles and TV spots, comments and likes on their Facebook page and website. More and more people were becoming aware of this crazy family of Vikings travelling through southern Europe. When the family arrived in Monaco, the local reception swept the family from the sea and into a hotel suite. The Yacht Club de Monaco did

things in style and they were welcomed like royalty. They had battled strong winds at sea and waves reflecting from the harbour walls. They were tired, cold and wet. As the club's motorboat sailed out of the harbour to greet them, Lars could be forgiven for thinking the formally-dressed man standing in the prow was the Prince of Monaco.



Between them, the children are proving to be an integral part of the expedition. As they travel through Italy, Lars and Suzi look forward to meeting more people, listening to the wisdom of fisherman, planning each day according to the weather; and educating their children along the way. Despite obstacles and challenges or, perhaps, because they've discovered the joy of overcoming them, their sights are ever firmly set on Istanbul.

See the April issue of The Paddler ezine to see how the family fare on their way to Turkey from Italy.

