

## **Tips and tricks for long-distance walkers**

If Martine from Canada reads this, she will know that I took her advice.

I have walked 'Hærvejsvandringen' twice, in 2006 and 2008. Before setting out in 2006, I would have been delighted to hear how other walkers manage. In this paper I describe what works for me. I hope that other walkers will add their advice and tips for the benefit of first timers and the rest of us. After all, my two walks are not much to boast of. Some of the veterans have walked Hærvejsvandringen more than thirty times

In 2006 I was completely done in, the calf of my left leg was as hard as wood for days afterwards, there were blisters on all my toes, the nails on my little toes fell off, and the skin on both feet flaked off and was renewed over some weeks, leaving my feet pink and vulnerable. In 2008 I did not have a single blister, and though tired at the end of the week, it was nothing that could not be overcome by a couple of good nights' sleep in my own bed. So I must have done something right.

### **How to prepare**

The most necessary thing is to get to know your feet so that you can pamper them. To do that you must train often and extensively, putting in long walks of a day or two. If you doubt if you can manage the long walk, why not start out with the shorter one of four days and join the crowd on the Wednesday?

### **What footwear?**

They say that walking is a cheap sport. That depends. You may be one of those lucky ones who can wear any footwear and get away with it. I invested in several pairs of sandals and boots before finding the types that are just right. My feet like roomy boots, so even if my ordinary shoe size is 40, it is 42 for walking boots - men's boots for the simple reason that they are wider than women's boots. Believe me: footwear needs to be roomy, for your feet swell when you walk a whole day. And footwear needs to be broken in.

Socks are very important. One hardy walker told me when I joined Fodslaw to always wear two pairs of socks. That is good advice as far as it goes. But two thin pairs of hard cotton socks are no good. The inner sock I wear fits snugly to the foot but is thick and soft underneath and at the toe end. The second pair is ordinary men's socks, but soft. Why men's socks? Because you can get them big enough and at a low price. It is not a good idea to wear socks with darns or hard seams.

If you wear boots with laces, tighten the laces around the ankle, but let them be fairly loose across the toe end. Your toes should be able to wriggle inside the socks inside the boot. When you start out in the morning, pay close attention to your feet. If they signal that something – anything – is wrong, stop and put it right. Do not worry that everyone overtakes you. You must be on good terms with your feet the whole day.

It is not a good idea to wear the same boots for seven days on end in the heat of summer, as I learnt to my cost in 2006. If you ask them nicely, the ladies at the first-aid station will kindly take a change of boots or sandals for you in one of the vans, so that you can change during the day.

### **Blisters**

Nasty things. I usually carry a roll of tape bought at the chemist's for the purpose, and whenever I feel the burning sensation of a blister on the make, I get off the boot and tape the spot to avoid friction which will surely make things worse. The tape should be the thin variety that peels off easily. The very sticky plaster-like tape is no good, for it is likely to take your skin with it when you tear it off. You can choose to neglect the pain, walk on and get the blister tended to by the nice ladies at the next stop, but it is likely to have grown by then. You can still ask them to check, even if you have taped the blister.

### **What if it rains?**

You get wet. A shower is no trouble – you walk through it and dry out. I usually carry a thin lightweight cheap plastic cape to take the worst of a shower, but chances are that the shower has passed before I get the thing out of the holder. If the weather forecast is for lengthy periods of rain, I take an umbrella. If you stand still under it during a short downpour, you may get off without getting wet. The trouble with an umbrella is that it does not allow your arms to swing freely, and it adds weight. A whole day's rain is simply tiresome.

A whole day with wet feet in wet socks in wet boots leads to blisters. There is one trick, to be used sparingly. For those who wear boots: a sturdy household plastic bag (11 litres) for each foot worn over the socks or between the inner and the outer sock will prevent friction. But remember: your toes should still be able to wriggle inside the socks inside the boots. You do not want the tops of the bags to flap around your ankles, so a few elastic bands to keep up the bags are recommended. Your feet will get wet from sweat, and the contraption is not healthy in the long run, but in an emergency it can make you cover a good few kilometres in comparative comfort.

### **What if it gets too hot?**

Lots of sun lotion and a good trekking hat with a brim.

### **How to survive**

Drink enough! And eat enough! You spend a lot of energy over the day. Do not worry – you will be hungry again by dinner time.

You are not alone. All first timers have sleeping quarters to themselves away from the common crowd and can thus get to know each other. It helps if you team up with another walker, perhaps only between two stops. If you need a boost, just talk to someone. Also the veterans are kind and helpful and most of them will be happy to talk. Or try to cheer up someone who is in trouble.

Veterans will tell you that the important thing is to find your own pace and stick to it. That can be difficult for a first timer. One mistake that I made the first mornings was to be sucked along with the crowd and starting much too fast. You have to face it: some walkers are faster than you. Let them get off at a trot, and proceed at your own pace. You have to stick it for ten hours or more and do not want to waste energy unnecessarily.

When the leg muscles begin to ache, it works wonders to grab hold of a tree and stretch the calf muscles. You walk on air afterwards. Exercises in the course of the day can be recommended. My back is a bit tricky,

and I have to lie down in the grass now and then and make exercises. Other walkers do not, but it is essential for me.

### **How to prepare for the day's ordeal**

Try to find out where the day's difficult stretches are and where you can get an ice cream or other reward. Forewarned is forearmed. If you can mentally prepare for a difficult spot or a tedious stretch, you are better off.

Bandaging your feet before a day's walk will sound alarming to first timers. It is optional, but practical, if you know where your feet are vulnerable. Long experience has taught me that two of my toes tend to get blisters at the end, so in the morning I wrap up those toes in the tape from the chemist's. No doubt because I wore too small shoes many years ago, my fourth toes tend to wedge in below the third toes. It is maddeningly painful because the skin gets squeezed. A strip of Artiflex wound over and below the toes does the trick. If you do not know Artiflex, you will find out on the walk. The ladies at the first-aid stations use reams of it. It is a cotton-wool like material that comes in rolls with a width of about 4 inches.

My walking companion, Rita, told me another good trick. At night before going to rest, she massages her feet with a good cream. I do not know if the cream does any good, but the massaging certainly does.

Carry as little as possible. If your purse is heavy, just take a few loose coins in your trouser pocket and a bank note in a plastic bag. Remember to bring a plastic bag for your mobile in case of rain.

If all else fails, go to the ladies at the first-aid station. They are very kind indeed. They have all walked the distance themselves, and they will dress your ailments, encourage you and tell you that you are brave. To quote 'The Wind in the Willows': You will be as good as new if not even better.

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