

## **A two-week tour along the Danube**

I've not done a tour of this length since I was a teenager. A tour of the Danube with a couple of American strangers that I had met on the Crazyguyonabike website. The plan was to link up with them on day 2 of my ride as I would be arriving in Munich at 9pm and would head for a nearby hostel for the night in order to give me a fresh start for the next days ride up to the Danube.

A smooth trouble free flight to Munich saw me unpacking the bike in the Arrivals Hall. Easily done as I had packed the bike in a large plastic bag. I had also included a map to my first nights accommodation which turned out to be useless, and I was also misdirected by two cab drivers at the airport. I therefore experienced the thrill of cycling down the hard shoulder of an Autobahn, then a couple of cycle paths across fields by moonlight with only my tiny front light to illuminate my slow progress. Evidently there is no street lighting in Germany outside of urban areas. Eventually, at 11pm my accommodation is found.

A night's sleep and a good buffet breakfast see me hitting the road in bright sunshine the next day. As I have virtually no German and having been assured that everybody in Germany speaks English I considered it would be an easy matter to navigate north towards Ingolstate where I was to meet my two buddies. Hah. What fools we are! I was misdirected once again [by a cyclist] and ended up well south of Munich. Due in no small part to my lack of German language. Very few people I met spoke any English and most small villages are deserted. I discovered the best people to approach are youngsters as English is compulsory in the school system. However they are not red hot on local geography. The German road signing system is very confusing. On smaller roads they will only sign you to the next village. Not the next major town or larger village. So if the small villages are not on your map you have little chance of making headway. Luckily I had a new toy in my bag. A GPS gift from my kids that I had not got to grips with yet, neither had I downloaded any maps of Europe [you have to buy these from Garmin]. However once it had buzzed into life it showed me where I was in relation to a major road and what direction I was facing. Big learning curve sat at the side of the road. With this and my scantily detailed map I was able to start heading in the right direction. The wasted time and mileage, intense heat [and a broken chain] resulted in me running very late and eventually I called it a day and gratefully dived into a roadside hotel where I negotiated a lovely double en-suite room and buffet breakfast for Eu36. No evening meal to be had though.

Day two on the road and I was off once again chasing for the Danube. The GPS and my almost useless map dragged me across rough cycle tracks, under tunnels, across fields until I was within a couple of miles of my river destination. I was keeping in touch with my new comrades via text and hoping I would catch up with them that day as they had a good days head start on me. After climbing a couple of long challenging hills in 80F heat I settled into the cool interior of a wooden bus shelter to escape the sun and settle down to a picnic lunch. Whilst there I hear a shout as 3 cyclists sped by. Jim! It was my new buddies. One of them had recognized me by a photo I had sent to them a couple of

months ago. Somehow I had got ahead of them. Handshakes all round and intros as there were now three of them. They had picked up a fellow German tourer on their travels. Eventually we sight the Danube and follow the trail. That night we manage to book two double rooms in a lovely small town. Our new German friend gets the rate reduced to E30 each, confronting the owner who originally tried to charge the Americans E40 each. In some places there are different prices for the locals. Something I would not have thought would happen in Germany but just goes to show. Karmen, the German cyclist only stayed for a couple of days, as he had to return home. He spoke virtually no English, so it was hard for him anyway, but a nice guy with a great sense of humour.

The plan each day was to cycle along the Danube path until about 4pm and then look for a room for the night in a small town if possible. The villages are very quiet and if you end up in a Pension in one of these you are limited in finding an evening meal. We usually tried to book a triple room to keep costs down. Done this way it usually came to Eu28 to Eu36 a night each. Breakfast included of course. Breakfast varied and it was much better if you had a Buffet breakfast otherwise there was not enough healthy food [which was usually cold meat and cheese and white bread] to keep hungry cyclists going. Sometimes we dropped lucky and got an apartment or two rooms for the same money. The accommodation varied from 1000-year-old buildings to 3 or 4 star hotels. One night we ended up above a Pizza shop with a huge bedroom window overlooking the Danube. There was always bike provision at these places but not always under cover. We locked our bikes but were always assured that they were very safe and there was never a problem [though on my last night somebody stole a strap off my rack].

The cycling was easy on the long flat stretches along the Danube but once you moved away from the river you encountered steep hills. My fellow cyclists were pretty unfit and carried a lot of luggage so we made an agreement that if I went ahead I would wait at the next turn or bridge for them to catch up. I did a lot of waiting. Scenery and weather was fantastic apart from one very rainy day. We rode 50 to 65 miles a day but things did not go exactly to plan. My American friends were very fond of taking photos and we constantly had to stop as they took many pictures of things that a European would not bother with. So we wasted, IMO, 2 hours a day and did not find a town for the night until 6pm ish, which I found very frustrating. One guy took over 800 photos on the trip! Including a shot of every meal that we ate!

When we got to Vienna we took a day off for sightseeing. I was glad of this as I was suffering with a sore bum and the newly fitted pedals I was using had broken through my shoes and were cutting my feet. I ended up buying new rubber platform pedals and repairing my crumbling shoes with some plastic and insoles from the Euro shop. Vienna is very beautiful but of course overrun with tourists, very crowded and very expensive. Here we stayed in a basic hostel but with a very good breakfast. We did intend to follow the Danube into Slovakia but we were [unbelievably] getting a little bored with the river scene, plus we had been constantly warned off Slovakia by the Germans we met who considered it crime-ridden. So we headed off into the Czech Republic. This involved a lot of hill climbing in the heat of the day. The roads and infrastructure changed completely once we crossed the Austrian border. Rough road surfaces and a general air of

disrepair. The scenery is beautiful though, as we appeared to be cycling through the wine region. Prices should be much cheaper in the Czech Rep but our first hotel [room over a pub] charged us the same as an Austrian one, this with poor accommodation and food, they insisted on been paid in cash in Euros and giving change in their own currency which is pretty useless. We gave this attitude a couple of days and decided to ride a circular route back into Austria. A shame as it is really a beautiful country. We eventually rejoined the Danube and rode the opposite bank of the river to Linz where after visiting Mauthausen Concentration camp we stayed overnight, before taking a train to Friesberg near Munich. This enabled us to spend a day in Munich and the next day, ride our bikes to the Airport for the return home.

We were away for 16 days in all. We had two days off during that time and covered over 700 miles. Plus learned a lot of lessons. We had a few falling-outs. Mostly, I think, because there is a gulf in our cultures and the pressure of being together 24/7. The different sense of humour is very evident. I found the Americans take everything at face value and do not realize that you are kidding. I did know this, but many times forgot and we had little spats over nothing, especially when hot and tired. They also struggled with my accent. I never knew I had one. However we did manage and had quite a few laughs.

Tips. Learn some German. Bring very detailed maps. Start early if possible. Finishing late loses you a lot of choice in accommodation. You should carry food for lunch. Very few shops outside towns. We often stopped at Lidl or Netto and ate outside on the pavement or if early carried the food to somewhere more scenic. But sometimes we had to resort to what we had filched at breakfast. I found food to be cheaper than the UK especially fruit. I would not consider camping, as I did not see many campsites on the route and those that I did see had no tents but lots of Motor homes.

The German and Austrian people were lovely, very helpful and happy to talk. Restaurant staff less so and they usually close the kitchen about 9pm at the latest. Their road surfaces are superb. Both countries seem to have a very young population and a huge cycling culture. However outside the towns you do not see many bikes and the drivers pass much closer to you than in the UK especially the lorries. In the towns the cars give you lots of room and stop for you to cross. Weird. I would not recommend major road riding if one can avoid it though. It is seriously scary. They drive very fast and close to one another. I did take a road bike and had no problems apart from a broken chain, which I suspect was my fault as I had fitted it prior to the trip. If I were going for a week I would consider bike hire. People were paying Eu7 a day for hire. It compares well to the cost of flying your bike. You would have to take the train to a city on the route to hire, but worth it IMO.

The actual bike path has some very rough stretches and a Hybrid may be a better bet or a road bike with bigger tyres. Most of the towns and cities have a lot of cobbled streets and the bike and I got pretty shook up at times. The path by the river is well signposted although the signs are very small and can easily be missed if you are away from the Danube. The route sometimes takes you through busy towns where it is easy to get lost as the signs disappear. My buddies had a proper Danube map but we still got lost and they

often had to resort to my GPS to tell us where we were. It saved us many times as it clearly showed the Danube on screen in relation to our current position. Personally I was not that impressed with the big cities, but that's just me probably as I virtually live in one. I would rather have spent more time in the small towns that were a lot more pleasant and with more opportunity to talk to the locals. I did have a great time and would do it again but slightly differently. Recommended.

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