



Down the Danube

Long-distance European cyclepaths allow easy, largely traffic-free touring. Colin and Rosy Gray, Tim Jackson, and Geoff Miller all rode beside Europe's second longest river



Photos by Colin & Rosy Gray, Tim Jackson, Geoff Miller & Neil Forsyth

FRANCE TO BUDAPEST: COLIN AND ROSIE GRAY

It was Helena and Tom's fault. Their wedding in Chinon in France looked like derailing our planned trip down the Danube. Then we stumbled on the Eurovelo 6 website (www.eurovelo6.org). It showed a new long distance route starting on the west coast of France, where the Loire spills into the Atlantic, and finishing over 3,000km later in Romania, where the Danube meets the Black Sea. It was our planned tour and more!

We eventually picked up Eurovelo 6 along the Loire. This is chateaux country and if one visited them all this section could take weeks. Beyond Orleans the brand new Eurovelo 6 signs disappeared. Many sections are not due for completion until 2010. However, it's easy to follow the south side of the river, usually with little traffic, using the IGN 1:10k maps or the Michelin 1:20k. In the Bourgogne the signs reappeared, but careful planning is needed here. The route takes many twists and turns in strenuously hilly country, when a flat, direct and virtually traffic-free alternative takes one directly into Digoin.

After Digoin we cycled effortlessly, mainly along canals,

or along the side of the Doubs, passing through the Alps at Besançon until the Rhone-Rhein canal reached Mulhouse. Work in the *department* of Doubs is ongoing and millions of Euros are being invested to provide many kilometres of immaculate new cyclepaths. Following canals can be boring, but not here. Whilst the route is nearly always along the old towpath, the sides of the valleys are steep and covered with deciduous trees. We saw herons, egrets, deer, chamois, red squirrels and otters.

Beers in Bavaria

Mulhouse was a nightmare to cycle out of, but finally we emerged onto beautifully surfaced Rhine cyclepath leading to the Swiss border at Basel. For the next 130km we 'hopped' borders between Germany and Switzerland as we followed the north (mainly German) side of the river. This tends to be flatter, has more tarmac, and is considerably cheaper than the Swiss side. It's easy to cross the Rhine here, often over the massive hydroelectric power stations that utilise its powerful flow. Just before Neuhausen the road dropped steeply to the base of the Rheinfall where the river narrows and then plunges 30 metres. Finally the Rhine broadens out into Lake Constance, where a beautiful sunset illuminated



the autumn colours on the opposite side of the lake.

After an all too short and idyllic ride, Eurovelo 6 leaves the lake and climbs into the hills heading for the Danube. There were superb views down to Lake Constance behind us and the Danube valley in front. The steep descent to Tuttlingen joins the Danube 35km below its source in Donaueschingen. This is the only sustained climb necessary to complete the whole of Eurovelo 6.

It ought to be all down hill from Donaueschingen, but that's not entirely true, especially on the upper, and probably the most attractive part of Europe's second longest river. After Mühlheim the river enters a narrow, spectacular gorge, and there are a few short, and occasionally steep, climbs. After the gorge the route follows the riverbank much less than one might expect, often crossing flat agricultural land, which can be muddy in wet weather.

The good news is that we were soon passing through a succession of beautiful Bavarian towns, usually entered through a brightly coved archway/clocktower. Tarmac gave way to cobbles and cafes proliferated the wide squares, typically with fountains, flowers, statues and of course the ornately decorated 'Rathaus', or town hall. It was time to try the Bavarian beer – connoisseurs will not be disappointed.

Austria and Hungary

Beyond Passau a tiny sign indicates the border with Austria, and through to Vienna this is probably the most cycled route in the world. It's easy to see why. It's almost completely flat, on dedicated cyclepaths, often on both sides of the Danube, and it's relatively easy to find accommodation, at least in late September. There are often dedicated cyclists' kiosks, and rooms in houses are a good option, providing good clean bed and breakfast from 15 Euros a person. Since the cycling and the navigating were easy we tried to make quick progress in order to leave time for some interesting visits.

We had mixed feelings about going to the Mauthausen Memorial, site of a Nazi concentration camp. It demands a couple of hours and it's not an experience we will ever forget. Melk Abbey and its large library were well worth a small detour. The extensive new museum is a work of art and historically interesting, but we felt overwhelmed by the opulence of the abbey's famous church. A few kilometres later the route passed within 30m of where Venus of Willendorf, a famous Palaeolithic work of art, was discovered in 1908. Finally, at Durnstein, if one has the legs and lungs, it's about 150m of steep rough climb to where Richard the Lionheart was imprisoned. The castle is now a ruin although the views of the Danube below are amazing. Clearly Vienna has much to offer the tourist, but we



The Western European bit of the Danube cyclepath offers tranquil, easy cycling that's very well signposted

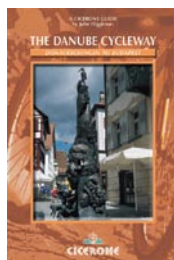
pushed on in the pouring rain, crossing the Danube near Orth, and followed the newly established south bank route into Petronell Carmuntium. From here you need a compass and a reasonably detailed map (e.g. Bikeline: Danube 3) as the short section in Slovakia has few signs, and the alternative route in Hungary that we took has fewer still.

Our first stop in Hungary, after a pleasant day meandering through a series of sleepy villages, was Győr. An easy 22km to Tata followed, then a more strenuous leg through the densely forested Gerecse Mountains and via

“We were soon passing through a succession of Bavarian towns. Tarmac gave way to cobbles”

Fact File The Danube

DISTANCE: the Danube cyclepath is 2,850 km in total. Eurovelo 6 is almost 4,000km.



GUIDES: The Bikeline guides cover the Danube in four books and are now available in English (13.40 Euros direct from www.esterbauer.com, or for £10.99 from www.cordee.co.uk). Cicerone offer a single volume on the ride, *The Danube Cycleway* (£12, www.cicerone.co.uk) and CTC members can order it online for the discounted price of £10 by entering the code DANUBE29L at the online checkout at www.cicerone.co.uk.

GETTING THERE (Danube start): *By plane* – Easyjet flies to Basel Mulhouse Freiburg airport, Ryanair to Karlsruhe-Baden, Basel, Friedrichshafen. *By bus* – take the European Bike Express to Nancy, then take the train. *By train* – take the Eurostar to Paris, TGV EST to Strasbourg, local train to Offenburg, regional train to Donaueschingen. Bikes are no problem on the latter two services. TGV bike spaces must be reserved in advance, or be in a bike bag. Eurostar carries bikes as luggage in bike bags, or as freight £20 each way, again booking in advance – phone Eurodispatch on 08705 850850. French Rail SNCF are cheap to book online, or contact Rail Europe 0844 848 4064 or on line. The best website for train service information is Deutsche Bahn (www.bahn.de)

TERRAIN: Largely flat. Nearly all on cycle tracks or minor roads. Some gravel comfortably negotiable on 28mm tyres. **ACCOMMODATION:** Plenty of campsites. Some hostels. Cheap or reasonably priced accommodation usually available but booking accommodation in July/August might be advisable.

JOIN US: CTC Cycling Holidays is running a tour 'Southern Germany, Rivers Danube and Inn' (ref: 0938) in 2009 under the leadership of Bob Harris. It follows the Danube to Passau, then the Inn. It's a 17-day tour between 20th August and 5th September, with a guide price (half board) of £1200-£1300. Visit www.cyclingholidays.org or contact Bob directly, tel: 01692 670691, email bobharris@talktalk.net



The amount of bikes parked at stops along the route shows how popular the trip is with European cyclists

Tarjan before heading back to the river at Esztergom, the 'Rome' of Hungary. A massive basilica dominates the town and it looks magnificent when floodlit.

After a further 90km, we arrived in the capital, Budapest – unfortunately in rush hour. Eurovelo 6 carries on for a further 1,400km through Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. We, however, were heading home. We took the hydrofoil back to Vienna, where a Heathrow-bound 'plane awaited.

**12 DAYS ON THE DANUBE:
TIM JACKSON**

We cycled from the source of the Danube to Budapest in the heatwave of summer 2003. We travelled fast and light, riding 100km a day and stopping wherever we could find accommodation on the way. The route in Germany and Austria is well signed and surfaced, and even when the tarmac runs out the gravel tracks are fine by touring bikes.

The start of the Danube is rather low key. There are two sources, one of which is a spring in the town of Donaueschingen. The two little rivers that rise in the Black Forest soon join to form the Danube, but after 6km it disappears underground, leaving 3km of dry river bed.

The heat was amazing and the first day to Sigmaringen was draining. Early starts were essential to avoid the worst heat, but some woodland sections were well shaded. By the second night we arrived at the beautiful old city of Ulm. The cathedral has the tallest spire in Europe, but also what seemed like the loudest bells, which boomed out all night, leaving us somewhat sleep-deprived.

The Danube then flows through a wide valley of agricultural lands, passing small unspoilt towns and villages, bringing us to one of the holiday's highlights: the route takes a 4km shortcut by boat through a limestone

gorge to arrive at the exquisite town of Kelheim. From here it is a short ride to Regensburg, a large historic and industrial city. Here the river bends sharply to the south-east and takes on a vital transport role. Vast barges ply up and down stream carrying coal, oil and aggregates. We had intended to stay in Straubing but there was a beer festival in progress and not a bed to be found, so we caught the train 25km downriver to Deggendorf.

The next day we passed through the border town of Passau, where the river Inn and other cycle routes join. Seamlessly, without even a sign, we crossed into Austria and were soon cycling on a beautiful smooth level path through the wooded gorge of the river. At Schloggen the river makes an enormous bend and the cyclepath stops: a special cycle ferry takes you to the other bank. Here was a splendid hotel, which offered discounts to cyclists who booked in after 5pm. The hotel was full of cyclists and the hotel courtyard of bikes, both in all shapes and sizes.

The cycle route next day was a delight – a smooth tarmac path beside the river, shaded by trees. We tore along, feeling strong and fit. Linz provided a delightful lunch stop in a flower-filled square, after which we raced on to Wallsee, conscious of lowering thunderclouds ahead, which broke not long after we reached shelter.

Our aim next day was Krems, to stay with a friend. This section is the loveliest of the whole route, passing through the Wachau, a deep wooded valley with fairytale castles perched on the hillsides. After Krems the river widens into a broad plain with less interest all the way to Vienna, just

“The cycle route was a delight – a smooth tarmac path beside the river, shaded by trees”

Tulln offering a good refreshment stop. Viennese suburbs spread for miles on all sides of the city. We took the S-Bahn (electric passenger railway) through the city, and out again to Bad Deutsch-Altenburg for the next night's stop.

This is where the route diverges, offering the choice between a leg through Slovakia on the left bank or Slovakia and Hungary on the right. We chose the latter, much of which is on road. It was a rude awakening: the traffic in Hungary was terrible. At Budapest's Keleti station we took a train to Vienna, then a sleeper to Brussels and the Eurostar home.



(Left) After the Danube, Geoff and Elizabeth completed the Elbe Trail, finishing at Cuxhafen harbour.

(Below left) Cyclepath signs in Switzerland. Roller-bladers also use the routes



FACT FILE
Long-Distance Europe

The Danube cycle route is just one option. CTC Overseas Touring Correspondents Judith & Neil Forsyth suggest five more.

PARIS-PRAGUE The 1500km route leads from Paris, across the hilly Champagne country to Nancy to climb gently over the Vosges into the Rhine Valley at Strasbourg. Here the route crosses into Germany to visit Karlsruhe, Heidelberg, Rothenburg ob der Tauber and Nuremberg. The Czech section brings you to Pilsen and Prague. The quality of both the beer and signposting is patchy in France, but better in Germany and the Czech Republic. www.paneuropa-radweg.de

The RHINE can be followed for 1350km from near its source down to the seaward end of the harbour wall in Hook of Holland through Switzerland, Leichtenstein, Germany, France and the Netherlands. A climb of about 900m between Andermatt and Chur is avoidable by taking a train. The north bank of Lake Constance offers better views of the Alps and a superb Zeppelin Museum in Friedrichshafen. www.rhinecyclerroute.eu

The ELBE CYCLE ROUTE, Germany's third most popular cycle route, is signposted for 1000km between Prague and the North Sea. The prevailing winds are westerly, so start in Cuxhafen and travel upstream. Gourmet cyclists can enjoy local dishes in Germany for €10 (Elberadweg-Teller). www.elberadweg.de

The somewhat challenging VIA CLAUDIA AUGUSTA was built by the Romans. It can still be followed on well-surfaced paths for over 700km from Donauwörth on the Danube, via Augsburg, Füssen with Ludwig II's fairytale castle, and the breathtaking Austrian Tyrol into Italy reaching the Adriatic near Venice. Bus 'piggyback' services assist with the total climb of 2500m through the Alps. www.viaclaudia.at

A new international COPENHAGEN-BERLIN cycle route (630km) and a short sea journey link the Danish and German capitals through East Denmark, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Brandenburg. There are many opportunities for swimming, eating and enjoying life. www.bike-berlin-copenhagen.com

For more ideas on cycling in Europe, see the European Cycling Federation website: www.ecf.com/3188_1

BEYOND THE DANUBE: GEOFF MILLER

My wife Elizabeth and I had toured in our youth, but it took a solo ride through Scotland as a pensioner to remind me how exhilarating it was to journey by bike. How could I convince Elizabeth to join me? After hiring a tandem for a week, we bought our own. The spring bulb fields of Holland beckoned, and our first venture proved a doddle. Even central Amsterdam was cycle-friendly.

That summer we cruised the



Danube, not by boat but on the smooth tarmac or fine gravel of the long-distance cyclepath. From Passau, flooded three weeks earlier, on tarmac still slippery with silt, we rode through vineyards and orchards dripping fruit. With plenty to see in Vienna on a rest day, and after a brief stop in Bratislava, we found time in Budapest for the Grand Opera.

This Danube trip was a real eye-opener. It being the most popular of Europe's cycle routes, we had plenty of company as we leap-frogged other cyclists in ones and twos, or groups of up to 30, often meeting up at the overnight stop. We were on an organised tour and the tour company had pre-booked accommodation at daily distances we chose. They also transferred our luggage and offered self-led or guided options. The tandem was a great success: not only did we arrive together, avoid mutinies and enjoy chat, but the bike was a good ice-breaker.

Many Europeans choose this type of holiday, using bike trails all over Europe, many of which follow major rivers. The Bikeline guides and maps (see Fact File) that were provided as part of our package are part of a series of over 150 titles covering 30,000 miles of dedicated routes in 16 European countries. Beautiful maps they are too, at 1:50,000, prepared by cyclists for use on a bar-bag or map-holder and readable without stopping.

After the Danube the question was 'Where next?' Starting near the source of a river seemed attractive and we chose the Tauern, a tributary of the Danube, which rises high in the Austrian Alps above Krimml. Hardly pedalling the first day, we drifted through Alpine meadows, farmsteads and hamlets, the bike trail using back roads and tracks known only to locals. Later, pausing in Salzburg to do the tourist thing, we took a circular detour for a week around the 'Sound of Music' country. Rejoining the Tauern we followed it to Passau and were back on familiar ground.

We've since cycled beside the River Elbe and the Rhine, as well as other trips. Our friends are still surprised that we holiday on a tandem, and in Europe. But if it wasn't for these dedicated cycle ways, the many cycle tour companies, and the safe cycling culture, all of which make it easy, we doubt if we'd be doing it. This style of holiday is aimed at people who may not think of themselves as cyclists but fancy an active trip. It also offers an easy way back into touring, as we have found. We're already planning another trip.