

CYCLING IN WESTERN EUROPE

By Chris Jones (CJ), Carnarvon

Many members have quizzed me on cycling in Western Europe, so here are some thoughts.

Over the past few years I have spent 3 months of each European summer cycling in Europe and can only recommend cycle touring in the biggest possible way. Europe lends itself to cycle tourism because towns are close together, cycling infrastructure is generally fantastic, cycle routes are in abundance, vehicle drivers are cautious and courteous, the European rail system is super and in general things are less expensive over there. All that makes for a great holiday. Also, if you are riding cycle routes, you don't need a GPS, you don't need a library of maps, you don't need to book anything in advance and you don't need to be multi lingual. Western Europe is not hard work and it is safe and friendly. If you want to ride there, just go, it'll all fall into place.

The best cycle ways I have experienced are in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Denmark. Also good are Belgium, Luxembourg, Northern Italy and France. In the Germanic lingo sounding countries the cycle routes are particularly well signposted. On that theme, I tend not to bother buying specific maps, but rely mostly on brochures and maps from tourist information centres as I go. I have no GPS (as yet, 'tho I do love 'em) but I do take a small compass. So far I haven't been lost and I've only struggled to find accommodation on one occasion (in Basel when a global art convention was going on). Generally I camp, but if the weather looks suss I'll stay in a cheap hotel, a B&B or hostel. I always eat out, it's more fun and part of the experience.

I tend to follow rivers and canals for some good reasons. Historically, rivers and canals were (and some still are) the main travel and trade routes linking people and places. Consequently, there are lots of towns (often restored from mediaeval times or the middle ages) dotted along them with a wealth of charm and history, and of course super bakeries, coffee shops, cafes, bars and restaurants, camp sites, B&Bs and reasonable hotels. Rivers and canals also flow through valleys, so you can cycle relatively flat with stunning scenic vistas on either side. So it doesn't really matter if you cycle the Danube, Mosel or the Rhine, for example, in the direction downstream or upstream because there are no steep

gradients. But please don't use that rule of thumb if you are looking at cycling in the alpine regions. For example, following the Adige River in northern Italy will take you on a spectacular journey from the Reschen Pass on the border of Austria and Italy at Nauders, on a 300kms downhill to Lake Garda. I wouldn't like to do that the other way, particularly from Merano going north to the pass. (If you went to Rosalee's presentation at a recent social gathering, the photo of Brian in the giant chair was on the Adige cycleway overlooking Merano).

On occasions I have stayed with hosts from Warmshowers (check it out at www.warmshowers.org). Warmshowers is a cycle only site where you can join up (no cost) and find hosts almost anywhere globally. You email them a few days or more in advance and you get to stay with like-minded people and have a good time, freshen up and wash your clothes. There is no charge and you can usually stay a couple of nights or so, but you have to be nice to them ok. Take some wine and cook a meal or take them out, or both. I am a host in Carnarvon so look me up on the site and you will get the drift of how Warmshowers works. Couch Surfing is another site but not exclusive to cyclists. There is also a Dutch organisation called Friends on Bikes



Lake Garda, Northern Italy

(<http://www.vriendenopdefiets.nl/en/>) which lists hosts in Europe (but mostly in the Netherlands, Belgium and France) but which has a charge. About 8 euro to join and a fixed price of 40 euros total for a twin room with breakfast at your hosts. I haven't used these much (couch surfing I never have) because I usually don't know where I am going to end up each night. But on occasions I have and they're great. I would suggest Warmshowers on arriving in Europe after your long flight from Oz. Your host will know all about cycling in the city where you land and will get you sorted in your new surroundings. Brilliant.

It is easy to cover large distances if you want to because the hours of daylight in the European summer are long. It can be light at 5 or so in the morning and still be light at 9 or more in the evening. I tend to average about 70kms a day but have done some 150kms at a comfortable pace in daylight hours. Say you average 15kms per hour, which is easy enough to do fully loaded, you would cover 75kms in 5 hours which is less than a day's work. If you start at 9 in the morning you would finish at 2 in the arvo. Add on time for snacking and site seeing and the day is done. I like to stop around 5 in the arvo and get sorted in a campsite or hotel and enjoy the evening chatting, wining and dining.

Do travel light because of course the cycling is easier. I travel with two small panniers on the front with my tent strapped across the top of them, and a sausage type bag along the top of the rear pannier rack. I've managed to do away with rear panniers. It is amazing how much you really don't need. I can get my bike on the aeroplane with most of my luggage in with it, with the package weighing in at about 22kg. The rest I take as hand luggage and it weighs less than 7kg. In my tool kit I take a couple of spare tubes and a spare folding tire. Emirates allow 30kg plus 7kg hand luggage and flies into most European cities. I prefer to fly into one city and out of another because it saves back tracking, but there's nothing wrong with a good loop ride (check out <http://www.radweg-reisen.com/en/five-cycle-path> and if that doesn't work, Google 'five rivers cycle route') and flying in and out of the same airport may be a bit cheaper. Also, but not always and don't let me put you off, I tend not to ride into or out of large cities like Paris or Berlin, but rather take a train in and out from a nearby town.

If you are following a designated cycle path,

keep a keen lookout for the next sign as you go. In some towns you can miss signs and some may be slightly hidden by foliage or an obstacle. If you haven't seen a sign for a short while and you're expecting one, then you may have missed it. Go back to the last sign and check. Some cycle paths coincide for a while or cross each other (you are bound to see multiple times the scallop shell logo of the Way of St James (the pilgrimage route El Camino de Santiago) which starts from almost anywhere and everywhere and ends up at Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain. Check out the map on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Way_of_St_James. Each cycle route has its own logo and or numbering, so stick to the one you're pursuing or you'll end up somewhere else. If you do end up somewhere else, it's bound to be good anyway.

I have listed what I think are some great rides, most of which would take no more than a week, some less. You can string rides together simply by putting yourself and bike on a train. Some you don't even need to do that, they run into each other. All regional trains take bikes. Look for the bike logo on the side of the train or on the timetable at the station, or ask at the ticket booth. In some countries (Italy for example) you need to buy a ticket for the bike, so mention that you have one. Some inspectors don't have a sense of humour and lack of the local language is no excuse. Also, in some countries (again Italy for example) you need to validate your ticket before getting on the train. You just feed the ticket into a machine which stamps the date on it. It's like tagging on in Perth, without the need to tag off.

A super ride is following the Mosel River (Google Mosel Cycle Route). Most popular is from Trier to



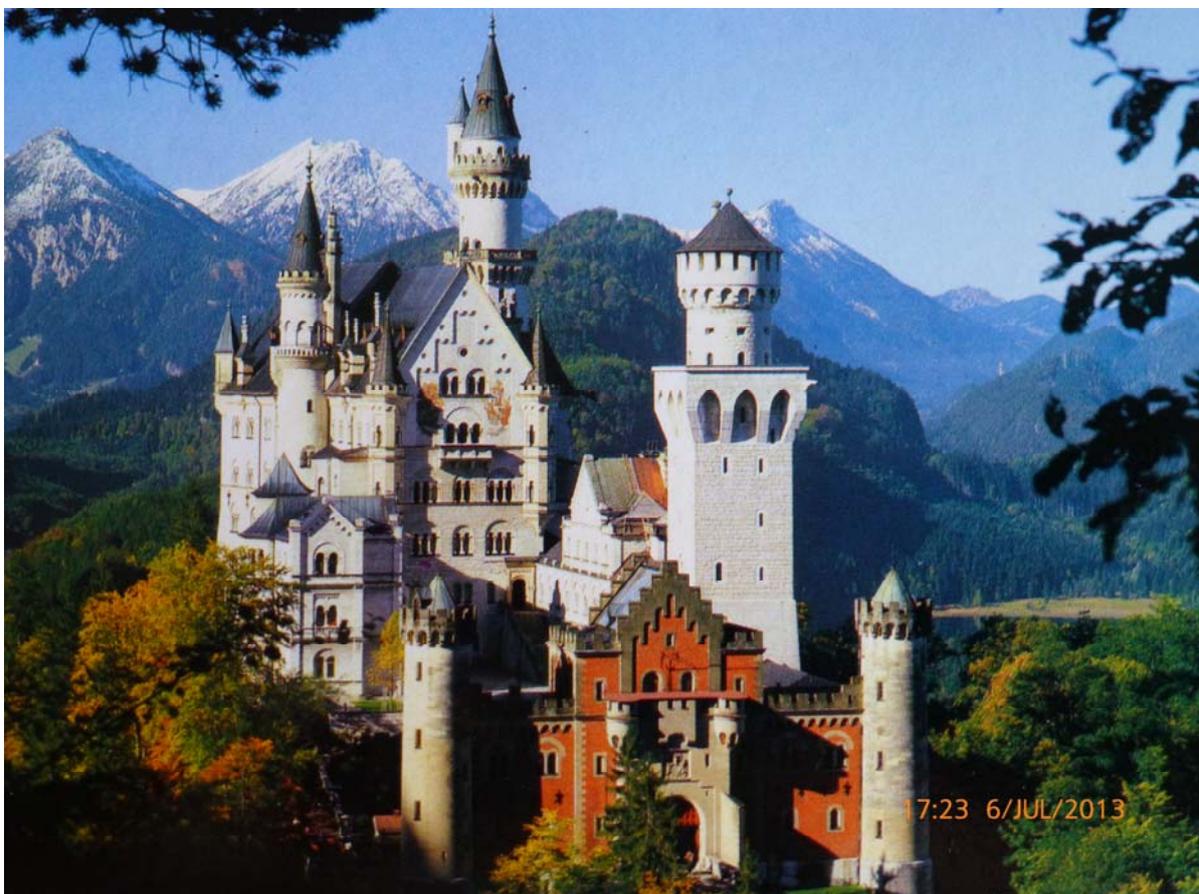
Plenty of nice B & Bs

Koblenz. At Koblenz, you and the Mosel join the Rhine and you literally turn the corner (at Deutsches Eck where the two rivers meet) and you can then cycle south alongside the Rhine to Bingen (or even further down to Mainz, although that section is not as interesting, but it does link you onto the river Main). There are other lovely areas of the Mosel in France and also the Rhine north from Koblenz to Koln. Along the Mosel and Rhine there are plenty of campsites, hotels and B&Bs (there are even special cyclist B&Bs and hotels in Germany and Austria known as Bett & Bike, just look for the logo on the wall... <http://www.bettundbike.de>).

Lyon in France to Geneva in Switzerland on the Rhone River Cycleway. This is close to Alpine territory but is not a difficult ride and the scenery is great. Then from Geneva you can ride Lake Lemman (often referred to as Lake Geneva) on the north side further following the Swiss Rhone Route (1) to Brig from where you can catch a train over (through) the Alps (Simplon Pass) to Domodossola in northern Italy and cycle gently downhill to Lake Maggiore and or Lake d'Orta (both outstanding). From there it is an easy 70km ride to Malpensa Airport if you are flying home from Milan. Or you can go on from Brig to St

Moritz (can use the train or the Swiss Postal Buses which take bikes over passes if you want). From St Moritz you can ride the **Inn River Cycleway** to either Innsbruck and beyond (goes all the way to Passau in Germany where the Inn River and the Inn Cycleway meet the **Danube and the Danube Cycleway**. Rowena Scott and Jude Comfort wrote about this in the March/April 2012 edition) or, because you can reach the road (Reschen Strasse) between Landeck and Nauders in Austria (turn left for Landeck and Innsbruck, right to Nauders), either cycle or take the Bike Bus to Nauders and the Reschen Pass and start the exhilarating and picturesque downhill to Lake Garda in northern Italy following the Adige River. Or you can bypass Lake Garda and follow the river and cycle path through Verona and onward to Venice on the **antique road Via Claudia Augusta**. (Google Adige River Cycleway and Via Augusta Cycleway. They coincide for much of their journey).

The Adige River ride to Lake Garda is a great ride. Just ask Rosalee and Brian. Once you reach the towns of Riva and Torbole at the top of Lake Garda you can cycle down the east side of the lake to the town of Garda. From there you can catch a ferry to the lovely town of Desenzano at the bottom of the lake. The



Neuschwanstein Castle, Bodensee—Königsee cycleway

ferry passes the Roman walled town of Sirmione which is a nice and easy day ride from Desenzano. Then from Desenzano you can cycle or train to the other northern Italian lakes of Como, Lugano and Maggiore, or train it to Milan for your flight home. I wouldn't recommend cycling beyond Garda further south on the lake because it is too built up and congested with traffic, so take the ferry.

How you get to Lake Garda can be interesting. Rosalee and Brian went down the **Via Claudia Augusta** from Augsburg (which is also the German **Romantische Strasse**, they coincide a lot). I have cycled from Munich's

English Garden following the Isar River through Bad Tolz (which incidentally is a town on the **Bodensee-Konigsee Cycleway**) veering off to Achenkirch and Lake Achensee, downhill into the Inn Valley at Jenbach and then Schwaz on the **Inn River Cycleway** through Innsbruck to Landeck. From Landeck you can catch the Bike Bus (goes every couple of hours) to Nauders, a lovely Alpine town in its own right and there is a campsite a couple of kms further up, almost at the top of the Reschen Pass. The campsite is in Austria, but you can walk 200 meters to a good pizza and pasta restaurant which is actually in Italy. On the left as you walk is the old disused border checkpoint. Alternatively, rather than following the Isar from Munich, you can get onto the Inn Cycleway from Passau or towns on the way such as Rosenheim, which is a short train trip out of Munich.

The Adige passes through Bolzano (also known as Bozen. Many northern Italian towns retain their Germanic names as well as their Italian ones. Italy was only unified in the 19th Century). A ride I want to do but haven't is to head north east from Bolzano up the valley to Bressanone (Brixen) and follow the **Pustertal Cycle Path** to get onto the Drava/Drau River at Dobbiaco (Tolbach). (Google Pustertal and Drau Cycle Path). I have ridden the Drau from Dobbiaco all the way to Maribor in Slovenia through the Dolomites and the southern Tirol. It is 366km ever so slightly downhill (but it has its ups and downs!) and is a good ride. If you get to Slovenia then it is a must to go to Bled (I took the train via Ljubljana) and cycle around the lake, it is fantastic. If you don't go all the way to Maribor you can head



Czech cycle cafe

north from any of the Austrian towns such as Lienz or Villach and venture onto Austrian cycle routes.

The Swiss Lakes Route (9) from Lake Lemman to Bodensee (Lake Constance). This cuts across Switzerland from south west to north east. This starts from Montreux on Lake Lemman (the lake of Geneva) but if you were combining it with the Lyon-Geneva ride you would ride the north side of the lake to Vevey just before Montreux. The Lakes Route goes through Interlaken and its stunning two lakes, then up the Brunig Pass (can take a train) and down to Luzern on the lake of the same name. Then, after your scenic ride up the Etzel Pass, the drop to Lake Zurich and Rapperswill is a spectacular and picturesque downhill. Beyond there is the lovely Wallensee and mountain scenery to Liechtenstein. I would then take the train from Buchs to Rorschach on Bodensee to bypass this more built up last bit of the ride. (Any of Switzerland's 9 national cycle routes are sensational and meticulously signposted. Check them out at <http://veloland.myswitzerland.com/en/veloland.html>. The home page will also show you mountain bike routes).

The Bodensee-Konigsee Cycleway (400km) takes you on a scenic ride from Lindau on Bodensee (the Lake which borders Austria, Germany and Switzerland) to Konigsee in Berschtesgarten in southern Bavaria near the Austrian town of Salzburg. If you are coming off Swiss Lakes Route 9 you will be on the Swiss side of Bodensee at Rorschach. Take the ferry from there to Lindau across the Lake and start the ride. At the same time rejoice in leaving expensive Switzerland to cheaper than Oz Germany,

and Lindau is a lovely town. Incidentally, the ride around the Lake is excellent and can be done very relaxed in four or five days (**Google Lake Constance Cycle Path**). The Rhine River takes its long journey to the Netherlands through Bodensee and the stunning town Stein am Rhein on the lake is very close to Europe's biggest waterfall, Rheinfall.

Passau to Vienna along the Danube is a classic if you go by website write ups. I have ridden the Danube from Bratislava in Slovakia through Vienna and Passau all the way to its source at Donaueschingen in Germany and it is all pretty good. (I would take the quick Cat ferry from Vienna to Bratislava and return rather than ride that bit. The ride is not great and the ferry trip is super). If you're doing the Vienna-Passau ride, there's a good three or four day excursion you can do by leaving the Danube near Linz and heading north through Freistadt into Czech to the amazing town of Cesky Krumlov and return to the Danube at Linz. Or you could follow the River Vltava from Cesky north to Prague and connect to the Elbe River and ride into Germany, through Dresden, Meissen and Riesa. That's nice. The Elbe (**Google Elbe River Cycle Route 840km**), if you kept going, would take you all the way to Hamburg and then Cuxhaven. You would then be on the North Sea Cycle Route (<http://www.northsea-cycle.com/>) which loops to north east to Denmark and Norway or south west to the Netherlands. It continues in England and Scotland if you take the ferries and do the full circuit. From Cuxhaven you can also get straight onto the **Weser River Cycle Way** (540km, Google it). Heading south alongside that river you pass through lovely towns such as Hameln (of Pied Piper fame). I stayed there in a B & B which had a bed in the shape of a giant mouse trap. The whole town is full of quirky things like that. The Weser just north of Kassel splits into two rivers, the Werra and the Fulda (both have cycle paths) from where you can join the Main River (flows through Frankfurt and extremely close to the Airport which is handy if you are flying in or out of there) or the Tauber.

Following the Tauber from Wertheim is a great ride to the stunningly preserved world heritage town of Rothenburg from where you can join the Altmuhl and follow it south onto the Danube. Going left at the Danube will take you pass the Isar River (goes to Munich) to Passau and beyond, or going right will take you to the Danube source at Donaueschingen

and close to the Rhine at the Lake Bodensee. Following the Main River from Wertheim, or Frankfurt or even Mainz for that matter (where the Main joins the Rhine), through to another world heritage town of Bamberg and beyond is super. There is also a canal, the Main-Danube, which joins the Danube and the Rhine. Check out German cycling routes at <http://www.germany.travel/en/index.html> by choosing cycling in the Leisure and Recreation Box.

In southern France, **the River Lot** around Villeneuve sur Lot, Cahors, St-Cirq-Lapopie and Figeac is fantastic and a loop ride back down the Cele River makes a good circuit if you are based say in Cahors. Also excellent is the **river Dordogne** just north of the Lot. There are fabulous towns and circuit rides in this area of France and I do recommend it. Although you are generally not on cycle ways but rather on less busy country roads, the cycling is good and the region is a treat, both in old world towns and smashing scenery. France also has some lovely canals which are nice to follow, particularly in the **Burgundy area**. It also has the Vosges chain of mountains in Alsace which run north south, just west of the Rhine River. Hugging the foothills at the southern end takes you from Mulhouse on communal roads (very minor roads that are really only used by farmers on their tractors) through fabulous vineyards to Colmar (go via Eguisheim just south west of Colmar, it's stunning), Strasbourg and Saverne. You are then close to both the **Mosel and the Saar Rivers** and both are excellent rides. Following either north will take you into Luxembourg and also near Trier on the Mosel in Germany. The Saar River actually runs into the Mosel just south of Trier (<http://www.romantic-germany.info/Moselle-Cycle-Route.4190.0.html>).



Cirq Lapopie on the lot, France



Cycleway signs everywhere

The Loire cycle way is also well regarded and in part is world heritage listed. I have followed it all the way to the Atlantic coast and onto the coastal cycleway south to the Dordogne River near Bordeaux. There are some fabulous castles and chateaux on the Loire and the Atlantic coast is nice, but I don't rate the ride as highly as others here I have mentioned. (Don't let me put you off, these rides are all enjoyable).

Cycling in the Netherlands and Belgium is excellent with outstanding designated bicycle only routes. With windmills on canals and stunning landscape at tulip time, the region is well suited for cycling. Amsterdam probably has more bikes than cars and in some bike parks I don't know how anyone



Tulip time in the Netherlands.

can find their own bike. Now I think of it, they probably don't. Amsterdam has a monstrous reputation for bike theft, so beware. Riding the sluices on the North Sea can be an interesting but windy experience. The engineering holding back the sea is amazing. If you're in the Netherlands on the **North Sea Cycle Way**, head north east rather than south west on that route. It and some other routes are at <http://www.eurovelo.org/routes/overview-route-database/> (click on EuroVelo 12 for the North Sea route and check out the others while you're there). A good website for cycling in the Netherlands and Belgium (Europe and Oz) is Richard Tulloch's at

<http://www.richardtullochwriter.com>.

I rode the **Classico Boretti** in Amsterdam with Richard and he has a wealth of cycling experience. Check out the site and click on Great Rides. Incidentally, CTA member David Taylor has a wealth of knowledge of cycling in Europe, particularly in Germany.

There are gazillions of rides in Europe. Google like crazy. Check out cycle tour operators and see where they go. As I mentioned at the start, if you want to ride there don't get bogged down in planning, just go and it'll all fall into place. Anyone wanting company on an overseas ride I'm always keen. If you would

like any more info, don't hesitate to email chriscycle1@bigpond.com.

Cheers, cj