

4 Countries, 2 Wheels, 0 Experience

You don't have to be a pro cyclist to have a successful European bicycle adventure.

By Jon Fleming



“But, we haven't even sat on a bike for four years!” My response to my wife's idea to embark on a two-week cycling adventure down the Danube was hardly enthusiastic.

But the more I thought about it, the more it appealed. What's not to love about cycling along beautiful paths beside one of Europe's greatest rivers, and passing from Germany, through

Austria and Slovakia, before ending up in Budapest in Hungary? By now, I was forgetting about obvious pitfalls like a basic lack of fitness, the toll that cycling takes on the backsides of inexperienced cyclists, and the logistics of carrying all our clothes for two weeks on our bikes. Those were problems for later.

Actually, the logistics were surprisingly easy. Rather than go through

a tour company, we decided to do everything ourselves — surely if someone carries your luggage for you, that's cheating? We found a bike rental company in Vienna that allowed us to leave our bikes with a sister company in Budapest at the end of the ride. They would also provide locks and panniers that could fit our clothes (if we packed extremely lightly).

CHOOSING THE ROUTE

We looked at various online resources, and the route seemed fairly obvious: Fly to Vienna, catch the train upriver to Passau, Germany (this was the most beautiful section), and then just follow the course of the Danube, stopping every 30 to 50 miles. The important thing was that we were following the path of the river, so it was ever-so-slightly downhill — something that you're very grateful for when you're cycling for 2 weeks solid.

The biggest daily dilemma was whether we should be on the north or the south bank of the river. It turns out that the paths are sometimes better on the north

and sometimes on the south, or that the sights are more interesting on one side or the other. We got plenty of advice on which side to cycle on, and which bridges to cross or ferries to catch, from our hotels or the helpful local tourism offices.

The most vital piece of equipment we took turned out to be our padded cycling shorts (although, as a cycling novice, I initially couldn't work out which way to wear them!), but even so, there's no denying that our rears were quite tender at the end of a long day of cycling.

But the whole experience was more than worth the pain of a couple of sore

bottoms. It was so invigorating to start each morning enjoying the fresh air as we cycled along the misty river. Sometimes the river was mirror smooth, the green hills reflecting mysteriously in its dark waters (in our experience, the Danube never was blue!), and sometimes it was fast-flowing. The wonderful thing was that the landscapes kept changing as we progressed. We moved from enclosed valleys to wide flood plains, from open countryside to large cities, passing by occasional industrial complexes and hydroelectric plants, so there was always something to see.



Vienna, Austria



Central European country roads



Budapest, Hungary



Győr, Hungary

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Bratislava, Slovakia



Esztergom, Hungary

Left: Mario Slovins - stock.adobe.com Right clockwise from top left: Tracy Flentling (x3); megal33300 - stock.adobe.com; Tracy Flentling

INTO THE COUNTRY

Although most of our time was spent on paved cycle paths directly by the river, we were surprised to find out that sizable parts of the well-marked Danube Cycle Path weren't actually on the river itself. Particularly on the Slovakia and Hungary sections, we were on paths alongside country roads, passing through quiet villages.

Sometimes there was a wide choice of accommodation, although in smaller villages, you just had to go with what was available, so our choices (we booked online in advance) ranged from boutique hotels set among vineyards, large city-center hotels, to tiny



Hungarian Parliament Building



Millennium Monument, Budapest

Clockwise from top left: Mistervipid - stock.adobe.com; vrabelpoter1 - stock.adobe.com; Tracy Fleming

As Budapest's spires and towers came into sight, the sense of achievement of reaching our final destination was simply exhilarating.



New York Cafe, Budapest

guesthouses which were rather basic. But what better way to see these countries and visit places that the ordinary tourist wouldn't think to go to, than to do it at a sedate pace on two wheels? It was fascinating to see the contrasts between sophisticated cities like Linz, Vienna, and Bratislava, with obscure towns like Komarno in Slovakia, and historic Hungarian cities like Gyor.

In the more remote places, the choice of food wasn't always the greatest, but after a hard day's cycling, we were sometimes just grateful to fuel up — the stodgier the better! In fact, there's not many vacations where you can take on so many guilt-free calories, safe in the knowledge that they'll easily be burned off tomorrow. Even in two weeks, we could feel ourselves getting much fitter. At the start, a 30-mile cycle ride left us pretty weary by the time we reached our hotel. But by our final day, we thought nothing of cycling 56 miles to the end of our journey, Budapest.

As Budapest's spires and towers came into sight, the sense of achievement of reaching our final destination was simply exhilarating, and where better to celebrate than a cosmopolitan capital city? However, after 470 miles of cycling, I have to admit that it felt a little strange (and a bit of a relief) to be exploring on two feet rather than on two wheels. ●