

2017 – The Rhine Cycle Route – Part 1

Last year we cycled the Loire – and this year we began to follow the Rhine from its source in Switzerland to the sea in Holland. We had 11 cycle days planned with the rest of the fortnight used to travel by car and train. As previously we travel independently, on our cycles we carry two panniers each. With pre booked accommodation we have a target to reach each evening – but know at least we will have somewhere to sleep!



The logistics for the Rhine Route were much more complex than before. At least 4 different countries and a “return journey” to enable one way cycling was somewhat of a headache. In the end we took the car to Altdorf, a Swiss town at the northerly end of the valley which has Andermatt at its head. We needed to get to the top of the Oberalp pass above Andermatt, preferably by train and “begin “our Rhine Route there. We also needed to return from Mainz via Basel with minimum changes on a train with bikes. We stayed at a hotel in the old part of Altdorf with a quiet car park at the rear where our car waited for our return.

Our general observations were that the signage for the route was very much better in France than in Switzerland and worse still in Germany. This does slow progress. We had a detailed guide in French “Le Veloroute du Rhin” that took us to Karlsruhe, and the Cicerone “The Rhine Cycle route” for the last two days as we finished north of Karlsruhe at Mainz.

Day 1. Thursday 8th June - Altdorf to Ilanz (Switzerland) 60kms

We cycled along the valley, 7kms, to Erstfeld where we caught a train for 20 mins up the valley toward Andermatt. The original plan – as the wait between trains was one hour - was to cycle the 6 kms up to Andermatt. However, extensive roadworks meant the road was closed to cyclists. There was a mini bus and trailer service that carried the bikes up to Andermatt and we arrived at Andermatt station by 11am. We caught the Oberalp Pass connection at 11.28 and arrived at the highest point of the journey before noon. 2048 metres with snow still on the ground in places and ice on the lake at the top.



However the sun was shining, so we set off swooping downhill on the road through half deserted ski villages. Gradually the road became busier so we found the cycle route – a gravel path- and followed the valley with a glacial blue torrent that was the Rhine into our first stop at Ilanz. The hotel was easily found, we had a good room, a great meal and a good night’s sleep

Day 2. Friday 9th June – Ilanz (Switzerland) to Vaduz (Liechtenstein) 98kms

A long long day! We left Ilanz and began climbing steadily through “Heidi land”. The Rhine passes through a gorge here, the Rhine Canyon, and we were cycling well above it.



We climbed 936m with super views before we gradually returned to the valley and arrived at Chur. The headwinds and lack of signage made this part difficult. Taking the “green route” we skirted the city and cycled alongside the Rhine toward Landquart, where we missed a sign and took a 5 km detour we didn’t need! Here the cycle route swings to the east of the valley and follows an undulating path of narrow agricultural roads through fertile fields and vineyards. A short picnic lunch stop was taken on a bench watching goats grazing in a field. After further undulations and vineyards we returned to the valley and a very good cycle track along the levee next to the now much wider, yet still quite fast flowing, river.



We were able to make good time, averaging 20km per hour, and reached Vaduz the capital of Liechtenstein. Finding our B&B was the next challenge – we ended up taking a rather circuitous route and of course the last km was uphill, but we arrived at 5pm at a very nice B&B with (luckily) a restaurant next door – I doubt we could have gone far for an evening meal that day.

Day 3. Saturday 10th June - Vaduz (Liechtenstein) to Rorschach (Switzerland) 68kms

We had by now got our first mechanical problem. David's right gear change had just stopped working – we discovered much later the cable was broken. He had 3 working gears only on the left and we carried on hoping to find somewhere to get a repair. Luckily the route was not hilly today. We freewheeled downhill to the Rhine, back into Switzerland and re-joined the cycle path on the south bank, making good time to Fussach, having “dipped into Austria” en route. At Fussach the Rhine becomes an enormous delta, 20 square kms, as it flows into Lake Constance (or Bodensee to the Germans) Here we chose the south side of the lake to continue our journey, and followed through a nature reserve and flat fertile agricultural land to reach the shore of the Lake. We followed the well signed lake path into the busy resort town of Rorschach where we met our friend Jane who was joining us for 4 nights. The day had been sunny and warm. Being Saturday afternoon no cycle repair shops were open in Rorschach, and tomorrow was Sunday so that wasn't going to help, but at least David's bike was still rideable.

Day 4 Sunday 11th June – Rorschach to Stein am Rhein (Switzerland) 68kms

Very sunny and hot all day. Leaving at 9.30am we followed the cycle path round the edge of the lake toward Constanz. There were lots of cyclists going in both directions – some “long distance” with their panniers but most people out for the day as it was Sunday and good weather. We had great views of the lake and crossed the railway line numerous times, often held up by the passing trains.



The route led us past Constanz and we had a good lunch stop by the Rhine at Gottleiben on a shady bench watching boats sail up the river. We cycled on alongside “Untersee” toward Stein am Rhein, where we found our delightful B&B run by an Australian. We had enough time and energy for a walk in the evening.

Day 5 Monday 12th June – Stein am Rhein (Switzerland) to Waldshut-Tiengen (Germany) 85km – battery on Garmin gave up part way!

This ended up being an 11 hour day! We left at 9.15am and bought lunch in Stein am Rhein. About 5 km further on out in the countryside Jane managed to pick up a drawing pin/tack and sustain a rear wheel puncture despite her new “marathon plus tyres”. A helpful Scottish couple helped with a repair. Our spare inner tube was unfortunately not compatible with Jane’s tyre valves – so we had to patch the tyre. We lost about 45 mins here. Soon after it became obvious that my (Ruth) back mudguard was rubbing on the rear tyre. A 20 min fix did help but after Schaffhausen at the Rhine falls we decided to take drastic action and remove the mudguard with the help of our tool kit and a Swiss army knife. This took about 45 mins in all with a quick bite to eat. On setting off, we discovered Jane’s rear tyre was soft again. We pumped it up and hoped for the best. Some 30 mins later we again attempted to repair the puncture, on the side of a country road. This time we used superglue with the “instant” patch. However this also did not have any longevity and 30 mins later the tyre was going down. We still had 45 plus kms to go and it was after 3pm.

At this point we spotted a sign for a bike shop nearby, a quick phone call and 1 km off the route and we were there in Flaach at a repair shop with a more than helpful man. He put a new inner tube in Jane’s rear tyre (and sold her a spare), sorted out my rear wheel which was running out of true – needed nuts tightening, and put a new cable in David’s right gear change. Wonderful, but it took another hour out of our day, so it was by now after 4pm and still 40km to go. It was still hot and sunny. Stretches of gravel track and a strong headwind continued to slow us down. We phoned our pre booked hotel to advise late arrival, gritted our teeth and cycled on. It was in fact a very pretty route undulating along the riverside but I suppose we didn’t really notice!



We crossed the Rhine into Germany and cycled the last 5 km to Waldshut-Tiengen to arrive at our hotel at 8pm. Needless to say we ate a hearty meal that night and fell into bed exhausted.

Day 6 Tuesday 13th June – Waldshut-Tiengen (Germany) to Basel (France) 82km

Sunny and hot again – but no major traumas, however one of Janes new Ortleib cycle panniers “jumped off” her bike twice whilst going over rough ground. We cycled back into Switzerland and continued along the Rhine past a huge atomic power station at Laufenberg. Today we had long stretches of stoney gravel which were unpleasant and slow to ride. We had a lunch stop on a bench by the Rhine and continued on to Augusta Raurica with a quick glance at its famous Roman amphitheatre as we sailed past downhill at this point. We sheltered from the sun on one of the many covered wooden bridges for an afternoon break before we tackled Basel. We arrived along the river, passed by the Cathedral and followed the signs for St Louis where our hotel was located. We passed into France at this point. The hotel was OK and it did have a garage for the bikes – always the first consideration. We found it amazing that the whole ambience was so French within one km of the “border”. We ate outside at a very “French” pavement café and watched a cycle race speed round the village.

Day 7 Wednesday 14th June – Basel to Elsenheim (France) 88kms

We said “Goodbye” to Jane who was returning from Basel station to Esslingen in Germany where she lives. We cycled out to meet the Huningue canal and regain the route. We passed through the “petite Camargue Alsacienne” with good fast riding along the canal bank. We met some Canadians at the bridge at Kembs who were off to Freiburg and had brought their bikes all the way from British Columbia for the ride! We then cycled a well signed route through agricultural fields of primarily maize and through small villages. We were now following “Velo Route 15” – previously we had followed “Rhine route 2” in Switzerland. Lunch from a boulangerie on benches in a town square in the shade by the church set us up for more well signed paths through fields, a “deviation” that didn’t get us lost and an arrival in Neuf-Brisach. Here we joined the canal that was to feed us into the Rhone Rhine canal that would lead us to Strasbourg.



Great cycling along the canal with a pair of swans having 6 cygnets swimming with them. David decided to “up his average speed” and sailed away from me missing the turning to our overnight accommodation. By the time I caught up we were some 9 km away from Markolsheim and the small village of Elsenheim where our B&B was. We retraced to the correct turn – had a refreshing drink in Markolsheim and arrived at our

B&B about 5pm. We ended up at her friends B&B across the street due to her having to go away, but it was a super room and his “table d’Hote” meal in the evening a great find.

Day 8 Thursday 15th June – Elsenheim to Kilstett (France) 72kms

Another hot and sunny day. After a really good breakfast with home-made brioche we returned to the canal to follow it 50kms to Strasbourg. A great ride, good surfaces lots to see and shady under the large Plane trees. In fact the later stages were very similar to the stretches of path along the Canal Du Midi. By now the canal had pleasure boats chugging along. We were in Strasbourg by noon.



The route was well signed and we traversed the city, there seemed to be some kind of demonstration holding up the traffic with three vans of riot police waiting close by, so we got out of there as fast as possible and stopped for a shady picnic on a stone bench in the forests at Robertsau further on. On through more well signed villages and rural lanes and we were at our hotel in Kilstett by 2.45pm. A field with Emus grazing and a shady garden filled the rest of the afternoon. A super meal at a local restaurant was accompanied by a thunderstorm which brought much needed cooler weather.

Day 9 Friday 15th June – Kilstett (France) to Karlsruhe (Germany) 73kms

It was cooler and some clouds today but still some sunshine. After breakfast outside we followed the route over the low lying flood plain via a supermarket for lunch supplies to Lauterbourg where we had lunch beside a wide fast flowing Rhine. We followed the river to a “bac” ferry across the river and tried to follow the signs to Karlsruhe – we were back in Germany and back to confusing and non-existent signs. At one point I tried to tailgate a couple of other long distance cyclists – obvious with panniers- but lost them in the maze of railway tracks and streets of the southern suburbs. Eventually and with directions from helpful people and my not too fluent German we luckily spotted a sign for the Station and knew our hotel was nearby. When staying in cities it is useful to be close to a station or monument to get directions as the names of the hotels are not always widely known. Eventually we arrived at our modern hotel with underground parking but not until my bike chain had come off and my gear cable had jumped off its mounting – all luckily easily repaired!. We walked the next day’s route out of the city that evening. We had to get to the Schloss gardens to the north. It seemed the whole of Karlsruhe was being dug up with streets closed off- apparently they are making an underground transport system. At the moment they are making

a big mess!!! However the Schloss gardens were very pretty and we had a good meal overlooking one of the “dug up” town’s squares.

Day 10 Saturday 16th June -Karlsruhe to Ludwigshafen (Germany) 86kms

A cloudy over cast day. Today we were using the Cicerone Rhine Cycle Route book, our French Veloroute du Rhin book finished at Karlsruhe. To be fair he does suggest you need local maps – but as we had previously always had good signposting I had assumed we could follow the route with his instructions only for the last two days. Not a mistake I will make again!!! At first all went well. We cycled through the Schloss gardens and the deer park following clear signs that led us through a village to a dug up and impassable section of the path. Luckily a lone, young, German male cyclist with panniers arrived at the same place at the same time. He asked a local and we conversed in broken German and English. There was apparently a diversion – we followed him and arrived (eventually) at a yellow diversion sign. We cycled together to the ferry across the Rhine. Leaving the ferry we waved goodbye and we set off along one of the long stretches of “Rhinendam” – the well surfaced cycle path following below the levee of the river. A lot of the time you can’t see the river. We negotiated Speyer and followed the below levee cycle path towards Ludwigshafen. Again a confusing array of signs led us seemingly around Ludwigshafen when we needed to be at the northerly end by the BASF plant to find our hotel. An English speaking garage cashier was very helpful and put us on the right track with landmark buildings to help. Eventually we rolled into this very upmarket hotel on Rene Bond Street. It turned out to be a BASF (Chemical plant) hotel for its executives during the week but open at weekends to tourists (I had booked through Booking .com). A fantastic find – the bikes stowed in a conference room with others! The room had every modern luxury and all for a very reasonable price including a magnificent breakfast buffet. Again we walked the route to find the path for the next morning and had a very good meal nearby.



Day 11 Sunday 17th June – Ludwigshafen to Mainz (Germany) 88kms

Again the weather was overcast to begin with but the sun came out later and made the day more pleasant. We re-joined the path by the chemical plant and followed out along the levee to Worms – it was quite

industrial. After Worms the path followed through prettier villages and was well signed. We could even see the Rhine with large barges sailing up it. We had a lovely lunch stop by the river in the sun. Then we met a huge deviation. The levee by the Rhine is being upgraded due to flooding and the cycle path was diverted. This was clearly signed, though the 9 km to Oppenheim was to take 1 hour! We followed the diversions signs to Mainz out to a road and along turning right where signed. We followed this road for about 3 kms till we reached another very dug up section of the Rhine levee and rather a lot of disgruntled cyclists who were following the same diversions signs we were. The locals suggested we retrace our steps to the main road – about 3 kms and follow for Oppenheim. This we did and I saw the cyclists in front turn right before the main road. Further examination revealed someone had covered the diversion sign that should have sent us along this road with an advertising poster. We duly removed the poster and continued on the correct route.



A pleasant route followed through the vineyards and along the river in the sunshine to Mainz where a very kind pair of cyclists led us to the station and our hotel for the night. We had arrived at our destination for this cycle trip.

Day 12 Monday 18th June- Mainz (Germany) to Altdorf (Switzerland) Train and last 7km by bike

We had pre booked the Deutcher Bahn tickets as the bike spaces had to be reserved and we needed an “international bike ticket” as we were travelling directly to Basel SBB – the Swiss station. Unfortunately the train was 1 hour late arriving in Mainz (German efficiency?) So the whole journey took longer than expected. We missed the original connection in Basel but caught the exact same train 2 hours later – a Regio Express where bike reservations were not needed. After an efficient journey we got off the train at Erstfeld and cycled the 7 kms back to our hotel in Altdorf. It had been hot and sunny all day and the journey through Switzerland on the train was delightful.