

Monday, July 15, 2013

Danube Adventure

After 12 months of planning, the Wheel Easy Danube Tour finally started on Sunday 30 June. 13 of us were collected from our respective houses by Eddy Brown Coaches and delivered to Stansted Airport, where we flew to Munich. At Munich we were met by Andre (the owner of Mercurio Bike Travel), who would be our host and ride leader for the next week. 2 mini-buses took our group to Passau, where we met up with 5 more Wheel Easy members who had travelled overland as they were fitting the cycle tour into other holiday arrangements around Europe. Shortly after, the Wheel Easy party of 18, plus Andre, and his 2 assistants - both called Michael - who were in charge of the support vehicle, went out for our first evening meal together. Earlier in June, the River Danube had its worst floods ever recorded, and Passau had been worst affected. Our hotel, on the banks of the River Danube, is used to floods every year, but on this occasion the water level had risen to the second floor. Apart from the lift being out of action, the hotel was now working normally and immaculately clean. The first photograph was taken on the steps of the hotel. 3 weeks earlier the water level would have been 10 feet over our heads!



Monday 1 July. After breakfast we had a guided walking tour of the old city of Passau, which is at the confluence of the Danube, the Inn and the Iltz rivers. This position makes it prone to regular flooding. Our guide told us that the town "can be flooded 5 or 6 times a year, but they are usually small floods, and we can carry on much as usual, just wearing wellingtons, not like this last one!" After lunch we returned to the hotel to receive our Mercurio hire bikes, and to have them all adjusted to fit us. An hour or so later, we set off following Andre along the Danube Cycle Path which would take us all the way to Vienna. As we exited the Passau city boundary we also crossed the border between Germany and Austria. This afternoon's 22 mile ride took us to Schloggen, where our hotel had a beautiful setting, reached by a ferry across the river. Our cases had already been delivered to our rooms by the 2 Michaels, as they did at every hotel.

Tuesday 2 July. We cycled 35 miles to Linz, which was European City of Culture in 2009, where we arrived in time for a guided walking tour around the city. Our hotel was the oldest in Linz, and had hosted the Austrian royal family in previous centuries. The courtyard still has wooden cobbles which were laid so that horses would not disturb the sleeping royal guests! En route we paused for another team photo, and also experienced our first Mercurio picnic. The meat, cheese and salad table was equally appetising and beautifully prepared for us by the 2 Michaels. The picnics were a highlight of each day.



Wednesday 3 July. Our longest day - 38 miles, finishing in Grein. The photos above give an idea of the scenery through which we were travelling, and the excellent quality of the cycle paths alongside the river. Surprisingly the Danube is not used as much as the Rhine for transport of freight, but nevertheless there are some barges and luxury cruise ships to add occasional interest .

Thursday 4 July. We had an earlier start (8.45am) than usual. Our destination was the small town of Melk, 32 miles away, but we needed to arrive there by 2.30pm, and of course, there was the usual gastronomic delight of the picnic to get through en route. The early arrival was so that we could have a guided tour of Melk Abbey, a UNESCO World Heritage site, built on a cliff above the Danube dominating the town.

Friday 5 July. At breakfast we discovered that several professional cycling teams were also booked into our hotel: 'Vorarlberg' and 'Gormetfein' from Austria, and 'IAM' from Switzerland. When we

took our bikes from the underground car park, we found ourselves surrounded by lots of expensive carbon fibre bikes, service vehicles and buses from the teams. Later in the morning a helicopter and police sirens announced the imminent arrival of the race, which turned out to be the Tour of Austria, which included the better known teams from Sky, Omega Pharma Quickstep, Cofidis, BMC, Katusha, and Astana (obviously the B teams, as the A teams are all the Tour de France). We cycled just 19 miles today, largely through the vineyards of Austria's best wine growing area: the Wachau region. Our destination was the town of Durnstein, where we had a tour of the vineyards and the underground wine cellars, followed by a very enjoyable wine tasting session. We had now finished our cycling, so we left our bikes at the winery where they would be picked up by the 2 Michaels. We then had free time to explore Durnstein, which is famous for its castle where Richard the Lionheart was imprisoned for some years on his way back from the Crusades. At 6.30 we boarded the ferry that took us on the 4-hour journey to Vienna, and we enjoyed our final dinner together on board.

Saturday 6 July. Our final breakfast together, where we could say farewell to Andre and the 2 Michaels. It had been an excellent tour, immensely enjoyed by all 18 of us, so much so that there will definitely be more tours with Andre in future years. We had cycled 146 very leisurely miles through magnificent scenery. The quality of the accommodation and food had been excellent throughout, and all arrangements had worked perfectly. We had just one puncture in our combined 2775 miles. The tour has ended, but not our holiday, as we were all staying on for some extra sightseeing in the beautiful city of Vienna. On Sunday, Jeremy collected his car from Passau, then continued with Kate and Matthew on their European tour - next stop Bratislava. Glyn and Jennie also returned to Passau to collect their motorhome, and continue their holiday in Germany. Caroline & Max, Eddie & Diana, Phil & Sam, and Sue W flew home. Eric & Di, Richard & Liz, Sue T & Jill stayed longer and returned home on Tuesday 9 July. On Sunday we met the Tour of Austria again when it arrived in Vienna, closing off the roads in the city centre for several hours as they raced around the Vienna Ring (about 6 miles) for 10 laps culminating in the final sprint. Eric W.

