

Bicycling the Danube River Valley

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We decided to treat ourselves to a European bicycle tour to celebrate our wedding anniversary a few years ago. Through Willamette Travel, we hooked up with Ciclismo Classico for a guided trip through the heart of Italy. We fell in love with Italy, and did three more tours with Ciclismo in the next seven years.

Ten years later, we wanted to treat ourselves again for our anniversary. However, we wanted to see another area of Europe, and the weak dollar argued for a less costly option than a full guided tour. As we had some experience cycling in Europe and as we had ventured into Austria on a tour with Ciclismo, we thought cycling in Austria might be something we could handle on our own.

After taking our bicycles once on an international trip, we really did not look forward to horsing them and the rest of our luggage through airports, in vans, and on trains. Further, we did not relish the idea of carrying all of luggage on our bicycles. Last, we wanted a warm shower and soft bed at the end of the day. With these stipulations, we started looking online for tour options.

We settled on a self-guided tour with Top Bicycle. We targeted two sequential tours that the company supports along the Danube River. We looked at combining the tours, but the time to follow the company's recommended itinerary was too long given our time constraints. As many of the days had rather short rides and as we wanted extra days in the cities of Vienna and Budapest, we contacted Top Bicycle to determine if it could lengthen some of the ride days and shorten the tour to two weeks. It could, and it offered us an itinerary that fit our needs. Top Bicycle then worked with Willamette Travel which arranged for flights and connections.

The self-guided tour included bicycle rental, hotel accommodations, continental breakfast each morning, luggage transport between hotels, route notes with maps and brochures for the cities we would visit, a GPS to assist in navigation, and a cell phone in case you needed assistance. A company representative also met us the day we arrived at our starting location to brief us and to fit our bicycles.

We started at Passau, Germany and were into Austria the first day. Stops in Austria included Linz, Grein/Donau, Melk, Tulln, and Vienna. The route in Austria was almost all on dedicated bike paths and away from traffic. This portion of our ride was busy with bicycle tourists, and as many people spoke English, language was not a problem.

We changed road bikes for hybrid bikes in Vienna. This proved wise as we encountered three sections of unimproved road, and it rained for four days which resulted in a section of one those roads to have axle-deep puddles that required us to walk the bikes a few hundred yards.

We found far fewer riders cycling from Vienna to Budapest. This part of the trip was mostly on secondary roads so you were cycling with some traffic, but it was bothersome in only a couple of sections. Our route included stops in Bratislava (Slovakia), Gyor, Tata, Esztergom, and Budapest (all in Hungary). Language also proved more of a problem along this portion of the route with English speakers mostly in the urban areas that served tourists. German helped some in the rural areas, and people were generally pleasant and made every effort to figure out what we needed. Knowing how to say please and thank you in Hungarian always brought a smile.

The overall route is very easy. The route goes down river so you are generally biking downhill although the gradient is not noticeable in most areas as the river has a series of locks and dams. The prevailing winds are from the west, so it is usually at your back. The portion of the route from Passau to Vienna would make a great first trip in Europe for someone who wants to get “their feet wet” and for people who may be beginning bicycle tourists. Extending the length of the days and taking side trips up and out of the Danube River valley will make the route more interesting for experienced bike tourists.

The route in Hungary is a little more difficult. The pathway is not as good, the route leaves the river in many places, there are a couple of hills to climb, and the support services leave something to be desired in the rural areas. Yet, with the cell phone, you never feel vulnerable.

For the more adventurous bicycle tourist, the route we rode could easily be done on your own. Cycline publishes Danube Bike Trail Part 2 and Part 3 in English (available online) and Top Bicycle provided these two guides with its materials when we arrived. There are ample hotels, camping areas, and other accommodations available along the route, particularly in Austria. With a little research and with a willingness to carry your own gear, the trip is eminently doable on your own.