

## A JOURNEY ALONG THE LENGTH OF THE RIVER RHINE – JUNE AND JULY 2019

The nice chap at Zurich airport kindly collected and disposed of the big cardboard boxes in which our bicycles had travelled, quickly solving the first and one of the relatively few real problems of the trip. The famed punctuality of the Swiss railway system was spoiled by a late platform re-arrangement which led to a chunk of our first afternoon being stranded at the station, waiting for the next train. The subsequent, scenic journey more than made up for that delay, with staff on the trains kindly alerting us to the most attractive viewing places.

Earlier anxieties about the Oberalpass being impassable because of snow, were unfounded. The very hot weather hadn't yet arrived, but was heading for the Alps faster than we were. Two of us cycled the steep uphill pass, two went by train after a little necessary attention at the bike shop in Andermatt. The beauty of the Alps could easily dominate this piece, if only there were enough superlatives to use. The sound of Swiss cow bells, echoing majestically across the mountains and valleys during the early days of the tour, was exactly the right musical backdrop to our tour. On the steep section of the Oberalpass, an old Dutch guy who was cycling around Europe just because he wanted to, insisted that we take the train again so as to enjoy the Alpine scenery from the rail line above. He was helpful and clearly meant well, but we were here to experience the open air and to do some pedalling.

The true source of the river Rhine required a walk on foot of two hours from the café at the top of the pass. We weren't allowed to do that because of the depth of snow causing the closure of the path higher up the mountain. Nevertheless, we were keen to begin the ride after a sumptuous Italian meal the previous evening and breakfast that morning. Our splendid first night accommodation had provided us with the solitude of single rooms, something we could have benefitted from periodically through the fortnight. That we didn't have that again was the cause of some disharmony, for reasons which we won't explain. As the sports people are fond of saying : what goes on tour must stay on tour.

We had planned the daily routes and knew the distances and gradients. Our general fitness and preparedness gave us confidence that we would be okay. Cycling in temperatures officially at 36 degrees Celsius, although probably higher at times, is a hard physical challenge. Moving along, usually at around 12-14 mph, creates a breeze which can be cooling at slightly lower temperatures. Not so in this heat, which seemed to rise and become almost infernal when you stopped riding. Sunburn and sunstroke are the dangers and you have to rehydrate all the time.

Some kind local people, on our first day riding, had encouraged us to make regular use of the fountains which contained the fresh water which was running directly off the mountains. As good pieces of advice go, that one earned the Gold medal. Searching furtively and sometimes desperately for these fountains became a whole day obsession. We drank this precious, clear water from our cupped hands and filled our plastic bottles. It was tasty beyond delicious. We bathed our feet, splashed our faces, poured the water over our heads and down our backs. On one occasion we even competed with horses to get at this precious liquid. Fundamentally, we treated the water with respect, truly appreciating its value on baking hot days. Nothing much was as refreshing on the rest of the trip.

The majority of spending was on food and we ate well, usually three times per day. Meat, protein, salad and vegetables in abundance, even cheese at breakfast. The range of meals included Italian, French, Turkish, German and Dutch. There may have been a buffalo grill in there somewhere, though memory isn't always reliable. The breakfast dish at Chur, labelled as muesli but probably 'overnight porridge', was heaven in a dish and we begged for the recipe. Our host kept the secret to herself as she waved us off that morning from the hotel balcony. One hot afternoon in Karlsruhe included a feeding frenzy on ice cream. It was difficult to understand then and even harder to explain now. At a cost of one Euro per scoop, we danced across the whole tasty range of flavours, to the utter bewilderment of the lady vendor. Yet, meals didn't always work out perfectly. One restaurant in Germany had no apple strudel for us, akin to a tragedy. It was a bit like going in to a fish-and-chip shop and discovering they only had jam donuts left.

Drinking and hydration were of utmost importance. There was the occasional beer in the evening, certainly and also the consumption of quite a lot of soft, fizzy drinks. One discovery in Germany was the fizzy fruit drink made with rhubarb, something we hadn't heard of in the UK. We thought that this drink should be imported quickly, before any tariffs become prohibitive. Another tasty beverage was a non-alcohol beer, flavoured with citrus. This drink might have vied with the fizzy rhubarb for second place in the favourite drink list, behind the mountain water, but for Tom's stubborn insistence that non-alcohol beer isn't actually a real drink. Instead, he preferred to wallow around in the many splendid locally-brewed beers available, as joyfully as a hippo in wet mud.

It was apparent that large numbers of people travel on bikes across Europe and many we met were following the same route along the Rhine. A group of ladies from all over America were taking a month to ride the route, having previously cycled together across the United States. A group of very senior Dutch people were making one of several short tours on electric bikes. We met a French man cycling sedately through the farm areas in the Alpine foothills in Switzerland. Having spent a month's holiday touring Asia, he had flown to Venice. There he bought a cheap bike and pannier bags from Decathlon and was cycling back to his home in the Massif Central mountains. He didn't have the fancy GPS technology which adorned our handlebars, but was comfortable following his own path – and we thought we were the ones on a trans-continental odyssey. We last saw him crossing the Rhine on a bridge from Switzerland into Germany, to find cheaper accommodation for the night. We concluded that he must have a tight-fisted Yorkshireman somewhere within his ancestry.

Our route enabled us to criss-cross the river Rhine frequently, using the various ferry boats at a very modest, bus fare-type fee. Large and small, usually elderly, they oozed quaintness of character and provided us with a respite from the pedalling, a welcome cooling breeze and an excellent, alternative view of the river and its diverse boating population. It did take a while to get into the swing of it. Surprisingly, the ferry boats wouldn't dock. Instead the boats' ramps were held steady onto the sloping dry land by engines kept running at a high throttle. Everyone got on and off the ferries without fuss or delay. Early on, being English gentlemen, we held back until the motor vehicles and, in turn, the locals on foot or on bicycles, had all moved off the boat. Later in the tour we realised that it was much more fun to participate than to spectate, so we giddily joined in with the mass cavalry charge off the boat, racing one and all straight up the short, steep inclines back onto land. Seldom did we win those impromptu races, yet we were happy to know that it is possible both to gasp for breath and laugh out loud at the same time.

Our accommodation each night was varied and splendid. The first night's hotel at Andermatt probably gets star billing for the single rooms and for our lady host being so nice. Kindly, she described the six miles' climb of the Oberalpass and where we should be to begin our journey along the Rhine. The surrounding Alpine scenery was spectacular of course and the ever-present jingling of the cow bells very literally provided a joyful, even calming note to the whole darn thing. Bregenz on the Austrian banks of Lake Constance offered us a large hotel room, an enormous restaurant and a back-drop of opera in the evening and a large-scale triathlon beginning very early the next morning.

The prospect of sleeping on the floor in Karlsruhe, at an hotel which gave fresh, if alarming meaning to the term "budget", wasn't at all appetising. However, it worked out well; we had another fine breakfast and also had the unexpected benefit of having our kit washed in a state-of-the-art German manufactured washing machine. Disappointingly, the dryer didn't function quite as well. All too rarely, these days, is it possible to get your bread buttered on both sides?

Touring cyclists have long dried their washed kit the next day by hanging items from the bags on their bikes. One such attempt on this tour resulted in a cycling shirt zip being mangled in the wheel spokes, resulting in an expensive appointment with the seamstress immediately upon return home. It's uncertain which one of us had run over the black cat that day.

The hotel at Worms (pronounced “warms”) had almost a mediaeval atmosphere, with a knight in shining armour protecting the entrance door. Our host served us glasses of iced water on arrival, which we gulped breathlessly and thirstily, simultaneously trying to say thank-you. The rooms and beds were spacious and large. Our tired leg muscles twitched expectantly when we saw that our pedal cycles were stored for the night alongside some powerful motor cycles. However, their owners weren’t going to swap.

The marvellous town of Bacharach gave us an excellent olde-worlde hotel. Our cramped room was high up in the bell tower and the clambering of three flights of stairs left us gasping. There wasn’t a lift in the place. The delightful, Japanese-looking host couple had us likening them to characters from the ‘Karate Kid’ Hollywood movie, until we discovered they were from South Korea. The high-up hotel room had a splendid view of the river, spoiled only by the close proximity of the railway line upon which trains ran through the night. Close proximity? We could have warmed our feet on the engines. The midnight express didn’t as much pass nearby as rocket straight through the middle of our room. There were some bleary eyes and irritable moods at next morning’s breakfast table. After Bacharach, came a cooler and faster ride to Remagen. By now, our fitness was more or less at its peak for this holiday and we were moving along well. We took a ferry across the Rhine from Remagen and stayed in the smaller suburb of Linz in a large hotel whose grandeur, style and decorations didn’t appear to have altered from the early 1950s. A quartet of string musicians playing chamber music was the only thing lacking.

Another budget hotel in Dusseldorf placed us above an Irish bar, whose customers insisted upon entertaining us with their singing at somewhere around two-thirty in the morning. There was plenty going on in the large city of Dusseldorf and we had a good walk around, digesting another tasty Turkish meal (although we passed on the smoking device available; we believe these things are variously referred to as nargile or sheesha, though we didn’t stay and check). We hadn’t always had such an opportunity to look around, sometimes because of long days in the saddle and others (Bonn being one example) where the route skirted past the town or city, instead of taking us through the centre.

A set of very steep stairs awaited us at the utterly unpronounceable small town of Wijk bij Duurstede in Holland, a situation which became bizarre when our host insisted upon climbing them whilst carrying our breakfasts. Even more bizarrely, on the same day when a very nice café owner had served us free coffee, the bus driver taking us on the short hop into town wouldn’t accept payment of fares from us. After our pleasant evening meal, a local chap gave us a lift back to our digs. He had worked many years in London, was ex-forces and seemed to want to have a chat about things with us Brits. Everything that evening was lovely, with the single possible exception of the quality of his driving.

Rarely were we disappointed with our choices of café and restaurant. Only once did a German lady proprietor seem unwelcoming. Perhaps she didn’t want foreigners in her café; perhaps she was just having an off-day. It mattered not, as the food was just as good as everywhere else. That incident was perhaps the one and only time that we faced any attitudes of impoliteness or rudeness. It’s certainly true to say that in a fortnight travelling across six countries on the continent, we were treated in a kind and friendly manner by just about everyone and we like to think that we reciprocated in the same way to our hosts.

The heat and accompanying exhaustion became a test of both character and patience. Our bikes were locked overnight out in the open air at the youth hostel in Schaffhausen. Attempting to lighten the sombre mood just a little, Richard’s early morning sortie to hide the bikes and pretend they had been stolen was a misguided high-flying ideal of humour, which plummeted instantaneously. Icarus would have had a softer landing.

The pretty town of Schaffhausen is memorable for providing the best and worst of times. A long and hot day in the saddle ended with a cooling and picturesque roll along the tree-lined banks of the Rhine, watching people swim and relax by the water. With barely a couple of miles to go to reach our destination at the youth hostel, spirits were high. Turning the corner in the town, we

were aghast to discover that the hill up to the youth hostel went even higher and became steadily steeper. That baking hot climb of almost a mile may have been the worst moment of the trip, followed in second place by the final bill for the evening meal at the restaurant in the old town of Chur (strangely pronounced Hoo-ah). Not so much the numbers, but what we had – or more precisely hadn't – got for our cash. Back in Schaffhausen, we recovered and enjoyed our stay at the youth hostel, had a lovely evening meal and – the following morning – a terrific close-up view of the Rhine falls, providing another of the very best moments of our journey. There was even another fountain from which to fill our water bottles, as we set off on the second longest day ride of the whole trip, travelling westwards to Basel.

The longest day riding was Basel to Strasbourg and thankfully the heat began to subside just a little. Our hotel room on the outskirts of Strasbourg was the oddest we stayed in, a small single room on two levels ensuring a claustrophobic, stuffy night. We just about stopped short of asking room service to deliver some fresh air.

The whole route we were following had been carefully planned and the surfaces we were riding on were excellent for most of the time. The smoothest of asphalt surfaces are always a joy to ride upon, because of the sense (and reality) of increased speed. We encountered hard-packed limestone, rough tracks through forests, a short hop through a transport depot yard, cattle grids, rail tracks, tram lines, a steady chaperoned roll along a stretch of road which was being newly constructed and even some deep sand. A very short section of potholed track in Germany, possibly forgotten by the maintenance crew, was probably the worst we encountered. It helped that our bikes were prepared and fit for the journey and that we had all chosen the same brand of robust tyres. The dry weather conditions meant that our bikes spent the fortnight covered in dust, resulting in a few irritating squeaks and rattles, though happily no significant breakdowns en route.

The downhill section in the Alps, at the very beginning of our journey, was soon behind us. The relative ease of riding on the flat was sometimes hampered by quite strong headwinds which affected us in parts of Germany and also in Holland. There was just the one occasion when we stood still in puzzlement, unsure of our next move and direction and yes, it meant going round in circles for a short time. There were half a dozen times when our route was blocked, usually because of track maintenance or reconstruction and once because of a bridge having collapsed suddenly. The result was some distance of back-tracking and a few more miles added on to the day, as well as a delayed evening meal.

The environment and geography of the Rhine and its surrounds which we encountered were always attractive to look at and to be briefly immersed in. In approximate order of passage : after the Alps came the sloping hillsides replete with vineyards; the awesome Rhine falls at Schaffhausen; a beautiful stretch of the river, with mountainous surrounds, leading to the bridge forming the frontier between Switzerland and Leichtenstein (a time on our journey we wished could have lasted much longer); the vast Lake Constance at Bregenz in Austria and the longest ferry crossing; the widening of the river Rhine to huge proportions as we passed Basel and headed for Strasbourg; long, sweeping pathway sections along the Rhine in Germany, especially the approach to Remagen; the delightful Rhine gorge resplendent with more castles than we could count; taking in the vibrant sights and sounds of the bigger cities at Cologne and Dusseldorf; and the blustery polders of Holland, with windmills and farms aplenty. The long, arrow straight finishing stretch to the Hook of Holland and the North Sea allowed us precious time and relative solitude for thoughts and reflection. Rarely would we see litter or graffiti, these items usually being confined to the cities. There was always a sense of a reasonable level of economic affluence, perhaps best evidenced by the number of vintage cars we saw driving around in Switzerland. Our journey crossed over two full weekends, where we travelled very slowly through a few street-markets-cum-car boot sales. Travel broadens the mind and in our case, also the waistline, as we joined the local populous and enjoyed the food and drink on offer in these busy, lively places.

Our midday trek through the middle of Cologne would be worthy of a piece all on its own, if only any one of us would dare to write it. It was Sunday and the time of year when the Gay Pride marches were happening. We were quickly caught up in the march and the large crowds of spectators as we approached the marvellous, tall cathedral of Cologne, our intended destination. The Police were unobtrusive. Although we couldn't reach the cathedral, we were confident that our brightly coloured and tight-fitting lycra outfits would enable us to blend in with the crowd. Possibly they did exactly that, or were doing so until a young man dressed only (or perhaps draped only) in a small flag, came past our way. Some things defy description, or are best left to the imagination. We moved on and found a very nice café for lunch just at the edge of the city centre.

The two main museums we passed were the zeppelin museum at Friedrichshafen, located on the German banks of Lake Constance and the military museum at Arnhem. Fleetingly, we saw a modern-day zeppelin in flight. Our route, annoyingly, took us past buildings, bridges and trees, such that the zeppelin succeeded in hiding itself from us and we were unable to record its flight, with either moving or still pictures. The bridge at Arnhem required us to push our bicycles up a lengthy flight of stairs, almost as steep as those in the hotel at Bacharach. The nearby museum was prominent, yet understated and sombre and stands as an appropriate memorial for the terrible wartime events which happened at that location. Earlier in Germany, we had passed the remains of a bridge which had been destroyed by the retreating Nazi forces in 1944. Hidden behind nondescript, utilitarian fencing, the stone remains lay there un sentimentally as a reminder of the past.

Apart from the risk of sunburn, sunstroke and dehydration, we were all in rude health throughout the trip. Dave took the prize as the strongest rider, most often taking the burden of the quite fierce headwind we frequently faced and thus offering shelter to the other three. Tom had the misfortune of the one and only puncture and also had to replace a broken rear wheel. That repair time, on yet another hot day, afforded us a lazy coffee at a café near the bike shop in Chur and where we later queued behind a couple of local hounds for the opportunity of another dip into some fountain water. Mahmood and Richard suffered broken bottle cages, an otherwise unimportant misfortune, but here placed in sharp focus because of the continual and urgent requirement to locate transport and consume copious amounts of water. Richard suffered the ignominy of being the only one to fall off the bicycle, performing a reasonably stylish face-plant, quickly followed by an undignified scramble for the spilled loose change. This incident was due to a moment's carelessness, hitting a kerb when coming off a roundabout just outside the pretty town of Ilanz in Switzerland. There was ample time to mop up the blood, sweat and tears – and to recount the loose change - just a few moments later at the charming, if expensive café stop. Italy was one country we would not visit en route, but in the first few days we were never far away from it. The small town of Ilanz, for example, contained some German street names and others with Italian names.

Modern technology allowed us to take and store many still pictures of our varied surroundings. We also indulged in the use of the 'Go Pro' camera to record moving images and sounds. We aren't experts, it can be difficult to ride and film at one and the same time and it was sometimes frustrating that the better view lay just around the corner, a few seconds after the camera had been switched off. Nevertheless, some worthwhile pictures and scenes have been obtained.

The river Rhine is an important trade route through Europe, with containers of goods being taken by barge to and from the Europort at Rotterdam. Sometimes, those large boats piled high with containers would appear dwarfed by the sheer enormity of the river. Because so many areas alongside the river are situated so far away from a coastline and the seaside, the Rhine is important as a destination for holidays. We witnessed crowds of people spending their leisure time next to and in the river. The very hot weather does have people flocking to the water's edge, of course, but we did have the feeling that everything we saw was the norm and was not just due to the Summer heat. Families entered the water with inflatables for the children; some people were in canoes or were water-ski-ing. Strong teams of rowers were out there practising hard, especially the Germans. There were pleasure craft and small boats of all kinds. A couple of brave

souls were on paddle boards. It was sometimes quite alarming to see all these smaller craft out on the water very close to some of the larger craft and the biggest barges.

Cycling has its place as an athletic pursuit, as something to do in your leisure time and as a simple means of transport. Using cycle paths, rather than sharing the highway with motor vehicles, seldom would we be without the company of other cyclists, travelling in all directions. There were the crowds at weekends, children in trailers, dogs in baskets, tourists like ourselves with luggage on the bikes, recumbent cycles with fairings allowing faster speeds and the full range of ages of people cycling. Electric bikes were commonplace. In Holland, parents would have their very young children – some barely a year old – alongside them safely on their bikes. Holland, of course, provides the highest standard of routes and paths for cyclists. It was heartening to see so many people riding in ordinary clothes and simply fitting the riding in to their daily routine. No need for the multi-coloured and tightly fitting lycra clothing. Just as many people wore helmets as those who didn't.

After the flight to Zurich, we had an afternoon and an evening of rail travel in Switzerland. The space and facilities for people travelling with bicycles were both plentiful and of a high standard, each train having several carriages clearly marked with a bicycle logo. It was a privilege to be able to make use of it. The UK could do worse than follow suit in that regard. Holland's safe and inter-connected cycle routes have set the benchmark of quality. Yes, the routes are congested in the large cities such as Rotterdam and Arnhem and we painfully discovered how irritable some people will be if you get in their way or slow them and their bikes down. City life is busy and hurried in so many respects. It was great to see an enclosed, large and secure city centre parking area for cycles, with a fee payable just the same as for a car park. It was very well used. Elsewhere, the off-road space directly in front of an outdoor swimming pool was entirely dedicated to cycle parking, with many sturdy racks in place. We smiled wryly, believing that anywhere else, that space would have been a car park. Perhaps it isn't possible to be sure that the presence of so many bicycles helps to reduce traffic congestion, but the absence of bicycles would certainly increase congestion.

The planned fortnight was a touring ride, rather than an energetic club run. Each day meant a full day on the bike, ranging from 55 miles to a high of 90 miles on one long day. We absorbed the environment around us, leaving it to the bike computer devices to log the mileage. Staying in different places each night, necessarily we moved on, without too much time to dwell on the delights of specific views and cities and townships. It helped that our riding abilities and even our eating and drinking requirements were similar. It didn't help that our sleeping patterns were misaligned. Any disagreements within the group were borne of tiredness, not of differences of opinion. They were quickly resolved. There was simply too much to enjoy along the way. Individually, we will have our favourite moments and areas of the route we travelled. Let the final word be this: nature has given Europe the magnificent Rhine River as a place to live, to transport people and goods, as well as being a destination for holidays and leisure. Please make your own visit if you can. May nature and mankind ensure the future preservation of the Rhine River and its surrounds.

*Tom Knight*