

it lacks doctors and dentists, which was becoming a big issue in the presidential election campaign – and a painful one for me, as I was starting to get toothache under a bridge.

There was no chance of seeing a dentist in Aubusson. On my 10th attempt I finally spoke to someone at the dental hospital in Clermont-Ferrand, who gave me an appointment in a few days' time. They gave me X-rays and other tests but couldn't find anything seriously wrong, so I continued north-east towards the spa town of Vichy. Then the pain returned. Staying in France for longer treatment could bust the 90-day Schengen limit, so I reluctantly decided I would have to go home. Sylvain said I could leave my bike at his house in Paris. What a great mate he has been over the years.

A couple of days later I took the TGV from Le Creusot in Burgundy to Paris, where I rode from the Gare de Lyon to Sylvain's home in Villejuif. Only when I returned to the UK and read *Cycle* magazine did I realise that Eurostar had stopped carrying fully assembled bikes during the pandemic and were only "planning to restart the service in the summer".

LOST LUGGAGE

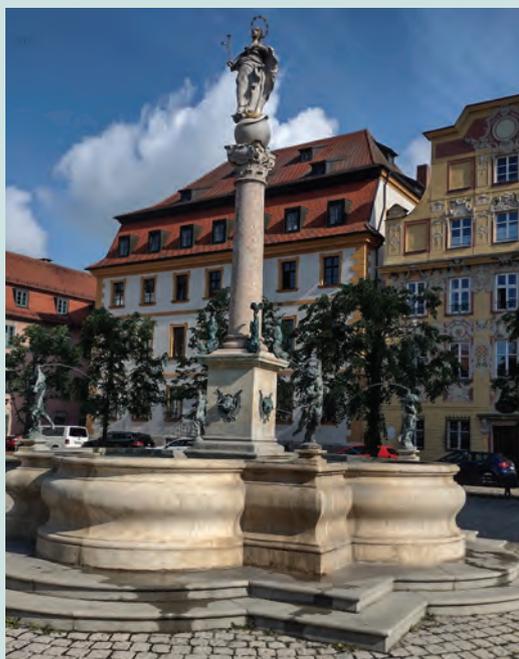
A month later, in early May, I picked up my bike in Paris and took a train to Colmar, near the German border. As I rode from the station to the first hotel a strange anxiety came over me as I wondered: what else could go wrong?

I crossed the border into Switzerland by the Three Countries Bridge over the Rhine, where France, Germany and Switzerland meet. Switzerland had the best cycle infrastructure I encountered, with clearer segregation and fewer shared pavements. All the paths on the designated routes were asphalted. People in this part of Switzerland speak Swiss German dialects; most can also speak standard German but not everyone. Some people had told me that nearly everyone in Switzerland, Germany and Austria speaks English. That might be true in cities but not in smaller places, where events would test my dodgy German to its limits.

Switzerland was also the most expensive country, so where Eurovelo 6 followed the border east of Basel I always tried to eat on the German side. Eurovelo 6 is mainly quite flat, although I sometimes diverted from it. Over the next 500km I would pass through some magnificent towns and city centres in Sigmaringen, Ulm, Neuburg an der Donau, Ingolstadt, Regensburg and Passau.

By comparison, the first city in Austria, Linz, was disappointing. A vast industrial area known as the Chemical Park stretches along much of its waterfront, but eventually the industrial activities gave way to wooded hillsides with sumptuous churches on the highest points.

I had been riding for four weeks and was feeling quite happy; nothing serious had gone wrong. Then, arriving in the market place in Tulln, I reached into my panniers and found no camera, no phone



Clockwise from top left: Saumur, France. Sigmaringen Castle, Germany. Steve at 840m altitude in Croatia. Roman amphitheatre in Pula, Croatia. Neuburg an der Donau, Germany

“
Due to the 90-day Schengen limit, my route was designed to reach Croatia as soon as possible
 ”

and no credit cards. I asked several people (none of whom spoke English) if I could call my number. Most refused. One old woman let me dial on her phone but insisted on keeping hold of it in case I tried to steal it. "I'm from Vienna," she explained.

Eventually, a German man helped me discover through Google Timeline that the phone had been stolen from a shop. This was the start of a four-week nightmare involving exasperated police, sluggish insurance companies, and incompetent banks and mobile phone companies. In the meantime, I bought local sim cards, which only work in one country and cost a fortune to call the UK, post-Brexit. Around the same time, I left my precious water heater in a B&B and the keyboard I used to write my articles somewhere else. I have no idea where.

All of this dampened the enthusiasm I would have felt arriving in Vienna. There are so many beautiful buildings, with such a rich history, that a few days there can feel overwhelming. I spent much of my time just wandering and observing. The Wiener Musikverein, where I watched a piano recital, glistens with gold on every pillar. An usher dressed like a naval officer looked askance at my attire and confiscated my water bottle.