



RIDING THE RAILS

IN MAINLAND EUROPE, LONG-DISTANCE TRAIN TRAVEL WITH A BIKE ISN'T JUST POSSIBLE, IT'S PRACTICAL, AS CTC MEMBER **ROBIN BEVIS** AND FRIEND JOHN SHOWED THIS SUMMER



● (In the photo) Flying isn't the only option: you can get to practically anywhere in Europe by train





● The Danube is easy to get to by train and offers great cycling

JUST AFTER dawn on a bright June morning, we pedalled off the Stenaline roll-on, roll-off ferry at Hoek van Holland. We were refreshed and relaxed. Setting off from Harwich International ferry port, after two UK train rides, had been just as easy. It was an effortless way to begin our continental tour, comparing favourably with the hassle of flying.

At Hoek van Holland, we were through passport control and customs in a trice. The cycle-friendly train station was only 100 metres away. A small ramp – no steps or lifts – took us onto the platform, where we could catch any of the half-hourly modern sprinter trains to Rotterdam Centraal.

For our four-week trip, we'd researched and booked trains for the majority of our route via the excellent Deutsche Bahn website and UK office. Twelve weeks ahead of departure (13 would be better yet), I contacted Deutsche Bahn with two alternative train routes to see which was cheapest. When we'd agreed which route to take, Deutsche Bahn made the reservations and posted the tickets. With them

came a breakdown of our schedule, complete with platform numbers.

Our itinerary worked a treat. From Hoek van Holland, we had three easy train changes in quick succession before boarding the long-distance Deutsche Bahn service at Wuppertal. That took us down the Rhine and through the Black Forest to Plattling, near the Austro-German border. Half of a train carriage was given over to space for up to 18 cycles, with seats in the other half. We stashed our panniers, hooked up our bikes, sat back, and enjoyed a great scenic journey.

Plattling was the starting point of our cycle tour along the excellent Donauradweg, or Danube Cycle Path. We would take this, Eurovelo route 6, all the way to Hungary, where we'd turn south to follow the Iron Curtain Trail (EV13). We had pre-booked a B&B in Plattling, opposite the station. Our bikes were stored safely inside.

The Danube & The Iron Curtain

After breakfast, our cycling trip began. The Donauradweg is relatively flat, and in

summer was busy with cyclists of all types, but it's picturesque and much is car-free. The Danube's banks are often wooded and there was lots of river traffic to watch as we glided along the radweg, or crossed over by bridge or ferry. The myriad small towns and villages you pass through provide present-day comforts and a glimpse back at their role in the historic significance of this crucial European waterway.

Reaching Vienna five days in, we followed well-signed cycleways and headed out east towards the airport at Schwechat. Here we caught a train briefly to avoid a motorway on the south side of the Danube.

At the Hungarian border, we picked up the Iron Curtain Trail. We spent a week on the borderlands, passing through attractive Hapsburg towns such as Sopron, Koszeg, Pecs and Szeged. We sought out small campsites along the way. The sites were inexpensive, had good facilities and were surprisingly uncrowded. Despite, or perhaps because of, the heat (up to 37°C), we had only one serious mosquito attack, at Sellye in southern Hungary. The village's mobile fumigator truck was on constant duty.

On reaching Serbia – via a short section of motorway! – the campsites became few and far between. So we stayed in hotels, B&Bs and inexpensive apartments. In Žitište, we

Half of a carriage was given over to space for up to 18 bicycles, with seats in the other half. We hooked up our bikes and sat back

Above and previous pages: Alamy.com. Other photos by Robin Bevis



● The Budapest-Hamburg DB service EC174 at Prague



● DB service IC2027 Hamburg to Passau carries 18 cycles



● Many remote Hungarian lines have been closed down

found a hotel for just over €5 each per night, which included a breakfast of omelette and coffee. The Serb/Romanian borderlands were similar to Hungary: vast expanses of crops, woods, and small villages.

As well as enjoying the geography and history of places you pass through on tour, it's the variety of people you meet that enriches your trip. We chatted with fellow train passengers and cyclists. In Serbia, the Director of the Lepenski Vir museum regaled us on the state of Serbia, the EU, local tourism and much more.

And we repeatedly met a French cycle tourist at campsites along the Donauradweg. He was travelling without a stove. 'What about making a cuppa when you want one?' I asked, conscious of the poor quality tea I'd been served with in mainland Europe. A Gallic shrug: as a coffee drinker, he could find a decent enough cup almost anywhere.

We turned for home at Kladovo, a town at the southern end of the Iron Gates, a gorge on the Danube. Our return had a certain

sense of adventure. We had booked our return train tickets from Budapest, but left things open before that. We only knew that we would catch a train from Serbia or Romania.

Home via Hungary

There was no suitable train from Kladovo. We discovered we could get to Budapest through Romania, on the opposite bank of the Danube. We crossed the river via a huge hydro-dam near Drobeta-Turnu Severin. At Drobeta, a helpful Romanian railway policeman assisted with money changing and ticket buying. We caught a convenient mid-morning train right through the scenic mountains of the Cerna and Temes river valleys to Arad, near the Hungarian border.

Unlike most Romanian trains, ours had no official cycle storage space. It was a tight fit in the train's front vestibule but we had nothing but helpfulness and acceptance; no muttering or tutting about our bikes. For a 280km journey, it cost us about 69 Lei each (about £12) plus 30 Lei for our bicycles.

JUST THE TICKET

BOOKING TRAINS AND FERRIES: TIPS FOR CYCLISTS.

TRAINS

- Deutsche Bahn UK (German Rail) is highly recommended for planning and booking rail journeys for the whole of Europe. Visit bahn.com and click on the Union Jack. Search for trains, ensuring the box for 'Carriage of bicycle on train' is ticked. Check two possible route options, then contact DB by phone or email ([08718 808066](tel:08718808066), sales@bahn.co.uk) for more information, fares, or reservations.
- seat61.com is another very informative website for train (and ferry) travel anywhere.
- Useful country-specific rail websites: bit.ly/1sdalmD (France); bit.ly/1wfHpSy (Spain); and bit.ly/1j5n5g2 (Italy). Also, capitainetrain.com (France) shows bike spaces you can reserve.
- Book your out and return train tickets, including bicycle reservations, well in advance and before booking your ferry. Train cycle spaces fill up; ferries have massive capacity.
- Eurostar tickets go on sale 120 days before departure rather than 92 days before like other European trains, so it's awkward to get the best prices for both.
- Deutsche Bahn will reserve places for groups as much as six months ahead. DB requires six people to qualify as a group.
- It's easier getting a bike on trains from Dutch ports than French ones.
- The Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Denmark are all cycle-friendly in terms of cycle carriage on local rail services.
- Paris Metro north/south carries bikes.

FERRIES

- For central or eastern Europe, Stenaline's Harwich to Hoek van Holland crossing is handy.
- Search for other ferry routes to Europe at directferries.co.uk or ferries.co.uk
- If the ferry company offers special deals solely for motorists, ask for one for cyclists. I did – it paid off handsomely!

BAGGED OR UNBAGGED?

- Most European high-speed trains, e.g. DB ICE (Germany), TGV (France), Renfe (Spain) and Trenitalia only allow bagged/dismantled cycles. Restrictions apply as for any large luggage.
- The vast majority of European non-high-speed train services will carry unbagged cycles. Look for the large cycle signs on carriage sides.
- Some SNCF TGV services now allow unbagged bikes, especially eastern France and Paris-Bordeaux.
- Bikes must be booked as registered luggage on Eurostar. It costs from £10 each way if the bike is bagged (120cm max dimension) and £25 each way unbagged. Your bike travels 'the same day', unless you book in advance and pay for it to go on the same train (£30 each way).
- Compact folding bikes like Bromptons are fee-free luggage on European trains and (if covered) are part of your luggage allowance on Eurostar.
- On the European rail network, most regional and international services charge for cycles by distance. (Most local services are free.) We were charged about £8.00 per cycle from Hoek van Holland to the German/Austrian border.





● Iron Gates Gorge, Derdap National Park, Serbia. A must-see

It was so relaxing to cycle along the long, traffic-free sections of the Donauradweg. The train journeys went well too



● Hungarian (MAV) trains: good cycle space, lifting required

» Leaving the train at Arad, and with a day or two to spare, we decided to cycle across the Hungarian border and head north west towards Budapest up the Tizsa river. The main road out of Arad was grim, but once off it and across the Hungarian border, it was a breeze. We rode north-east beside the Tizsa until our spare time expired. We then took a short train ride to Budapest. From Budapest, our pre-booked trains delivered us back to the Hoek van Holland ferry.

Euro stars

Our 2,000km cycling trip had many memorable moments. It was wonderfully relaxing to cycle along the long, traffic-free stretches of the Donauradweg. We enjoyed visiting the historic towns of rural Hungary and Serbia. On the Iron Curtain Trail, there were poignant reminders of the Cold War, with memorials to failed escapees, watchtowers frozen in time, plaques, pieces of 'the wall'

and museums full of artefacts. But there were lighter moments too, such as when a group of Hungarian teachers generously plied us with food and pálinka (a Carpathian fruit brandy) at their end of term party.

The train journeys went well too. We travelled a good distance into the heart of Central Europe with our bikes. It was an altogether more uplifting experience than taking a bike by train in the UK – there is more space, the trains larger and, though you may be a stranger in a strange land, you aren't treated as a breed apart. And it could get better yet the European Cyclists' Federation is campaigning to improve bike-rail integration further across Europe. ●

Robin Bevis is a CTC Right to Ride rep, a veteran bike-rail traveller, and a former CTC touring correspondent. He's happy to answer queries from CTC members about this and similar routes. Email editor@ctc.org.uk with the title 'For Robin Bevis'.

STRESS-FREE TRAVEL

HOW TO MAKE IT EASIER TO TRAVEL WITH YOUR BIKE IN EUROPE.

ON THE TRAIN

- When booking (e.g. with Deutsche Bahn), allow plenty of time for platform changes. They may be busy or you might need to use lifts.
- At stations, check the train's formation display board to locate the position of the cycle carriage.
- On board trains, use a toe-strap or ratchet strap to hold your front brake on. It's also useful for parking on gradients on tour.
- Loosen your pannier clips before boarding trains so you can quickly remove them when lifting the bike up carriage steps or into narrow entrances.
- Minimise the number of things you have to remove from you bike by putting everything in your panniers – or attaching items to them.
- Avoid officialdom hassle by fixing one of your two cycle tickets onto your bike (DB supply two).
- There's free wi-fi on many Dutch and some Hungarian train services. It's also much more common in public places and cafés than the UK, so is handy for route checking and accommodation.

ON THE BIKE

- Bikeline maps (Verlag Esterbauer GmbH) series are excellent for specific routes, while Geocenter International EuroMap 1:300,000 series offer a good scale and detail for planning cycle tours.
- Donauradweg (Eurovelo 6) is in my view the best developed, longest and certainly most used long-distance leisure cycle route in Europe. It's ideal for a first long European cycle tour.
- Learn a few basic words for east European countries, particularly Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia and Serbia. It's useful for directions and socialising.
- Take Euros, which you can change for Hungarian Forints, Serbian Dinars or Romanian Lei as needed. It's cheaper than withdrawing cash.
- There is lots of camping in Western Europe, as well as Hungary and Poland. There's little camping in Serbia and Romania, but hotels there are very cheap.