Details

- **Where:** Europe
- **Start/finish:** Oberalp Pass, Switzerland, to Hook of Holland
- **Distance:** 1,400km
- **Pictures:** Sophie Gordon
The Rhine is one of the longest rivers in Europe, flowing 760 miles from Switzerland to the sea. **Sophie Gordon** followed the cycle route alongside the border, barely noticing as we hopped between Switzerland and Germany. The blackened remains of bridges destroyed during WWII reminded us that this was a luxury we shouldn’t take for granted.

My favourite moments were the early mornings: setting off in hazy blue, with the sun breaking through and dissolving the mist in the distance. The miles disappeared beneath our wheels on the smooth, traffic-free cycleways.

At the other end of the day there was the blissful coolness of jumping into the water whenever we could after a long day of riding. This was interrupted once by a thunderstorm brewing as we wild camped near Lake Constance, making us run back to the tents and hope the willow tree sheltering us wouldn’t be struck by lightning.

**SOPHIE GORDON**

After a few UK tours, this was Sophie’s first foray onto foreign shores.
After a few days in France we were back in Germany. I was struck by the prevalence of e-bikes. One gentleman, after examining our loaded bikes when we explained where we were going, looked at us incredulously and said: “But you have no motor!” It was fantastic to see how the combination of e-bikes and extensive traffic-free cycle networks keeps people cycling. I was particularly impressed by what we termed the ‘silver pelotons’ – small groups in their seventies and eighties, meandering around town together. Imagine what that does for the health of a nation!

**HISTORY AND INDUSTRY**

The Rhine countryside is mostly flat. The exception is in central Germany, where medieval castles perch on rounded hills like Drakensfel (‘dragon’s hill’). One hill is watched over by the colossal Niederwalddenkmal monument. The steep climb up to it was rewarded with a fantastic view back down the shimmering river.

After the Rhine Gorge, tourist ferries were replaced by freight barges chugging their way through an increasingly industrialised landscape. Heading towards the sprawling city of Mannheim, home to the biggest single-site chemical plant in the world, the view became steel and concrete as far as the eye could see, a maze of pipes and tubes and funnels belching out steam. It was like a scene from a sci-fi film.

The Rhine route is well travelled and we found we kept bumping into the same characters along the way. There was Bern, a quiet Swiss chap who glumly announced that all his stuff was rain-soaked the second time we saw him. There was the bloke on a trike who looked so leisurely but always seemed to reach the campsite before us. And the couple from Stockport on a semi-recumbent tandem, full of stories from seven years of touring on it.

There were also those little surprises that make a trip memorable. We caught a volleyball world championship game in Lichtenstein; discovered a hidden sculpture garden made from discarded objects; and explored the fascinating fortified town of Neuf-Brisach with its star-shaped outer wall.

After two weeks of cycling, 1,400km, and five countries, we emerged where the Rhine meets the North Sea at the Hook of Holland. I had imagined an industrial port so it was a surprise to find beach cafés and bars and hundreds of people on sun loungers on the beach.

Before we joined them, we decided to finish the ride properly by cycling out to the end of the mile-long pier, until we were surrounded by sea and could ride no further. The next day we rolled onto the ferry back to Harwich – a breeze compared to the hassle of flying.