

BLACK SEA TO THE NORTH SEA BY BIKE, 2015.

(Istanbul to Cuxhaven)

I (Rob Foster) had planned to do this long trip, but needed some company; fortunately fellow CTC Midweeker Steve Ratford agreed to join me. So in mid June Turkish Air flew us and our trusty touring bikes, plus a lot of loaded panniers, to Istanbul. After a day sightseeing in this fascinating city, we were off. The plan was to cycle from the Black Sea, back across Europe to the North Sea on the German coast, over 8 weeks or so.

To avoid city traffic we took a ferry up the Bosphorus to Sariyer, passing under the famous bridges. Then onto what we would call B roads north west across Turkey. All was fine until we met some road works, where the narrow shoulder had cones along it; foolishly I clipped a rear pannier against one and was thrown off the bike hard. Luckily nothing broken, but several good grazes and bruises! That night we stay at a small hotel in a small town for about £12 each. (We are carrying camping kit, but these eastern Europe hotels are such good value we use them a lot).

Navigation – we had a paper map of each country, not very detailed but ok most of the time. Steve has sat nav which is great for the detailed bits. And a compass!

Three days later, we enter Bulgaria, after some scenic hills and a monsoon which we avoided in a bus shelter. Before descending to the river Danube, we have to cross a big range of hills, but this goes pretty well as the road was quiet and well graded, though Steve was always ahead. Veliko Tarnovo was a nice overnight stop, in a guest house with a balcony overlooking the pretty river and old town, with good grub nearby.

On day 10 we reach the mighty Danube, but Steve is unwell with gut rot, but after a morning's rest bravely continues via the ferry into Romania. Shame he missed an excellent breakfast! An easy day to Alexandria, wet evening, nowhere to eat, but only one of us was hungry.

Romania is a country of contrasts, possibly the most interesting of the trip. It has an old rural feel to it, helpful locals (one shop keeper gave us bread etc. and refused payment), feral dogs, many horses and carts, and mad drivers. The main problem was the rough minor road surfaces which needed a mountain bike, not our tourers. So we were forced onto the bigger roads, which have heavy truck traffic, not pleasant. The plan was to go via Transylvania, which is circled by big mountains, to Brasov. My planned minor road was unusable, said the locals, so we switched to a 'B' road, via a lane that petered out into a muddy field! We pressed on, and had a ghastly time pushing uphill as the bike wheels clogged with mud – mudguards off, and into the next river to clean up us and the bikes. But Brasov was a fascinating rest day; we also went to Bran by bus to visit Dracula's Castle. On via Sighisoara, then at last we had some excellent cycling following a river into the hills in fine weather for two days, before descending the other side into Hungary.

Hungary is nice and flat, but a bit boring. There are cycle lanes (a policeman ticked us off for not using them), but most main roads ban cycles – this is a problem if you want to go a big distance, like us. So we muddled through to Budapest, where we rejoined the Danube.

Another rest day here, with an excellent guided walking tour of the fine city. The heat was terrific in Hungary, up to 37 C, thank God it was flat cycling.

We now follow the Danube for a few days, on the Cycle Trail, crossing into Slovakia. Another good walking tour of Bratislava, then into super-efficient Austria for one night before entering the Czech Republic. 4 countries in 4 days!

Czech has rolling hills, but good cycling in nice scenery – very empty, with ripe grain crops and woods. The Czechs all smoke like chimneys, but we enjoyed some good local food and beer at a brewery in Trebic. At Melnik we camp for 2 nights to fettle the bikes and do some washing, which dries fast in the heat. Now we have joined the river Elbe, which we will follow all the way to the sea. Up here it has made a gorge through the hills, the ‘Bohemia Gateway’, which is lovely.

Day 36 we enter Germany, though there is no border post. The Elbe bike trail is now better signposted, mainly smooth (except for stretches of blasted cobbles!) and traffic free, but we seem forever to be into a headwind – one day this was so strong it blew small branches off the trees. But mostly flat. You don’t actually see the river much, because of the big dykes, but get glimpses, and there are ferry crossings from bank to bank. We were camping in not cheap Germany, all busy in the holiday season, and your German camper likes to drink beer and make a lot of noise!

The best bits were in the south – ‘Swiss’ Saxony has terrific rock scenery, then you get restored Dresden, then we visited Meissen to see how the porcelain is made. Further north it got a bit all the same, though pleasant enough and easy cycling (if the headwind eased). Some rain showers but nothing too bad. By now we started thinking of the rail & ferry journeys back to the UK, so called into a *bahnhof* to buy tickets, and an internet place for Stena (free wifi is easy in east Europe, but rare in Germany). So steadily we progressed – Hamburg had interesting old docks but the infamous Reeperbahn was very tame at 1 pm! A final crossing of the now huge Elbe, and we were into Cuxhaven, the end of our epic journey, where you meet the North Sea.

After a celebratory dinner it was up at 6 to get our budget trains, all six of them, to the Hook of Holland (8th country), and a comfortable overnight ferry to Harwich, where Steve was met by some of his family. I took the train home.

Total distance was about 3,600 km over 47 days (3 rest days). Ascent say 18,500 metres.

The bikes did well – no punctures or broken spokes (thanks Geoff!) but mudguards suffered in the mud.

Rob Foster