

Stuart & Kaye's European Odyssey

Way back then Arthur, a long time friend who'd just found out that Kaye and I were members of the O55CC, suggested that in view of our supposed cycling abilities, we might like to accompany him and wife Roilyn on a cycling holiday in Europe. Ever ones for snap decisions, we instantly agreed. Imagine our surprise, when some months later, having forgotten all about it, we were told that the proposed departure date was 1/7/08 - some four weeks after our return from our trip to Canada and Alaska with several O55CC members.

Having done the requisite panic we decided - why not? As the fateful departure date approached, it became evident that gear had to be kept to a minimum. Believe you, me you can't fit the Amani suit in two bike panniers and a rear container. So it was down to the basics as you can imagine. Apart from clothes, you've also got to take tools, spare tubes, water bottle, - I'm sure you get the message.

In addition, there are bike maps of Germany and Italy, mobile phone, cameras, battery chargers, wet weather gear, to the point where there was not enough room left for a black ant. Bear in mind we were taking our own bikes from Perth and there is a weight limit on airline baggage.

Having sorted that lot out we obtained free bike boxes from a bike shop and duly packed our bikes within, having removed front and back wheels, unbolted the handlebars and taped them to the frames and then removed the pedals, seat and rear carrier.

The big day arrived and we flew out for Frankfurt via Singapore. Uneventful, except that our connecting aircraft failed to make Singapore on time and so Qantas put us up overnight at a hotel where we ate dinner at 11 pm and had to be back at the airport by 6 am (and out of bed at 3 am). As luck would have it, we were upgraded to business class free of charge for the leg to Frankfurt, so that eased the pain a fair bit. I could get used to that sort of luxury very easily!



Note the champagne glass (it's 6 am)

Some twelve or so hours later we finally arrived in Frankfurt and met up with Arthur and Roilyn, who'd flown with a different airline; as a result of which they'd waited for us at the airport for around eight hours.

Frantic rush to catch a bus to the train station (bike boxes on trolleys) where we found our train just about to leave. Throw the gear on board (and upset the conductor in the process). Managed to miss our connecting train in Koblenz by around two minutes, so we employed the two hour wait by assembling our bikes on the platform.

We reached our final destination of Luxembourg late that afternoon. After loading our bikes (once again) on a bus, arrived at our hotel (the only accommodation we had prebooked for the whole trip).

Next day saw the start of our cycling as we left the hotel and fought our way through heavy traffic to get to the cycle path alongside the Mosel River. Once we were on the path, we could finally relax and just enjoy the idyllic scenery of forests and river, neat little farms and the first of thousands of vineyards we were to cycle past. Our first overnight stop was in Remich, a little town on the water's edge where we found accommodation easily (about €60 with breakfast). German breakfasts don't show a lot of imagination, tending to be cold ham, cheese, bread rolls, yoghurt, muesli and fruit (if you're lucky). They can't make a decent tea or coffee to save themselves, but their beer is second to none!

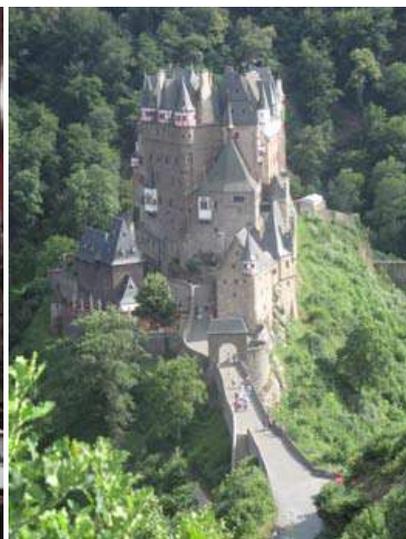
So this set the tone for a lot of the trip - a leisurely breakfast, aiming for departure at about 8.30 am (sometimes later), cycle about 50 to 70 km and start looking for accommodation at around 3 to 4 pm. Having found suitable digs, have a bit of a look around, a couple of pints of the best, dinner and bed. We saw lots of lovely Hansel and Gretel type villages, walled towns, castles, churches and cathedrals, many of which were hundreds of years old (and in some cases over a thousand).



Arthur with fully assembled bike- note the closed in shoes!



Built in 1492, this tavern in Berncastel-Kues is



Fitz Castle near Cochem

one room wide and three stories high

ELIZABETHAN COURTIER

Our route took us along the Mosel river back to Frankfurt and thence South following the Lech river and the Romantisch (romantic) road to Fussen near the Italian border. Some German highlights were the breathtaking cathedral at Cologne, a private wine tasting of the famous Mosel rieslings (to die for), the enormous statue of Kaiser Bill in Koblenz, a cable car trip up Zugspitz mountain, stunning mountain views, wonderful train rides, Eltz Castle, village fairs, oom pah pah brass bands, Neuschwanstein Castle (the one in the Disney films), magnificent churches. The list could go on for ever.

As a cycling destination, Germany is fantastic! As mentioned previously we had no accommodation pre-booked at all. This was a bit of a worry for me, since I'm the sort of person who likes to know there is a definite bed at the end of the day. As it turned out I needn't have been concerned as we never had any problems finding somewhere to stay and the standard of accommodation was excellent at a price of around €60 per night for B & B.



Pfunds Pension Schöne Aussicht

The German people we encountered were extremely friendly. If you dared stop by the roadside to look at a map invariably and in the space of one or two minutes there would be someone alongside asking "Can I help you?" Most of the time we were able to find our own way but on a couple of occasions the help was invaluable. On the other hand we must have looked like locals because we were asked for directions on several occasions.

If you get tired cycling (as we did a couple of times) there is always the wonderful German rail (Deutsche Bahn) system, which consists of express trains travelling at up to 300 kph (and which don't take bicycles) and slower regional trains that mostly do take bicycles and that stop at a lot of the smaller towns and villages. We, of course, used the latter, which was sometimes a bit of a trick because only one (end) carriage takes

bicycles on each train and we never knew on which end of the train it was going to be located. Given that the trains are very, very long indeed, we used to wait on the platform about where we reckoned the middle of the train would be and then had to spot the bicycle symbol on the carriage (or not as the case may be). It was then a mad race to whichever end took the bikes and a frantic effort to load our bikes on board; which is not easy when all panniers are loaded and everything has to be lifted quite high to get it into the carriage. Especially when you don't dare upset the train driver's timetable and therefore the "on time, all the time" performance which generally meant arrival or departure within one minute of the advertised time.

Cycling paths abound and there is seldom need to use the roads but when this couldn't be avoided there was never any danger from cars in our experience. Drivers always give way to bicycles and sometimes stop to let you through long before you'd reached the intersection. I reckon our lot could learn a thing or two in the art of courtesy, if only they could get to Germany and observe.

Most of our route was fairly flat where it followed the rivers and it was interesting that even on the bike paths you are never far from sustenance, with path-side eating and drinking houses (Inns?) about thirty minutes apart at cycling speed. Almost a necessity, given that a large percentage of the population cycles - from the lycra clad Tour de France types to entire families with Mums and Dads towing the babies, while the older kids are on their own machines.

Villages can be interesting, since the route invariably passes through the centre of town. Most towns have cobblestone roads which are in varying degrees of roughness and it is probably better to have the widest tyres you can fit to your rims in order to maintain stability.

Dogs of all sizes are almost a national pastime and they get carted everywhere (and I mean everywhere). Even into upper class restaurants, where they sit beside their owners through the meal. Something I never quite managed to get used to.

As an aside, the all time classic was the guy we saw at Split Airport who had his (little) dog in a bag with a hole in one end where the dog's head poked out. The bag was slung over the guy's shoulder and there he was lining up to get on our flight to Frankfurt! Naively I thought to myself "there's no way they are going to allow him on board complete with dog." How wrong can you be? On he went, no questions asked. I don't know if the dog got cabin service though!

I did say earlier that "most" of our route was flat but I don't want to leave you with the erroneous impression that the whole cycling bit was a walk in the park - it wasn't. The photo above should give you some idea that there is the occasional mountain in Germany and although we did reach the top of Zugspitz mountain by cable car, I can assure you the approach to the starting point was a long and arduous bike ride. I'm sure when I tell you we crossed the alps from Germany into Italy (on our bikes) you'll start to get the idea that all was not "beer and skittles". Even though the downward slope into Italy required little or no pedalling for about 200 km, we had had to pedal our little hearts out on the other (Northern) side to get to the pass.

Northern Italy is still very Germanic for some distance from the alps. One major change was the enormous number of apple orchards we cycled through. I reckon there must be enough apples to supply the whole of Europe, as we literally travelled hundreds of kilometres through millions of apple trees. Quite handy really, since some of the apples were delicious and all you had to do was stop and pick them.



I don't think much of the fishing opportunities. We were cycling along the Mincio River toward Mantova when we spotted lots of fishermen on the opposite bank with the longest rods I've ever seen.

No reels - just line tied to the end. Why they bothered I don't know, since the "fish" they were catching were about 100 mm long from what I could see. It must have been for the "sport", since caught fish were placed in



Cologne Cathedral



*A view from the peak of Zugspitz
(Germany's highest mountain)*





The scenery is once again spectacular as you can see.

canvas "tanks" to keep them alive and then it seemed were eventually thrown back. Strange people these Italians.



Around about this point we'd just about had enough of cycling, since we'd done 1 700 km and the bike paths had all but disappeared. This left us with no option but to ride on roads with the rest of the traffic. Believe me, it isn't very pleasurable dodging Italian drivers who (unlike the Germans) seem to think cyclists are fair game. So we hopped on a train that took us from Mantova to Firenze (Florence) which, as I'm sure you are aware, is a very old and beautiful city famed for its architecture, its museums and its art.



Duomo De Firenze

We were spotted by a landlord touting for business in the railway station. Casting our doubts aside, we followed him as he cycled off into the old part of town. When we arrived at his street, we were a little taken aback by the fact that it was all dug up for roadworks and by the ancient and fairly grubby appearance of the buildings. We needn't have worried, since the accommodation was all we could have asked for - immaculate, spotless and right in the centre of the old part of town where all the main tourist attractions can be found. We spent the next couple of days doing the tourist thing & thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Unfortunately we were now running to a schedule as we had to be in Ancona to catch the boat to Zadar in Croatia. We'd booked and pre-paid our tickets and were meeting my sister there on September 3. From Firenze we trained it to



Arch of Trajan

Tuoro and thence by bike to Perugia - another beautiful, old walled city built on top of a hill with commanding views of the surrounding countryside. We spent a couple of days here and then caught the train to Ancona on the East coast. Ancona is a very busy port which attracts tourists from afar and is a main arrival and departure point to and from other Adriatic destinations such as Croatia and Greece. There are some very old buildings there as you can see from the marble arch below, which was built in Roman times (the tourist holding it up is Kaye in case you hadn't guessed).

It certainly gives one an appreciation of history and makes one wonder why us West Aussies seem so ready to knock down anything older than fifty years (or so it seems). West Aussie does have some advantages though - a fact brought home during the trip from Perugia to Ancona where the train followed the coast for many kilometres. We were amazed to see the "beach" covered in thousands upon thousands of beach umbrellas set up in blocks of various colours. Obviously you would have to pay for the privilege of hiring the umbrellas (and the chairs that went with them). There was no surf and at this time few patrons. Gimme our deserted beaches any time.



Mosel river beach

Diverting slightly it reminded me of the "beach" we saw in Germany along the Mosel River. Sand had been imported at great expense, a fence erected to keep out the peasants, tables and chairs and lollabouts provided. Plus a bar and a volley ball court. No one there when we cycled by, which is not surprising given the temperature was a little cool and the river looked distinctly uninviting for swimming. Back in Ancona the time arrived when we had to say "goodbye" to Italy so we headed for the port which, although small was frantically busy with vehicle ferries of all descriptions, huge trucks, cars, motor homes - you name it.

Just finding our boat was an interesting exercise and pushing our bikes into the cavernous maw of the good ship Zadar was a task tinged with sadness realising our European cycling odyssey was over.



All good things must come to an end which from our point of view was also a beginning. Our next adventure was six weeks in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. We hired vehicles as cycling in these countries is the equivalent of a death wish. There are no cycle paths, the roads are mountainous and narrow, and the traffic difficult (at times). It was bad enough driving to avoid donkeys, horses and carts, farm tractors, pedestrians, huge trucks and the occasional 500 metre vertical drop from the road edge. Nevertheless Croatia was magnificent - but that's another (non-cycling) story.

The one final point of (cycling) interest is/was getting our bikes back home. To help in this endeavour Kaye had made two cloth/canvas bags each of which could take a disassembled bike as previously described. The bags had carry handles and a Velcro strip at the top and were very successful, with a minor on-the-spot amendment where we had to punch holes with a biro tip and tie the openings, the Velcro being inadequate.



So now here we are back home and the trip seems like a dream.

Would we do it again? You bet we would!!

Split Airport with bikes on trollies