



Zagreb Art Pavilion.
Below: Melk, Austria

Import duties again

If you're travelling into Europe and back to the UK with your bike, you shouldn't have to pay import duty in either direction – if the bike is clearly yours and doesn't look like it's being brought across the border for resale. When you're travelling with your bike on a plane, train, or ferry, you'll be waved through customs. Problems can occur if you're travelling separately from your bike. A group of Welsh charity cyclists was charged over £7,000 last summer to reclaim their bikes, which were taken to Spain in a van while the cyclists made their own way. Cycling UK has written to the UK Government for an explanation on why the charge was levied and how cyclists can avoid it without investing in an expensive carnet. See also cyclinguk.org/cycle-magazine/knowhow-travelling-abroad-cycle

Croatia's third city, was ruled by the Venetians for many years. You can still see the Italian influence on its old buildings and smart pedestrianised centre, which has café terraces on every corner. I spent a week there, as the temperatures rose, swimming from its pebble beaches. I asked my host if this heat was "normal". Not at all, he said in broken German. The climate was "kaputt".

From Rijeka, I followed the coast into Istria, on Eurovelo 8 for part of the way, although there wasn't much evidence of that on the ground. That day I started at 7am, but it was 32 degrees and sweltering by 10.30am.

I met my wife in Pula, a port full of Roman sites, in early July. There is nothing like a long period of travelling alone to remind you whom you love and why. My feelings were entirely uninfluenced by the credit cards, keyboard, water heater and sim card that she brought.

BURNING ISSUES

On our last evening, a Saturday, I was washing my bike and noticed a split in the rear wheel rim. All the bike shops were closed until the Monday, so I had to stay two more nights and pay twice for accommodation. Fortunately, I found a friend in Ron of Enduro Bikes, who fixed everything while I had a coffee on the Monday morning.

“Eurostar had delayed plans to restart its cycle service due to “security and customs issues” (Brexit again)”

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I had wanted to spend time on the islands but, when I looked again, all the accommodation had gone. So to avoid retracing my route, I took the island ferry all the way to Zadar, further down the coast. It was a magnificent journey, with the wind cooling the effects of the burning sun on the open deck. Zadar is another historic city with Roman remains, but in mid-July there are so many tourists it is difficult to walk, let alone cycle, through its pedestrianised centre.

Eurovelo 8 seems to have two alternatives from Zadar: one goes inland, the other mainly follows the coast road. When I looked online all the available accommodation was on the coast, so it would be very difficult to avoid that coastal road. I started at 6am but the traffic, including heavy lorries, was already busy by seven, and it was getting hotter.

A Greek friend told me it was 43°C in Athens. As I planned my route, I realised that conditions would be like this for some time. I had been considering shortening the ride for various reasons but this tipped the balance. I would end my journey on the Split-to-Ancona ferry and make another trip to Greece at a different time of year.

That was the end of my continental ride, but not the end of the story. When I started to plan my route home (without flying), I discovered that neither SNCF nor Trenitalia were offering cycle spaces between Milan and Paris. I found a way across the border via Ventimiglia and Nice, but the only option from there to Paris was the overnight sleeper in two days' time.

Eurostar's website said the company had delayed its plans to restart its cycle service due to “security and customs issues” (Brexit again), so back to Cherbourg and Poole it would have to be. There were two silver linings to all this. If I had stuck to my original plans and discovered these problems in Greece, I would have fallen foul of the 90-day Schengen limit and could have been detained at Cherbourg. Now, at least, I could ride the last stretch home.

Taking a fully laden bike on and off trains and ferries is always stressful but the night train was well-organised. There were four cycling spaces in our carriage, and they put the cyclists together in the cabin nearest to the bikes. I didn't get much sleep but at least we could swap stories about our travels. A Dutch couple told me that Flixbus carries a few bikes on some of its routes, which might be useful for the future.

I arrived home in early August. I had travelled for four months, including the English sections, cycled on just over half the days, covered 2,200 miles, and spent just over £10,000. For years I have dreamed: when I retire, I will cycle across Europe and write about it. Things didn't go to plan, they rarely do, but I am still basking in quiet satisfaction that I did it. ●