

CYCLING THE DANUBE: BUDAPEST TO THE BLACK SEA

The Danube rises on the edge of Germany's Black Forest and pours its billions of gallons of water and tons of alluvial silt into the north-west corner of the Black Sea just short of Odessa. As far as Budapest – about half its length – it is accompanied by a dedicated cycle path: you ride without competition from any other kind of traffic, through beautiful countryside full of wonderful historic places, prosperous, cherished and organized: Passau, Regensburg, Linz, Melk, the Wachau, Vienna.

From Budapest on it is a different story. Budapestiential and Belidegraded was my wife's jaundiced name for it on a bad day in heavy traffic. But this is the bit we chose to ride. Why, you might ask, when the upper Danube is so incontestably prettier and more civilized? Well, this is part of the answer. Prettier and more civilized means tamer, more crowded (traffic jams of cyclists), less of an adventure.

Fifty years of Russian-imposed Communism has held back the countries downstream of Vienna. They are more old-fashioned. People don't speak other languages. You can't read the signposts. In Hungary you can't read anything. It is harder to find places to stay. Try taking a bike on a train in Serbia or Romania! You have to be resourceful, keep your wits about you.

And because of all this it is much easier to imagine the Danube as the age-old frontier between civilization and barbarism. In Roman times the enemy was on the north bank, the wild hordes pushing into the Mediterranean world from the steppes of southern Ukraine. As Byzantium declined and the Muslim Turks pushed in from the south and east, reaching Vienna in 1530, the Danube became a bulwark against a southern threat.

I wanted to see for myself these places where for so many centuries civilizations had clashed and mingled. And mingle they did, Turks, Germans, Slavs, Jews, Greeks, Romanians living cheek by jowl pretty much until the First World War.

Budapest is beautiful, sitting spectacularly astride the Danube. Wooded hills and a castle crown the right bank; on the left all eyes are drawn to the gleaming Parliament building, modelled on London's, behind which stretch broad boulevards reminiscent of Haussmann's Paris. Much is already chic and fashion-conscious –and much is blackened, crumbling and seedy.

We got a taste of the seediness within fifteen minutes of arriving. As I went to greet the Romanian friend who had come to guide us to her house, I left the car door open and a shabby-looking fellow nicked a bag containing all our money, passports and camera. I gave chase and luckily he dropped the bag unopened. "That's Budapest," said our friend. "You must be careful. And when you get to Romania..."

We had decided to follow the guidebook's suggestion and take the train to get clear of the city. We made our way to what we thought was the suburban railway station, but it did not take bikes and we got mixed up in one of those grotty subways that seem to have found a new role as shopping malls in the post-Communist world. There was a ramp down into it and only stairs out of it: not easy to negotiate with

conventionally laden bikes, let alone my trailer. Unload, unhitch; hitch up, load up, all the while paranoid about leaving anything unattended.

We were told to go to the next bridge. We stopped various people hurrying to work, but no one really understood what we were asking. When we did find the run-down port-a-kabin that served as a ticket office they told us the track was under repair and the replacement buses could not take bikes. The staff were friendly and amused but communication went little further than smiles. I showed them the map and pointed to the place we wanted to go: Kiskunlachàza – but try saying that to a Hungarian in a form he recognises. I understood there was a station for regular trains not too far away, but how to get there?

“Ferenczvaros,” I would say, vainly accosting passers-by, at the same time rehearsing the pronunciation so that I would not forget it. That was the name of the station. Then suddenly we found it: a once-elegant 19th-century rural stop lost now among new car sale-rooms and derelict Communist-era cement. A station-master in a red cap was sitting at a paper-strewn table. It was difficult to feel confident: this tiny ill-kept building facing acres of weed-grown track, a handful of travellers waiting with the long-suffering heaviness of people who have learnt never to expect service. Officialdom in the ex-Communist states does not put on a friendly face. A stony, disapproving air is *de rigueur*, *nyet* the word you most expect to hear. But we got our tickets, learnt the time of the train and joined the waiters. It was hot, 35 degrees.

A long rusty procession of carriages pulled in. Was this it? “Kiskunlachàza,” I said to several people before hitting on the guard. “No,” he indicated, “next one.”

East European platforms are so low they leave you with a waist-high climb to reach the carriage floor, no good at all for the infirm, the laden and the cyclist. We got on: panniers, bikes, trailer. It’s a panicky business. Nobody queues, nobody wants bikes. You don’t know how long the train is going to wait. In the end we refined the technique and could now be plausibly employed to end an embassy siege. Of all the east European trains we boarded this one alone had a luggage van. It was occupied by six happy Hungarian schoolgirls going on a camping holiday. They spoke good English. We were reassured.

At Kiskunlachàza we scrambled out. The tiny station was hot and silent. We loaded up, tugged and tucked, mounted, crossed ourselves and started out. A truck roared past and in the slipstream my wife’s sunhat took off. Gentle warning, one. We recovered it and turned south on Highway 51, the main road to Croatia. It is narrow and busy with trucks and cars – buses are particularly bad news – and their drivers are not squeamish about squashed cyclist.

The Radweg and Bikeline cycling maps we carried plot various routes to avoid it. All are flat; the whole of Hungary is flat and the wide Danube valley with it. The prettiest routes may well be the guides’ “alternatives,” the riverside dyke paths, but we were afraid the surface would be too unstable for a loaded touring bike, so we stuck to the minor roads as far as possible.

We rode through straggling villages of brightly painted cottages, all with double layers of glazing against the winter cold. Immaculate gardens of vegetables and fruit trees surround each house; people are poor and need to feed themselves. The wide verges are planted with poplar and walnut. All around stretch

acres of maize, paprika and blackened sunflower awaiting harvest. You wonder how food-production can be problematic with such expanses of fertile land.

The river keeps itself hidden behind screens of willow and poplar. You see lots of bicycles and dedicated, if bumpy, cycle paths run through nearly all the villages. The further you get from Budapest, the friendlier people become, stopping their cars to ask if you are lost or warning that it is dangerous to continue on the main road. If you do have to ride a section of main road for some reason, we found that there was a marked lull in lorry traffic between 12.30 and 2pm.

“You should be proud of your wife,” one man said to me. “Mine won’t even bike to the next village.” And he directed us to the dyke path. “It’s gravel for a while, then asphalt all the way to Baja.” We could not find it. An old lady with shiny steel teeth came up and signed to us to follow. For perhaps a mile she led us on her bike through a village and out to the dyke, the picture of old-fashioned Christian goodness. It was a relief to be away from the traffic but I could scarcely keep my balance on the sandy track.

We were not sure at first how far we could ride in a day. We thought we could probably manage 80km without too much pain, which turned out to be the case. You need to know so you can calculate where to spend the night, as accommodation is not everywhere available. Camping gives you more freedom, but there are not many official sites. We met cyclists who were camping wild, without difficulty, but it does bring other problems, like weight, food and security.

We decided we would spend three nights in Hungary, the last at Mohacs close to the Croatian border. It was a long flat ride in the rain over marshy ground where egrets, herons and cranes trawled in the ponds. A primitive ferry carried us across the river, slewed sideways by the steady power of the current.

Like many other provincial towns we saw, Mohacs was surprisingly leafy but centre-less. It is a phenomenon I have noticed in other ex-Soviet countries, from the Ukraine to Uzbekistan. Pot-holed boulevards lined with wide avenues of trees screening jerry-built blocks of flats stretch for miles, with no sign of a shop – of course there were not any shops in Communist days – and no sort of a place which might encourage people to come together. A few dilapidated buildings from the 19th-century may show where once the centre lay. It is as if the authorities did not want to leave any reminders that there had ever been any other way of living.

We rode out of Mohacs in the morning, past the memorial to the great battle of 1526 that cemented the Muslim Turkish occupation of the Balkans for the next three centuries. As with walking, you can’t sight-see on a bike: it’s too far. With reluctance and a sense of guilt I kept pedalling. At the Croatian frontier post they waved us through; it was the cars and trucks they were interested in.

And at once, as always happens with the arbitrary lines on the ground that are frontiers, everything changed, not just language. The light, the landscape, the look of the villages, people’s attitudes – and the standard of living dropped visibly a notch or two.

The country was prettier, the fields smaller. Hills appeared and the vast acreages of sunflower gave way to vines. The road began to twist and turn. We dipped into a valley where ducks and geese puddled

around in the village ponds and canals. Then we faced our first real, bottom-gear climb, mitigated by a half-way pause to go scrumping in the plum orchards that overhung the road.

We rode through a succession of sun-drenched villages lining the edge of the terrace that limits the Danube's flood plain. People seemed of a happier and more open disposition than in Hungary and much readier to speak English. We stopped at a roadside stall to buy tomatoes and fruit for a picnic and the young man refused to take any payment.

The river, though never far away, is bordered here by extensive swamp and marsh. Signs warning of uncleared minefields deter even the calls of nature. That was shock enough, but coming into Osijek, our goal for the day, we were further taken aback by the sight of houses roofless and holed by shellfire, the vestiges of federal Yugoslavia's bloody disintegration.

We did not enjoy Osijek. We could not find anywhere to stay and ended up in a pokey overpriced hotel in a characterless "modern" district, where the receptionist told us about the horrors of the war, how as a little girl she had watched a Serbian tank run over a civilian car and its driver. This was the forgotten part of Croatia, she said; there were lots of educated young people and no jobs: wages a quarter of earnings in Europe or on the Adriatic coast.

Vukovar, a short but dull flat ride away, displayed equally distressing scars of war, but seemed a livelier, more optimistic place. There was an international film festival going on. Crowds of slim, fashionable girls milled in the town centre. Were they hoping to be spotted?

The town is on the Danube, its wide sky and sunlit breadth lending a festive air, with boats skimming across and river barges moored as bars, a café terrace with parasols and a riverside park where we met a young French couple cycling to China for their honeymoon. We stayed in a typical Communist monolith of a hotel overlooking the river. There were hardly any guests and the fabric was decaying: tiles falling off the façade, the telephones all down. It had been sold, they told us. One wondered who to.

It is hard to gauge the mood and temper of a foreign place when you have no language and are just passing through. I noticed that the police seemed very much at home on the hotel terrace. That is not something I have ever seen in western Europe. You used to see it in Greece: uniformed police sitting at café tables, often in the company of the owner – they never paid for their drinks. It is a telling sign of where the power lies.

At Ilok we crossed to the north bank of the Danube into Serbia rather than stick to the recommended right bank. We wanted to get to Novi Sad by evening. Things started well. Backa Palanka, the first town, was alive with colour and bustle: it was market day and we stocked up with the tastiest grapes and nectarines. I felt more at home; I could use the little Russian I know. Then, riding out of town, we began to hit the traffic: worse than anything we had seen.

The road was narrow. There was no hard shoulder. A large truck filled one half completely. If another was coming the other way, there was no spare room, not for a ladybird, let alone a cyclist. We stopped at a gas station for a cold drink and the pump attendant told us we were risking our lives; in 6km, he said, we should turn off on to a riverside path. We did so, with relief.

We were soon in the outskirts of Novi Sad, Serbia's second city, in that twilight zone that surrounds big cities, where people dump rubble, put up corrugated-iron hovels and build villas without planning permission. Gradually the haphazardness gave way to order: docks, apartment buildings, a riverside park with beaches where people sunned themselves and swam. Close to the bridge that has replaced the one that NATO bombed we stopped to look at a huge town plan. A middle-aged roller-blader stopped to ask if we needed help. His wife was a travel agent. Within minutes he had booked us a hotel room in the old city centre and told us how to get there.

A sleek brown-eyed biology student received us. She was a Serb from Osijek. They had stayed on after the war until 1998, she said, but the Croats were full of anger and made life difficult for Serbs. Her brother had stayed to be with his Croatian girlfriend; they had married, had two children and then he died of cancer aged 35. In the morning we were directed to a nearby café for breakfast, where we were served by yet another student, who came into town every morning from his village by the 5am bus. Well-mannered, energetic youngsters who had faced far greater difficulties than us, getting on with their lives enthusiastically and without self-pity: you could not but warm to and admire them.

After our Novi Sad experience we were worried about riding into Belgrade, for the guidebook again warned of heavy traffic. It was just an hour by train. We got tickets for ourselves but there was no provision for bikes. We had no idea what the public announcements were saying. The number of passengers waiting on our platform grew significantly as the time for departure approached. It was Sunday afternoon. I had not thought of that; it must be one of the busiest times with people returning to work in the capital. That was going to make getting the bikes on board doubly difficult.

As we waited everyone suddenly started to go down into the subway. A faded blue train with two carriages pulled in on another line. A guard indicated that it was ours and we needed to change platforms. Bikes, panniers, handlebar bags, trailer – we made it, but it was clear that there were not enough places for everyone, especially as one of the carriages had been taken over by armed police escorting a cohort of shaven-skulled youths. I assumed they must be prisoners changing jails or something. I tried to force my way on but it was hopeless. There were at least thirty other disappointed passengers milling about. I was just about to go to the ticket office when someone explained that they were going to add an extra coach.

The old orange locomotive uncoupled and waddled off into the grassy distance. This is going to require some careful calculation, I thought. There were easily enough people still on the platform to fill an extra carriage. I reckoned there would be a panicky rush as soon as it appeared. So we took up a position on the edge of the platform that I estimated would coincide with the end door.

As the carriage came to a halt I saw that I had guessed right. Camilla stood back by the bags while I used my bike as a barrier to defend my position. Camilla does not like it when I behave like this, but I say, when in Rome... If you do not defend your interests ruthlessly, you will find them swept aside. I hoisted my bike on my shoulder and grumbling loudly in Greek – the most appropriate language in such circumstances – used it as a weapon to ensure that I got on the train first. I biffed a couple of people but they were not offended: they understood perfectly what I was doing: exactly what they were trying to do, except that on this occasion I got there first.

We were going to have to stand with the bikes in the space by the doors. There was just enough room to accommodate us and two or three other passengers. The seats were quickly taken. How different the crowd is here. Old women, squat and worn, humble, grumbling; panicky gypsies rushing the doors long before the stops; a willowy girl in what looked like a swimming costume cut high under hipster jeans revealing the silky skin of her loins...

And then the outskirts of Belgrade: a chaos of shacks, grubby reed-beds, unfinished buildings. As we came into the main station, a squad of paramilitary police were waiting to escort our prisoners, who, as soon as they were assembled on the platform, burst into full-throated song. They were football supporters!

We stayed in Belgrade a couple of nights, partly to see the sights and partly to find a way of getting clear of the traffic again. In spite of Communism and subsequent vicissitudes the city centre still exudes a 19th-century metropolitan grandeur, in particular the streets round the vast Kalemegdan fortress that commands the confluence of the Danube and the Sava, where the Romans and, in later centuries, the Turks, built their military settlements.

I got the impression that Anglo-Saxons are not particularly well-regarded because of NATO's bombing raids against the Milosevic regime. On the bus an elderly lady was pointing out the sights to a young Japanese: "And there is the American Embassy," she said, "with all its windows blocked out on the street. And that burnt-out building opposite was destroyed by NATO." It was a vast concrete pile, collapsed like a house of cards by a Cruise missile and left, one could not help feeling, as a deliberate rebuke.

Leaving the city was not so easy. It should have been, with the station just up the road from our hostel, but major transport reorganisation had disrupted both roads and railway. I was sent to find a station called Topcider. It turned out, rather like Ferencvaros, to be a half-forgotten rustic stop in an unkempt park that once had served as a royal hunting lodge. In pidgin Russian I established that there would be a train for Malo Krsna at 7.23 in the morning, starting from there, which seemed improbable, but I did not have the language to carry the discussion further.

And so it turned out. After a long cold wait in the rain – the temperature had dropped several degrees in the night and in my anxiety I had got us out of bed much too early – our old rust-bucket of a train hobbled along almost brushing the overhanging trees through undulating, English-looking countryside, past isolated cottages and country halts at each of which we were received with due uniformed ceremony. At Malo Krsna the guard and a friendly passenger came to make sure we did not miss our stop.

We drank a hasty fruit tea and set off past ragged fields of maize and burnt stubble and a gross post-Communist travesty of a Palladian palace that reeked of mafia money. The going was bumpy, the concrete surface broken and slow. In Pozarevac we stopped for a snack. No one spoke English but everyone wanted to help. On the outskirts of a grim little industrial town, the tarmac suddenly gave out and we stopped, bewildered. A bulldozer pulled up and the driver climbed out. "Follow me" was the gist

of his advice and he kept an eye on us for the next hour, even waiting for us at a tricky junction to make sure we did not go wrong.

We were aiming for Ram where an Ottoman fortress stands guard on the Danube and a modern ferry crosses to Stara Palanka and the Romanian frontier. A Serbian professor from the Japanese University of Kyoto told us that the best route out of Belgrade was to take the north bank as far as here. And here you have to make a decision, whether to stay on the north bank and enter Romania or, like us, stick to the Serbian bank through the narrows of the Derdap gorge where the Danube cuts its way for a hundred kilometers through the southern reaches of the Carpathian mountains. We chose the Serbian side because it was for so long the extreme northern frontier of the Roman empire.

The river is so wide here, it looks more like a lake. There is a massive back-up of water because of the Communist-era dam downstream at Sip which has basically wrecked the ferocious majesty of the Iron Gates, where the voluminous rush of this huge river once squeezed, at almost unnavigable speed, through a gap scarcely 150m wide.

We spent two days in the gorge, with a couple of ten-kilometre climbs to 200-300m altitude and a series of more than twenty unlit tunnels, some of them, not all, straight and short enough never to lose sight of the day: not pleasant and you should make sure you are carrying lights of some kind. Luckily there was not much traffic. Scenically it was the most spectacular part of our journey, with wonderful views of the river. Sadly, the Roman military road has been completely drowned by the raised water level and the Latin inscription that commemorated it, although raised above the water, can only be seen from the river.

At Sip we crossed the dam and entered Romania. There was a proper old-fashioned frontier, with a long queue of motorists being given an old-fashioned Iron Curtain hard time. We were waved straight through, into heavy traffic and roadworks. At one point a bus, luckily travelling slowly because of the traffic, pushed me off the still sticky surface of new tarmac and down a 30cm drop on to the remains of the old hard shoulder, wrenching the trailer off my rear hubs and nearly unseating me: not the last unpleasant traffic experience in Romania.

Past acres of derelict factories we rode into Drobeta-Turnu-Severin and stopped at the Hotel Continental, a classic Communist pile, with vast mirrored foyer and poky rooms out of sight upstairs, the kind of place I would not think of going to in western Europe, but here... Well, for one thing, there is nothing else and the cost is less than €30. Surprisingly, for what on the face of it is a bourgeois and pretentious establishment, no one baulks at the appearance of sweaty cyclists wanting to bring their machines and cumbersome luggage into their marble halls.

We went down to breakfast at half past six, ready for an early start. To our surprise the dining room was already full, with more than a hundred Romanian OAPs tucking in to gargantuan breakfasts. They surged round the self-service tables piling their plates with omelettes, boiled eggs, sausages, ham, cheese, pancakes, salamis, cakes, far more than they could possibly eat, which back at their tables they shovelled into barely concealed doggy bags. Within minutes there was not an olive to be seen. A cheery waitress, with some English learnt on cruise ships, took us in hand and found us a place close to the kitchen doors. "They always do this," she said. "You sit there and I'll bring you what you want."

Within minutes of the OAPs' departure a party of eighty young athletes arrived. The tables were replenished and emptied again. Sitting next to us, slightly embarrassed by this display of rapacity, were a group of German Romanians. That is to say, they were descendants of Swabian Germans who had been encouraged to settle in Transylvania in the early middle ages and whom Ceaucescu, short of foreign currency in the 1980s, had had the wizard wheeze of selling back to West Germany for 11,000 deutschmarks per head!

It is worth lingering sometimes in these unprepossessing-looking places. If you never stop, if you are always riding on, there are things that you miss. We changed our plans and stayed an extra night. Not that there were any spectacular sights, although I did want to see the forlorn remains of Trajan's great bridge, the first ever built on the Danube, in 105AD. You will find that, among the dreary workers' flats built of adulterated concrete and cheap materials and the vulgar glittery cafeterias that are supposed to herald the modern age, there are still streets of gracious nineteenth-century villas, brightly painted and decorated with elaborate plaster curlicues and filigree tin work. There is a baroque municipal theatre adorned with winged lions and griffons. Here and there Art Deco houses survive from between the wars. There is a pretty leafy park overlooking what was once one of the busiest ports on one of the busiest commercial rivers in Europe. If you go on to Braila at the beginning of the Danube delta, you can see, in the gorgeous if battered surviving palaces the wealth accumulated by the largely Greek merchants transshipping the agricultural produce of the Danube plains on to ocean-going vessels bound for Sebastopol, Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria.

There is a new *Carrefour*: the mouth-watering smells of France assailed us as we entered, but the prices are way beyond the pockets of the natives. They shop with the peasants selling their own produce in the covered market and boxy little cubicles round about. There is a museum, pathetically dilapidated, but full of fascinating material, Danube flora and fauna and folk art and of course important Roman stuff, including a splendid model of Trajan's bridge and, outside in the grounds, the remains of Drobeta, the Roman bridgehead fort, with a couple of battered piers from the once magnificent bridge.

Downstream from Drobeta the river swings in a great arc south and the guidebook warned of a long gap without accommodation. We took to the trains again: another adventure. The station itself was surprise enough, a super-modern structure with electronic information boards and touch screens worthy of the French railways. With the aid of a genial clerk we learnt that we could get to a place called Turnu Mugarele a couple of hundred kilometres downstream, with one change at Rosiori Nord. Only problem: no tickets for bikes. "But you can take bikes on the train?" "Yes. You make an arrangement with the *conductor*." "You mean, pay him?" The clerk laughed. "Romania," he said, "This is Romania."

This business of bribery again: I do not like it. Back at the hotel I asked the receptionist what she would do. "I earn €140 a month," she said. "A railway guard may make €150. So, a €10 bribe is a substantial addition to his wages. Remember that," she said.

The hotel was gearing up for a wedding party: an all-night do with 120 guests and a live band. When we went down for breakfast at 6.30am, we passed the bride, dishevelled and exhausted, the last to leave the party, as, we were told, custom requires. This morning our fellow-breakfasters were a coachload of

middle-aged German cyclists... If nothing else works in Romania, the hotel caterers certainly know how to put on a show.

We got on the train without hassle and hustled across pretty, hilly country, past derelict collective farms and decaying factories, tiny peasant smallholdings, lots of horses, lots of fallow land; there was neither the manpower nor the machinery to cultivate it. And then the guards appeared: a big bully and the weedy ineffectual one. "Are those your bicycles?" "Yes," I said, "but they told us at the station they did not have tickets for bicycles."

Mobile phones were produced and the guards went out into the corridor. Was it a charade? A pretty young girl with a Jean Seberg haircut smiled sympathetically at us. I asked her in English what the guards had been saying on the phone. "Oh, they were asking about your bicycles."

We heard no more for a couple of hours. I thought perhaps we had got away with it, but approaching our station they reappeared. "You have to pay 70 lei." The moment had come for my prepared speech. "That seems to me *prea mult*, very much, considering we only paid 80 lei for two people." The bullying one made a face that said, Too bad. "Okay," I said as loudly as possible, invoking all bystanders as witnesses, "if that is the price, of course we'll pay, but please give me a ticket and a *chitansa*, a receipt?" There was a moment's silence and the ineffectual one said, in a lowered voice, "30 lei, without *chitansa*." I handed over the money and they left at once. No one said anything, but there were some amused looks on the faces of other passengers,.

The towns we passed looked awful: shanties, shacks, packs of stray dogs, derelict factories, third world filth. At Rosiori Nord we changed to a *personal*, a couple of rickety carriages that stopped everywhere. In a scruffy field on the outskirts of town we passed a fair and the carriage filled with dark, lean, raffish gypsies a little the worse for wear. They dropped off at lonesome stops in the wide featureless landscape of blackened sunflowers and burnt stubble.

Turnu Magurele: another leafy, slow, rather other-worldly, centreless town with another Communist-era hotel. The German cyclists again, another wedding party and a solitary heavily laden Englishman, on his way to Saudi Arabia, whom we took out to dinner, and I dined again on *tochitura*, my favourite Romanian dish, of pork and polenta crowned with a fried egg.

The Danube, never more than a mile away, manages to remain largely out of sight; all you see is the dark line of the poplar screen in the broad flat valley bottom and beyond the darker hills of Bulgaria rising against the horizon. On the Romanian bank the road and villages stick to the shallow scarp that serves as a natural levée to the flood plain. The going is mainly flat but punctuated, when you are least expecting it, with some sharp little climbs. Flocks of sheep and geese grazed in the roadside pastures. It was harvest time and the roads were busy with horse-drawn, rubber-tyred, V-bottomed carts piled with golden corn cobs or stacked with hay, the drivers sprawling on the top with cheery abandon. There were not many youngsters among them.

The villages string out along the road, for miles sometimes, almost running into each other. Children called out and waited in the road to touch hands as we rode by. The houses are all bungalows, brightly painted, with porches and fancy plasterwork, each in its carefully tended garden of vegetables and fruit

trees. The mirabelles were ripe and no one seemed to mind if we stopped and helped ourselves from the trees overhanging the verges. Shops were few and far between. We stopped for the occasional drink and were not allowed to pay. “*Vreau sa v’ajut*. I want to help you.”

Approaching Ziminicea we passed the infamous Belene island, used by the Bulgarian Communist regime as a concentration camp for getting rid of jazz musicians, philosophers, shopkeepers, hard-working peasant farmers and other such enemies of the people. In the town itself we passed a funeral, the open coffin towed on a flatbed trailer by a tractor and followed by a procession of mourners on foot, the men all wearing a piece of cloth pinned to the shoulder of their jackets – a custom for which I cannot find a satisfactory explanation. It was barely lunchtime, so we picknicked under a tree, waved at by the passing carts, and decided to keep going to Giurgiu, making our longest day yet, at almost 120km.

It is a part of the world that is completely off the map of our Anglo-centric education and culture. The big riverside towns, especially the ones on the Bulgarian side, Vidin, Ruse, Silistra, were for centuries busy cosmopolitan centres of commerce and culture with mixed populations of Jews, Germans, Genoese, Greeks and Turks in addition to the various Slavs. The Russians too meddled in their affairs, seeing them as the key to capturing Constantinople, which they had long wanted to do on the pretext of protecting the millions of Orthodox Christians suffering under the yoke of the Muslim Ottoman empire. In fact, the Crimean War really began here when the Russians laid siege to Turkish-held Silistra in 1854 and the Sultan reminded his men of the duty of *jihad* against the unbelievers.

Russia in the Balkans? Muslim *jihad* in Europe? Is there anything new under the sun?

At Calarasi we took the ferry across to Silistra. The border skirts the edge of the town and the ferry lands you just on the Romanian side. And here began the toughest two days of the trip.

It was cold and overcast and we had clearly landed in an out-of-the-way and neglected corner of Romania. The view over the Danube and its many islands was beautiful as for the first time in days we began to climb to higher ground, but the road surface was hellish, with long stretches of cobbles that shook bike and body to the core and made steering extremely precarious. We reached a median altitude of around 100m, but it was frequently interrupted by testing climbs and further stretches of cobbles. Passing the monastery of Dervent cheeky little boys lay in wait for my wife and tried to pinch her as she laboured uphill in bottom gear. And just as we were beginning to enjoy the consolation of a long, long descent, the tarmac gave way to cobbles again slowing us right down to 5kph. The Danube bore away to the north towards its delta – you can go that way – while we turned east towards Constanta and the Black Sea.

The wind got up, not just the head wind that bugs cyclists in all weathers and latitudes, but a real one: one that stopped us in our tracks when we stopped pedalling. I tried to persuade myself that it was a local wind, an afternoon wind just caused by local conditions. We laboured on through villages, more infrequent and poorer than any we had seen to date. Ragged children called from the roadside, “*Nu vreti nuci?* Don’t you want walnuts?”

Our last night on the road we spent very enjoyably with two young German cyclists in a B&B on the outskirts of a nowhere village called Ion Corvin. In the morning we left early. I saluted Trajan’s

triumphal monument from the distance as we struggled up into the village of Adamclisi. Nothing would have induced me to ride the extra mile or two to take a closer look. The wind blew across our bow, cold and steady and sometimes laced with rain, all day, forcing us down to 11, 12kph at times. If we stopped, we got cold.

Approaching the main road from Bucharest to Constanta, we pulled into a lean-to truck stop, just the kind of place guaranteed to give you the runs, and ate two helpings of the most delicious grilled meatballs I think I have ever tasted. We crossed the Danube-Black Sea Canal, passed our first mosque and hit the four-lane highroad: a 20km battle with a ferocious cross-wind and crazy traffic. Some of the time there was enough hard shoulder to get off the road and some of the time you had to watch out for huge coverless manholes lurking close to the kerb.

Our German friends caught us up and we rode into Constanta together, through the city centre and straight to the cliffs above the magnificent curve of beach where the white waves of the Black Sea rolled in under the lash of our head wind. Journey's end.

Is there a sense of achievement? I guess so – and some sense of relief too, that we don't have to face either the traffic or the wind again. And a little niggling regret that we are not going to keep on to the end: to the delta and the very mouth of the great river, but that would mean another 150km on bad roads and you can't get beyond Tulcea on a bike anyway: you have to take a boat, to Sulina, the last straggly, run-down little village, where there is a cemetery full of Scottish midshipmen and Greeks and other foreign sailors, testimony to the once rich pickings of trade on the Danube. And on the way to Tulcea you pass the extensive remains of the port city of Istria, the first Greek Black Sea colony, established around 600BC, now forlorn and reed-girt and silted up.

I like Constanta. Its physical charms have been largely wrecked by Communism – the fate of nearly all the once great cities of the Black Sea, except for Sebastopol – and it has lost its Greeks, who for two and a half millennia provided both the commercial zing and the civilizing influence in these places. But it feels young and lively; there is a definite sense of renewal. Its ties with Turkey are strengthening again, as in Ottoman, Byzantine and more ancient times. The Black Sea, after all, is only a pond.

Practical information (valid Aug/Sept 2010):

Money

ATMs available everywhere.

Shopping

Outside main towns, food shops offer limited choice.

Accommodation

These are the places we stayed in. Prices range from €9 to €80 for two. We were not particularly careful, usually just grateful to tumble into the nearest decent-looking establishment. In the smaller places there is little choice. On the whole you do not feel you are getting good value for money. It is probably worth trying harder to find rooms in people's houses.

All the following provided secure shelter for the bikes.

Dunföldvár: Hidfo Pension, right by the bridge, c.€25. Looks discouraging, but actually fine.

Kalosca: Club Hotel, on main street, €40. Very nice.

Mohács: Pension immediately left of ferry landing, opposite modern hotel, c.€28.

Osijek: Millennium Hotel, €80, in unattractive part of town and not worth it.

Vukovar: Hotel Dunav, c.€58; on the river bank, near good riverside café-restaurant.

Novi Sad: Mediterraneo Hotel, €60, between Danube bridge and National Theatre; very nice.

Belgrade: Friends Hostel, €50, near the station, but noisy, unattractive building; expensive for what is essentially a youth hostel.

Veliko Gradiste: best to stay in one of the small hotels at Silver Lake, a riverside holiday complex about 2km from the village, with a good restaurant (don't remember the name!).

Golubac: Hotel Grad, €30; riverside, great view, dodgy restaurant.

Donji Milanovac: private room, €9; very nice – info from very helpful tourist office in town centre. *Zlatni Ribitsa* is a good restaurant.

Drobeta-Turnu-Severin: Hotel Continental, c.€40; clean Communist pile overlooking the park.

Turnu Magurele: Hotel Turris, €45; ditto, in city centre.

Giurgiu: Prietenia (Friendship) Motel, near railway tracks, €27, with breakfast; bearable. Hotel South nearby is new, but snooty about accepting bikes indoors.

Oltenitsa: Golden Restaurant, €23 for a nice room and, I think, breakfast. The restaurant was good, too. You can see it from the dual carriageway that forms the main street.

Calarasi: Hotel Calarasi, €37; classic Communist pile, close to the riverside park and the Town Hall. You have to keep going quite a long way along the road into town.

Ion Corvin: Pension Vivi, at the gas station at the entrance to the village. Clean and friendly place. I don't remember the price: not expensive.

NB – Other cyclists have assured me that there is now accommodation between Dobreta and Calafat and Turnu Mugarele, the bit we skipped on the train.

Bike spares and tools

We were given the name of a specialist bike shop in Bucharest: *Veloteca*, Sos.Iancului 100, sector 2; www.veloteca.ro and there must be something in Budapest and Belgrade. In emergency you can probably find a handy mechanic in most places; these are countries used to making do. The road surfaces can be rough, but we had no punctures (I got three in a week on returning to London!).

So, basic tool kit, with some spare inner tubes and brake blocks. No need for tyres if yours are in good condition. Duct tape and Velcro, always useful. Rear light and, I would say, a head torch for the tunnels. And locks. We had no trouble, but best to take no chances.

Traffic

Most of the way there is little traffic. However, where there is, you need to be very careful (yellow waistcoats, minimum requirement; we had pennants behind). Entering and leaving Novi Sad and Constanta is alarming; Calarasi was too, although it is not very big. We chickened out with Budapest and Belgrade, but, if the guidebook's recommendation is anything to go by, they will be difficult too. Narrow roads, poor surface, lots of traffic and little regard for cyclists! But don't let that put you off the trip.

Guidebooks

We had Bikeline's *Danube Bike Trail 4* and Verlag's *Donau Radweg* maps, Budapest to Constanta, the latter with text only in German, which I can't read and is probably rather useful. The Bike Trail guide is not always clear. The route is signposted, although not always where you need it. We did not get seriously lost.