

Riverside RIDE

Thousands of cyclists travel along the Danube Cycle Path every year. **Colin Nicholson** decided to explore its charms a little differently... by boat as well as bike

At first I thought they were on the wrong boat. The silver-haired Swiss ladies at the welcome cocktails had listened, along with the rest of us, to how we would cycle 270km – nearly the length of the Austrian Danube – from Passau, on the German border, to Vienna. But there they were, chortling and quaffing wine over dinner as if they were on one of the gin palaces moored alongside our more modest vessel, the MS Diana.

The next morning, I was among the last to pick up my hire bike, so was no closer to solving the mystery. It had been a bit of a last-minute decision to come. My partner was at a conference and he doesn't quite share my passion for cycling anyway, and I needed the R&R to escape the stresses of work. But now I wondered what would happen if I had a puncture and found myself alone? I certainly needn't have

worried about missing the boat, as the Diana generally moored at night. And there's nothing quite like getting on a bike to let the cares of the world blow away in the breeze behind you. Speeding past cliffs and meadows, I felt I was being carried along by the Danube itself.

The cycle path I found myself on switched banks quite often and the ferries, some ingeniously powered by the tide, gave me a chance to stop and chat with my fellow cyclists. Generally, the 80 passengers on board the MS Diana cycled as couples or in small, convivial groups, ringing their bells and waving as we passed each other. But where could the silver-helmeted ladies have gone? It was a few hours until I spotted them, motoring ahead of me. Quite literally, as I realised when I spotted the batteries under their cycle racks.

These "e-bikes", they explained, let them cycle up to 90km a day using just half the effort, and could be recharged on the boat. The rest of us also recharged our batteries as we let the Diana carry us into the historic city of Linz, avoiding one of the few stretches where the cycle path is next to a main road. Perhaps I was more tired than

I realised, as I only briefly looked round the magnificently illuminated architecture before collapsing gratefully into bed.

Though simple, all the cabins on the boat had en-suite bathrooms with showers and plenty of hot water. One of the beds folded away by day, allowing the space-hungry cyclist to spread out without constantly repacking panniers. And we were free to cycle where we pleased, or just follow the towpath – except where it had disappeared!

During the summer of 2013, three months' rain fell in three days, so the water level was over the chimneys of many houses. Happily, after the great flood of August 2002, many towns had invested in flood barriers – concrete walls stored out of town and slotted into place in an emergency. However, parts of the cycle path had been washed away, so we sometimes found ourselves doing detours through cornfields and villages.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

But with the warmth of the early September sun on my legs and crickets chirping in the meadows, scenic detours were no hardship and I felt I could have easily done another 60km before stopping for dinner. This was a high point of every day. Each morning, over a wonderful cooked breakfast, I would have to choose between two mains for our three- or four-course dinner and would spend



the rest of the day drooling over the prospect of pork medallions in cream sauce, red perch or lamb cutlets.

If at any point I had wanted to take a day off cycling, there was also the option to have lunch on board, but nearly everyone cycled each day, taking a packed lunch. I was not feeling saddle sore, either, even after the narrow cobbled streets of Ybbs. It was there that I really appreciated just how uncomfortable I could have been, when I tried out a penny-farthing at the town's cycle museum.

CHURCHES, CASTLES, INNS AND HILLS

About 38,000 cyclists a year tackle the Danube Cycle Path, coming from all over the world. 'Are you British?' asked one I met, before pointing

out that I had reverted to cycling on the left on a quiet stretch. He came from Mali and was cycling beyond Vienna to two more capitals – Bratislava and Budapest. We cycled together for the rest of the afternoon, only parting company after the day's big attraction – the monastery of Melk, with its imposing baroque architecture overlooking the bend in the river where the Diana was moored. Melk stands at the entrance to the Wachau

valley, whose warm microclimate makes it Austria's fruit- and wine-growing capital. All along the route the next day were roadside stalls with tempting punnets of fruit and bottles of schnapps alongside honesty boxes.

For an extra challenge, I left the smooth, flat asphalt cycle route to go up into the hills. And what a challenge it was! I worked through all 21 gears before finally getting off to push through the shimmering heat of the vineyards. But I was rewarded with a cold plunge through woods as I headed back downhill towards Durnstein and the castle where Richard the Lionheart was held hostage after his crusade. I couldn't resist stopping at a heurige – a tavern – along the way, either. Here the wines were so nice that I stuffed my panniers with bottles to take home.



VIENNESE WHIRL

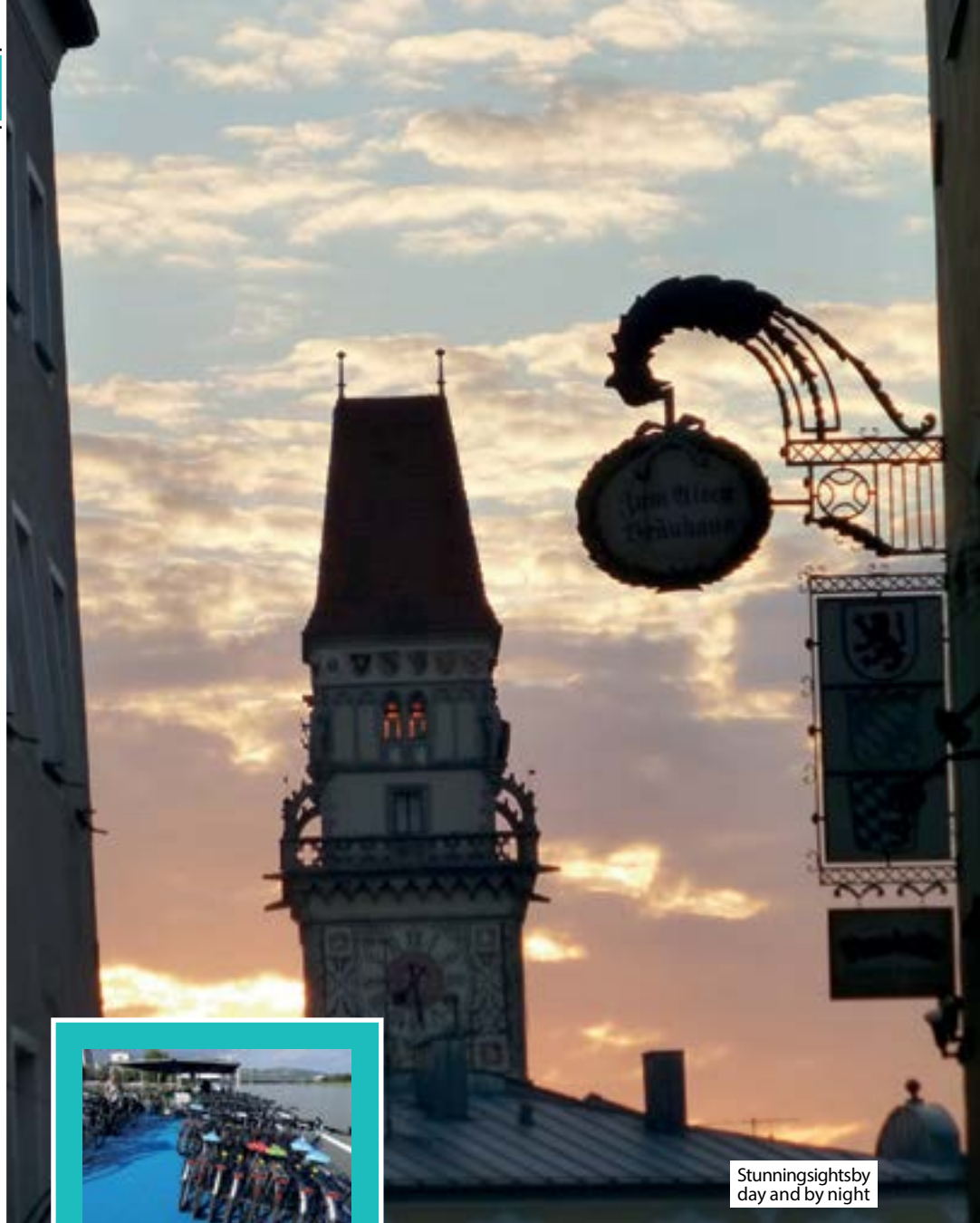
It felt like just a short couple of days before we were approaching Vienna, where the last foothills of the Alps meet the start of the Carpathian mountains. A coach tour was laid on for us here, and our wonderfully laconic guide gave us a real insight into the imperial city. But soon I was itching for my bike again and in the afternoon toured Vienna's outlying

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villages, nestled in vineyards that stretch into the Wienerwald – the Vienna woods.

Vienna is where my floating home for the past week, the Diana, turned around and sailed direct to Passau. But that doesn't have to mean an end to the cycling. The boat stopped for long enough to allow a final 45km ride on the way back, taking in another beautiful monastery, St Florian, with its amazing library and frescos so bright they haven't needed repainting since the 18th century.

And then it was back to the bustling cycle city of Passau. Rarely have I felt such a sense of accomplishment – with so little pain. We had ridden through a landscape of mountains and valleys, but never so arduously as to miss out on the good things in life. And on leaving I could console myself that no matter how old I grow I can come back and do the tour... on an e-bike. 🚲



Stunning sights by day and by night



INFORMATION

Colin travelled courtesy of Donau Tourism (+43 732 2080 63, lines open Mon-Fri 8am to 11am and 12.30pm to 2.30pm; www.donautouristik.com). The company offers full board for week-long tours from 24 May to 23 August 2014 for 699 Euros (lower deck) or 779 Euros (upper deck), based on two sharing, including bike hire (88 Euros extra for an e-bike) and tours of Vienna and St Florian. Not included are harbour fees of 59 Euros per person, ferry fees (usually 2 Euros), transfers and airfares. The single cabin supplement is 570 Euros. To book through a British tour operator, try Hooked On Cycling (01506 635 399; www.hookedoncycling.co.uk). For more on visiting Linz see www.linztourismus.at and for more on holidaying in Austria see www.austria.info.



Another day by the Danube