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CYCLING

your way through

EUROPE

Tips from the expert

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

As someone who has guided thousands of travellers on European cycling trips, the most common question I'm asked, besides "What's J-Lo really like," is "How can you charge three thousand bucks only to have me join a group of freaks?"

It's a delicate customer service issue; after all, how best to diffuse one's displeasure at having been randomly grouped with one or more of the following travel companions:

- The eccentric geriatric from Tokyo who spoke no English, and whose only utterances during a 10-day trip were off-key renditions of the first act arias from *Die Fledermaus* (bad enough in German; unbearable in Japanese); or
- The 50-something man from South Dakota who used to cycle each day in a woman's one-piece bathing suit ("makes me feel thinner," he would explain to a horrified group of onlookers); or
- The couple who began a trip celebrating their fourth anniversary, and who returned home 12 days later separated (details too horrible to repeat); or
- ... Well, you get the idea.

It's a valid point: Group European cycling trips are not for everyone. The social lottery component is daunting, but even more troublesome for many is the cost — you pay a significant premium to join a commercial group trip. This is not to suggest that tour operators are gouging their guests; rather, it's expensive to run a company — my company used to spend several hundred thousand dollars a year on breakroom napkins alone. But that doesn't make it any more palatable knowing that you'll pay at least two to four times more for a commercial European bicycle trip than on one that you could design yourself.





For those wishing to travel through Europe by bicycle, now that I'm no longer in the bicycle touring business¹, I can finally tell you that it's possible to cycle through Europe on your own at a fraction of the cost of what you'd pay a tour operator. The only things you'll need to plan your trip are a computer, a few free evenings and a jumbo-sized bottle of whisky. Ready?

The Internet

If you don't have Internet access, I'm assuming that you've got more important things to worry about than planning a European trip — like repairing your ship. But assuming that you're a member of civilization, begin your planning by searching the country-specific tourist offices that you'll visit at tourist-office.org.

Choose your route

Once at the relevant national tourist office site, narrow your focus by region and then send inquiries directly to local and regional offices requesting bicycle trail maps and notes. They're a great source for tons of free information, and most are eager to accommodate prospective visitors.

Alternatively, Adventure Cycling is a comprehensive source for cycling information worldwide. They provide details of books and maps designed for bicycle travel: adventurecycling.org/cyp/ww.cfm.

Once you've narrowed your search to a specific destination, it's time to plan your trip particulars. You'll need to consider:

Accommodation: Whatever your budget, you'll find ample information on the Web for European accommodation. As for hotel reviews, I tend to stay away

from the online consumer blogs. Besides exposing the public to butchered grammar, they provide little insight into reviewers' personal biases. I rely on Michelin at viamichelin.com.

For campgrounds and hostels, quality is always a gamble. But just remember, as you lay awake at 3 a.m., forced to listen to your neighbour's banjo playing: You're only paying eight bucks a night. You can't afford to be picky.

Luggage transfers: Unless you prefer carrying your luggage in *paniers* on the back of your bicycle, you'll need to arrange for luggage transfers along your route. The best way to plan these is with each night's hotelier. This becomes more difficult if you choose the budget route, as few hostels or campgrounds employ personnel to coordinate luggage delivery.

Bicycle rentals: These are readily available in most European gateway cities, and many shops provide additional services, such as luggage transfers and bicycle pickup/delivery. For a list of shops, try the Adventure Cycling at adventurecycling.org/cyp/ww.cfm or log onto bikeaccess.net.

Repairs en route: If you're cycling independently and don't possess repair skills, you can still enjoy an autonomous cycling vacation. Many hotels and bike rental facilities provide emergency pickup services — inquire while making reservations. You might want to avoid areas where you're unable to find this reassurance. Additionally, you should avoid itineraries whose facilities are limited (the Scottish Highlands, for instance).

If you suffer a breakdown (bike or otherwise) and don't have telephone access, I guarantee the means you use to find assistance will be a story you'll tell for years to come. Whether you are hitching, walking, or some other creative venture (I've tried them all), almost every story ends with the light-hearted catchphrase: It was a very dumb thing to do.

Your best bet: Are you out of whisky and still getting nowhere with your planning? Then save your sanity, go out and buy *Cycle Europe: 20 Tours, 12 Countries*. It's by far the best book ever written on European bicycle travel. In fact, it's one of the best books that I have EVER read, on ANY subject, and in ANY language.² It provides turn-by-turn directions for 20 itineraries, including contact information for lodging, luggage transfers, food, shopping, airport transfers, bicycle rentals and sightseeing.

And finally

Independent travel is not for everyone, but with a bit of planning and patience, you can successfully enjoy your very own European cycling vacation. You'll save hundreds of dollars from the commercial trips, as well as spare yourself the awkward group dinners where you're forced to sit next to the Montana guy who shaves his eyebrows.

¹ I sold my company last summer.

² A coincidence that I'm the author of the book. ■

opposite page, left: A bird's eye view of the Mosel Valley
top left: Cyclists check a map in front of a church in Ardennes, France.
top right: Switzerland's Bernese Oberland
Jerry Soverinsky