

Chain reaction

Get a new view of the Danube by pedalling in Jeannine Williamson's wake along its banks

As I unscrew the cap on the tiny bottle and take my first cautious swig of Magenbitter, it's pretty clear the tippie brewed by monks at Austria's only Trappist monastery is not your usual energy drink.

But the unexpectedly sweet herbal spirit does the trick, and I set off with a renewed spurt of muscle and pedal power, as we tackle the next section of the trip.

Having hardly been on a bicycle since childhood, and with any more recent cycling confined to the occasional spinning class at the gym, I hadn't been too sure about signing up for a 178-mile, self-guided ride between Passau and Vienna.

This stretch of the Danube

is normally associated with sedate river cruises, effortlessly transporting passengers from one scenic highlight to the next. But for those in the know, it's the most popular stretch of the Danube Bike Trail, which runs alongside the celebrated waterway and is – for hardcore types and anyone by the name of Chris Froome or Bradley Wiggins – part of the EuroVelo 6 cross-European cycle route running from France to Romania.

However, it didn't take long for my literal and metaphorical wobbles to disappear, as we headed off along the wide, flat paths that make up most of the trail. Armed with Inghams' idiot-proof maps, the convenience



The route from Passau to Vienna is slightly downhill, which is why most people tackle it in this direction

of luggage being whisked from hotel to hotel, the option to fork out an extra £65 for a power-assisted e-bike and 'get-out clauses' to travel sections of the route by boat or train, it soon becomes clear that this trip is just as achievable for families with young children as it is for active older travellers who want

to experience the Danube from a different perspective.

According to the government's National Travel Survey, 7% of Brits aged five-plus cycle at least three times a week, which equates to about 4.2 million children and adults. Bike traffic has risen almost every year since 2008, with some 3.5 billion miles clocked up in 2016. This growing interest in cycling, coupled with the suitability of this trip for a wide demographic, means it's a great time to suggest clients get on their bikes. So what can they expect?

► DAY 1: PAUSSAU

How far: 0 miles

See: Pretty Passau is uniquely situated at the confluence



**RIGHT AND
FAR RIGHT:**
Linz

BELOW:
The Danube
Trail, Austria



➔ of the Danube, Inn and Ilz rivers, and a sightseeing cruise is included in the holiday. The top sights include St Stephen's cathedral, home to the world's largest church organ. At noon each day, it thunders into life, and visitors can attend the 30-minute concert for a small fee.

Afterwards, enjoy a beer on the waterfront and pick up a feather-trimmed Bavarian hat or, for the brave, a pair of traditional lederhosen from the souvenir shops. Then it's time for an early night ready for the start of the next day's adventure.

DAY 2: PASSAU TO SCHLOGENER SCHLINGE

How far: 24 miles

See: After getting fitted with bikes at a vast cycling store, riders set off along the cycle path and cross the



Each morning, luggage is left at the hotel reception and magically reappears at that night's accommodation

border into Austria. Each morning, luggage is left at the hotel reception and magically reappears at that night's accommodation. The route from Passau to Vienna is slightly downhill all the way, which is why most people tackle it in this direction. So rookie cyclists don't have to worry too much about avoiding people coming the opposite way.

Stop at Engelszell Monastery to

stock up on Magenbitter, before taking one of the dinky ferries across the river to rejoin the cycle path on the opposite bank – you even get to summon the ferryman by ringing a bell.

Hotel Donauschlinge, set on a dramatic horseshoe bend, is one of the most memorable overnight stops, plus it's got a wonderful pool and spa to ease saddle soreness.

DAY 3: SCHLOGENER SCHLINGE TO LINZ

How far: 32 miles

See: An early-morning walk to the top of steep Schlögener Blick is rewarded with spectacular views of the curving riverscape. The daily schedule always allows time for extended coffee and lunch stops, and hearty Austrian food – think dumplings and apple strudel – is the perfect fuel for active



Inghams' seven-night Treasures of the Danube
Passau to Vienna unescorted cycling tour costs from £859 B&B; add an extra £132 for half-board and £188 for full-board. The price includes flights, airport transfers, bike hire, route map, daily luggage transfer service, three Danube boat trips and a return on the Pöstlingberg mountain railway. agents. ingham.co.uk



➔ breaks. There's an option to cycle 17 miles and take a boat to Linz, Austria's third-largest city and former European Capital of Culture.

DAY 4: LINZ TO MARIA TAFERL

How far: 50 miles

See: This is the big day – but if it's too much, you can use the included train ticket to travel from Linz to Dornach and cycle a more manageable 22 miles to the hotel. If you're tackling the whole section, stop off in Grein, where actors still tread the boards in Austria's oldest municipal theatre. A tour of the tiny playhouse, which dates back to 1791, reveals the old jail where inmates could watch performances through the bars, and a very public toilet separated from the auditorium only by a flimsy curtain.

DAY 5: MARIA TAFERL TO CASTLE ARTSTETTEN

How far: 9 miles

See: Stretch tired legs with a gentle stroll around Maria Taferl, where the distinctive yellow and white basilica is a pilgrimage site. There's the option for a round-trip cycle ride, with a small uphill stretch, to fairytale Artstetten



PICTURE: AUSTRIAN NATIONAL TOURIST OFFICE/LEO HIMSL



Head to one of Vienna's atmospheric cafes for a big slice of chocolate Sachertorte. You've earned it!

Castle, the former summer retreat of the royal house of Habsburg.

DAY 6: MARIA TAFERL TO KREMS

How far: 31 miles

See: This headline day features the Unesco-listed Wachau Valley, where terraced vineyards stretch down to the river and part of the route meanders between the vines. Landmark Melk Abbey perches on top of a rocky outcrop and resembles a palace rather than a Benedictine monastery. The imperial corridor is lined with portraits of Austrian rulers, and the cavernous library, with beautiful ceiling paintings, contains about 90,000 books. Aching muscles? Then cycle 14 miles to Melk, take a boat to Durnstein and pedal the remaining four miles to Krems.

DAY 7: KREMS TO VIENNA

How far: 32 miles

See: Saddle up for a morning cycle through rural areas and stop off in Tulln for a last lunch by the Danube. One of Austria's oldest towns, it's famous for its fountains and flowers. Say farewell to the trusty metal steeds at the bike drop-off point on the outskirts of Vienna, before catching a train to the city centre. If you've got the energy, grand palaces and museums await. Alternatively, head to one of the Austrian capital's atmospheric wood-panelled cafes for a creamy Wiener melange coffee and big slice of chocolate Sachertorte. You've earned it! 



ASK THE EXPERT



Lydia Crisostomo,
PR executive,
Inghams

"For first-time cyclists, families or for those looking for a gentle introduction to cycling in Europe, the unescorted cycle ride from Passau to Vienna ticks all the boxes. Suitable for all levels of fitness, the route is flat, traffic-free and easy to navigate. The river mirrors the path itself, so it's very hard to get lost. Guests can cycle at a gentle pace while soaking up the spectacular scenery of monasteries, castles and pretty villages, before ending their trip in the cultural city of Vienna. Cycling shorts are a must, and don't forget to advise clients travelling in September to pack a rain jacket."



ABOVE:
Krems

LEFT:
Melk Abbey