



Stein am Rhein, Switzerland
Right: On schedule for the ferry home



Sète, I came to the reluctant conclusion that if you really want to travel along the canal, the best thing to do is hire a boat. It's a great shame as, in all other respects – the canal itself, its history, the surrounding countryside and nearby towns such as Carcassonne – it's a wonderful area through which to travel, just not on a bike on the towpath. It also suffers from being the second half of the Canal des 2 Mers A Vélo, the first part of which is along the superb Canal de la Garonne. The comparison between the two canals is stark.

I had few expectations for the ViaRhôna. At the planning stage it was the part of the journey that simply linked two other places where I wanted to be: the Mediterranean and the Alps. It turned out to be the highlight of the entire trip. Again, money has been invested into the route and it's very visible in the quality of the traffic-free sections, often along the river. I lost count of the number of bridges that I crossed but at 8am one morning, under a blue sky and with not another soul in sight, crossing the rebuilt suspension bridge near Rochemaure was a magical experience. Destroyed several times over its lifetime, it has now found a fitting purpose in transporting pedestrians and cyclists across the River Rhône.

After Lyon, the ViaRhôna took my route in the direction of Switzerland. Mountains became a feature of the trip for the first time. That said, it wasn't until after several days cycling in Switzerland that the major physical challenge of the cycle presented itself: the climb to the Furka Pass at 2,436 metres. Following in the tyre tracks of Sean Connery in his Aston Martin Goldfinger, it was a long climb but one that was rewarded with Alpine views and a long descent into the valley to Andermatt and the same campsite where I'd stayed overnight in 2010 en route to the Gotthard Pass and Italy.

If you happen to have read that first book, you'll be delighted to hear that I had no repeat problems with spokes in 2022. My new bicycle (a bike called Wanda...) is made of strong stuff. A Koga WorldTraveller, complete with carbon belt and Rohloff hub, she performed superbly throughout the trip. Not even a puncture, courtesy of the Schwalbe Marathon Plus tyres.



Getting there & back

Overnight ferry from Hull to Rotterdam and back with P&O (poferies.com). The crossing takes about 12 hours and is overnight both ways. Prices vary according to the season but for a very flexible return ticket I paid around £250. For a guide to taking your bike on ferries to the Netherlands, France, Spain, and Ireland, as well as other parts of the UK, visit the Cycling UK website: cyclinguk.org/article/guide-taking-bike-ferry

DOWNHILL AND HOME

My onward journey along the Rhine required another climb to the Oberalp Pass, but having just earned my spurs at the Furka Pass, I chose to take one of my trains. It was train number eight of the trip. The previous ones had been chosen for a variety of reasons – to make progress (Calais to Le Touquet), avoid suburbs (Paris to Chartres), to relieve the boredom of cycling along the Nantes-Brest Canal (Redon to Couëron)... But, here in Switzerland, it was because I fancied taking one of the little red trains that had been passing me along the Swiss valleys for days. Nothing whatsoever to do with it being another strenuous climb.

From the Oberalp Pass it was, literally, downhill all the way as I headed east through Switzerland before swinging west and then north along the Rhine. Time began to play on my mind. I left Andermatt on 23 August so I had just 12 days to get back to Rotterdam, the Hook of Holland and my ferry home. The two remaining trains helped, as did a ferry on the Bodensee from Bregenz to Konstanz (after drinking far too much beer with a German friend I'd met up with for lunch). Even so, I wasn't confident of completing the loop on time until the very end of August, and it did require some long days in the saddle.

Yet where better a place to spend hours in the saddle than back in the cycling nirvana of the Netherlands? I reached the sign at the Hook of Holland in the mid-afternoon of 3 September. My ferry back home to Yorkshire departed at 8pm that evening. I was back in the classroom just 36 hours later... ●

i More info

The book should be available to read in late 2023 or early 2024 but if you can't wait until then, listen to episodes 52 to 59 of the *Cycling Europe Podcast*. There are also four films to watch on YouTube. The links are at:

cyclingeurope.org/LeGrandTour

