



Clockwise from top left: The Drauradweg is surrounded by spectacular scenery but follows the valley floor so the cycling is easy. Leaving Möllbrücke and heading back into the countryside; not all the Drauradweg is tarmacked but it's all well surfaced. Crossing the river to Villach, where the hire bikes would be handed back, on a cycle and foot bridge. The widening, turquoise River Drau at Feffernitz. Pobersach again

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out to check where we're going, and it is cleverly developed to take us over or under busy roads by bridge or tunnel so we don't ever have to encounter heavy traffic. The River Drau increases in size next to us as we ride – there has been a lot of rain this year so it's flowing fast – and it's our constant companion on the route, along with the single train line. This also means there's a get-out clause for any member of the party who doesn't want to cycle one day: they can always take the train for a section if they fancy it.

REAL, RURAL AUSTRIA

We overnight at a selection of different hostels – some hotels, a very random B&B, classic Austrian guesthouses, a farm, a youth hostel. No one is surprised by our arrival by bike, and each place has a secure place to leave our bikes undercover. For the four of us, we are almost always able to find a family room with four beds, though we had booked these in advance. Our hosts are local Austrian people, many of whom speak excellent English. We get a real insight into how people live in this valley: we

see their farming methods, stumble upon their village celebrations, and hear about how they make a living.

As we ride through the Drau valley, the cycle path is mostly surfaced with tarmac, with occasional stretches of hard-packed gravel. We ride by pastures full of cows with their cow bells, by fields of wildflowers and corn crops and through small villages, each with a striking, traditional church. Although we've left the Dolomites behind, we've had a succession of Alpine ranges take their place, with an ever-changing impressive skyline.

There are occasional inclines to ride up but none lasts for long. The weather warms up and we find ourselves detouring off the route most days to find an outdoor swimming location. Austria does a great line in outdoor pools and swimming lakes with grassy surroundings and a little café. These provide a handy place to cool off, eat our packed lunch and buy a drink before heading onwards.

After 165km of cycling, we reach our final destination of Villach, which has a distinctly Mediterranean feel. The weather is truly hot, and the River Drau is wide, turquoise and magnificent in the sun as we cross over it on a foot- and bike-bridge to reach our youth hostel. We admire the beautiful pedestrian- and bike-friendly old town as we ride through it on the way to drop off our hire bikes, which we part from reluctantly.

We have left the last 342 kilometres of the hugely tempting Drau Cycle Path unriden. To paraphrase Austria's most famous ex-pat: we'll be back! ●

There and back again

We took the Eurostar to Amsterdam and then the OEBB overnight Nightjet train from there to Innsbruck. From here there's an easy train to Toblach, necessitating a short change at Franzensfeste. You could also fly to Innsbruck, Klagenfurt, Salzburg or Vienna and then take the train to Toblach.

At the end, you can take a train from Villach back to any of these locations, though you may need to change. In general the Austrian railway system works well, though can get busy. We recommend making seat reservations where you can and booking early for the best fares.