

# A WHEELY BIG ADVENTURE

One lake, two wheels, three countries – with its easily marked trails, flat terrain and ample escape routes by bus, train and ferry, a circumnavigation of Lake Constance is perfect for even reluctant cyclists

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**L**ove in a foreign country. It can happen in so many ways. There's the obvious wham-bam type: adoration comes fast, followed by a proclamation to the world! Then

there's the slow, creeping onset of affection that neither one of you sees coming. It was the former that I was witnessing on a bridge in the Austrian town of Bregenz. I watched as a couple took out a red padlock, which was engraved in gold with their names and two interlinked hearts, and clamped it securely around the railings.

"It's to show our unbreakable love," the woman explained when they caught me staring. With that they kissed and threw the key into the fast-flowing river below.

At the same time, in this exact spot, another relationship was beginning to blossom, between me and my hired bicycle — though, being the second kind of love, I didn't know it yet. Earlier that morning I'd picked the bike up from town, ready to

start a week-long adventure circling Central Europe's third-largest lake. So far we were getting off to a quarrelsome start, mainly because, as I watched the loved-up couple, I was emptying my pockets and panniers, desperately trying to find my own key — to the bike lock.

Like a clasped padlock, I'd always been closed to the idea of a cycling trip. But once I'd learned that a journey around Lake Constance meant crossing country borders almost daily, offered endless café stops, came with a multitude of escape routes (courtesy of efficient public transport), and that someone else would transfer my luggage, I began to feel more open. Before long, I found myself setting off on the first 41km of my 214km journey...

**DAY 1**  
**Distance to cycle: 41km**  
**Ice cream count: 0**

Lake Constance. An over-inflated bulge in the River Rhine, here, Switzerland, Germany and Austria meet in a glorious mix of verdant vineyards, baroque churches,

medieval castles and bench-lined promenades. It's 273km in circumference, and with the official Bodensee Radweg trail covering 214km of that, there's really only one way to tackle it: on two wheels.

"You never know what will happen," said the lady at the hire firm as I jumped on my bike. Immediately the saddle slipped, my over-stuffed panniers caused me to wobble and I proceeded to knock the bike over as I leapt off and tried to put it on its stand. Making my way out of Bregenz, I decided I disliked my seven-geared companion.

The small Austrian town was off to a sleepy start. Most of the coffee shops were still closed as sunlight started to hit the wooden-beamed buildings of the old Upper Town, which sat dreamily among the foothills of the Alps. These cobbled streets date from the 13th century, though further back the area was a Roman camp, patrolled by centurions; today only dog-walkers and roller-skaters were doing the rounds, enjoying the sunshine. As I pedalled, I passed the floating stage that gets rebuilt anew every two years for the sunset festival. The green and orange dragons flanking its edges seemed to watch me with their giant eyes. ▶



**Flaming saddles**  
 The floating stage in Bregenz, Austria (left) has two silver bridges and three along Lake Constance; (below) dragon-like on the back near Helwig's peninsula, Austria, a couple of km from the Swiss border. Greenish dragon wing towers at the official Bodensee Radweg trail in Austria's Nature Reserve, Germany.

Following the trail was a dream. Navigationally there's just one rule – keep the lake to your right. And despite my rocky start I began to settle into the saddle. I made my way under trees and over bridges covered with love locks; I stopped to take a walk, locked up my bike and – for what wasn't to be the first time that day – briefly lost the key.

At some point I made my transition into Switzerland. There was no fanfare; no passport office, no duty free. Only the greetings subtly changed, from 'Grüss Gott' to 'Grüezi'.

Despite my initial reluctance to pedal I was pleasantly surprised at how good I felt. Kilometres seemed to melt by with each turn of the spokes, my mind being distracted by cuckoo-clock houses, outdoor art and glimpses of the sparkling lake. By the time I arrived at my hotel in Arbon I felt like I could have cycled through the night.

However, the promise of beer and spätzle (noodles) made me reassess my enthusiasm.

**DAY 2**  
Distance to cycle: 67km  
Ice cream count: 2

The next day was to be less gentle. Between me and a comfortable bed was over 60km of trail and my legs were a little heavy from the previous day.

The air was hot and the sun glaring as I finally repacked my panniers (after having to look for my bike lock key – again). I set off, racing alongside a train that I could have taken to cut out 20km. Giant Swiss flags lined the streets and ferries emerged onto the lake at the harbour town of Romanshorn. The churches came thick and fast – tall white ones with elegant spires and friendly clock faces, then ivy-coated giants that looked like they'd been topped by giant witches' hats.

The German border was coming up, but I wouldn't be crossing it yet. Leaving the hectic traffic at Kreuzlingen, the route headed inland. Suddenly I was surrounded by farmland, allotments and barns. I sharped down an ice cream in the small village of Gottlieben, with its odd collection of dome-shaped turrets, oriental dragons and dark wooden shutters, before weaving my wheels through fields of wheat. An ugly grey and graffitied concrete bunker came into view, then I emerged back by the lake at Ermatingen. Children were jumping into the water, which certainly looked like a good idea – but then so did another ice cream (or two).

I trundled on and soon I could see the slopes on the opposite shore, dotted with churches and wooden huts. A downhill swoop brought me back to the water and to the town of Stein am Rhein; my hotel was within reach.

Stein am Rhein is one of those towns you can spend hours ambling around with no particular purpose. Encased within the remains of medieval walls, each building has some interesting oddity. There are gilded frescos depicting real events and myths (created to boast of the residents' affluence), an imposing former monastery (now a church), tantalising wooden doors leading into hidden alleyways and small bronze statues of cats.

That night I sipped a beer and watched the sun set while crazy children leapt off the bridge into the water below. Though I kept my feet on the ground I could feel myself beginning to fall for this part of the world.

**DAY 3**  
Distance to cycle: 56km  
Ice cream count: 5

The next morning I realised, with surprise, that I felt excited to be reunited with my wheels. I packed lightly and efficiently, having by now learned exactly what I needed; within minutes I was out of the town.

This was to be my first proper taster of the German side of Lake Constance, which makes up more than half the shoreline. I passed a sign bearing a black eagle –

the German emblem – which later seemed quite fitting: as I made my way further into the country, the sky overhead filled with birds of prey. Falcons and kestrels swooped and soared, unperturbed by the cyclists that kept stopping beneath them.

Distracted by the feathery flight show I suddenly felt a pain in my thighs and realised that I was climbing up a rather steep hill. I kept pedalling, determined not to give up, then I turned a corner and the hill kept ascending. With a flick of the gears and some teamwork between me and my bike, we made it to the top. If at any point we progressed from acquaintances to friends, it was here. On the other side, we huddled down, moving as one.

Towns shot by with unexpected frequency – proving that on this bike trail, you're never far from help. Or a latte. I decided then that I had plenty of time for a detour to the island of Reichenau.

I pedalled along the tree-lined causeway that connects Reichenau to the mainland. The causeway was completed in 1838, but the island's many churches and abbeys were founded much earlier – AD714 to be exact. And, as Reichenau is now as famous for its vegetable growing and ▶

■ In the Bag

**WHAT TO PACK FOR A CYCLE ADVENTURE**

- **Cycling shorts** Look for padded ones: your bottom will thank you!
- **Base layer** Choose tops made from fabric that wicks sweat away from your body, not cotton
- **Shoes** Look for breathable, waterproof multi-activity shoes that have a rigid non-slip sole (bendy soles will make your feet tired)
- **Helmet** Not mandatory but if you choose to wear one take your own – hired ones may have been dropped and be weaker
- **Sunglasses** These will keep both the sun and flies out of your eyes
- **Windshirt** Pick a lightweight top made from a windblocking fabric, good for colder days
- **Suncream** Use at least SPF30; reapply regularly
- **Insect repellent** Vital, as midges and mosquitoes are waiting...

**'At some point I made my transition into Switzerland. There was no fanfare; no passport office, no duty free. Only the greetings subtly changed, from Grüss Gott to Grüezi'**



Change of gear (from left) The bridge into Stein am Rhein; cuckoo clock houses near Romanshorn, Switzerland; chess and conversation in Bregenz, Austria



**'Soon, wingbeats from birds were replaced with the clackety-clack of trains leading into Konstanz... I wandered through a jazz festival where people aged 8-80plus met and danced'**

◀ wine production as its religious history, it proved a great lunch stop.

Leaving the island, I passed a wetland reserve where a cluster of birds fluttered overhead. Soon, however, wingbeats were replaced with the clackety-clack of trains leading into Konstanz, just a kilometre from the Swiss border, the German university town has a vibrant buzz, especially along its waterfront. Here, as the light faded, I wandered through a jazz festival where people aged from eight to 80-plus met, drank and danced.

**DAY 4**  
**Distance to cycle: 25km**  
**Ice cream count: 7**

After a short 6km ride, my bike and I boarded the ferry at Staud. Though the

lake stretches on up to Bodman, that area has been a victim of industry – access and pleasant cycling are an issue, so like most who do the trail, I was cutting it out.

If anything defines the northern section of the trail it is the silhouette of the castle in Meersburg that greets the ferry. Built on a steep slope, the whole town is a network of twisting alleys and crooked stairs leading up to a fort at the top; on a clear day it offers views over the southern side of the lake and the serrated Alps beyond.

After a couple of hours wandering on foot, I left, passing waterfront parks and fire hydrants painted to look like pirates, en route to the north shore's capital, Friedrichshafen.

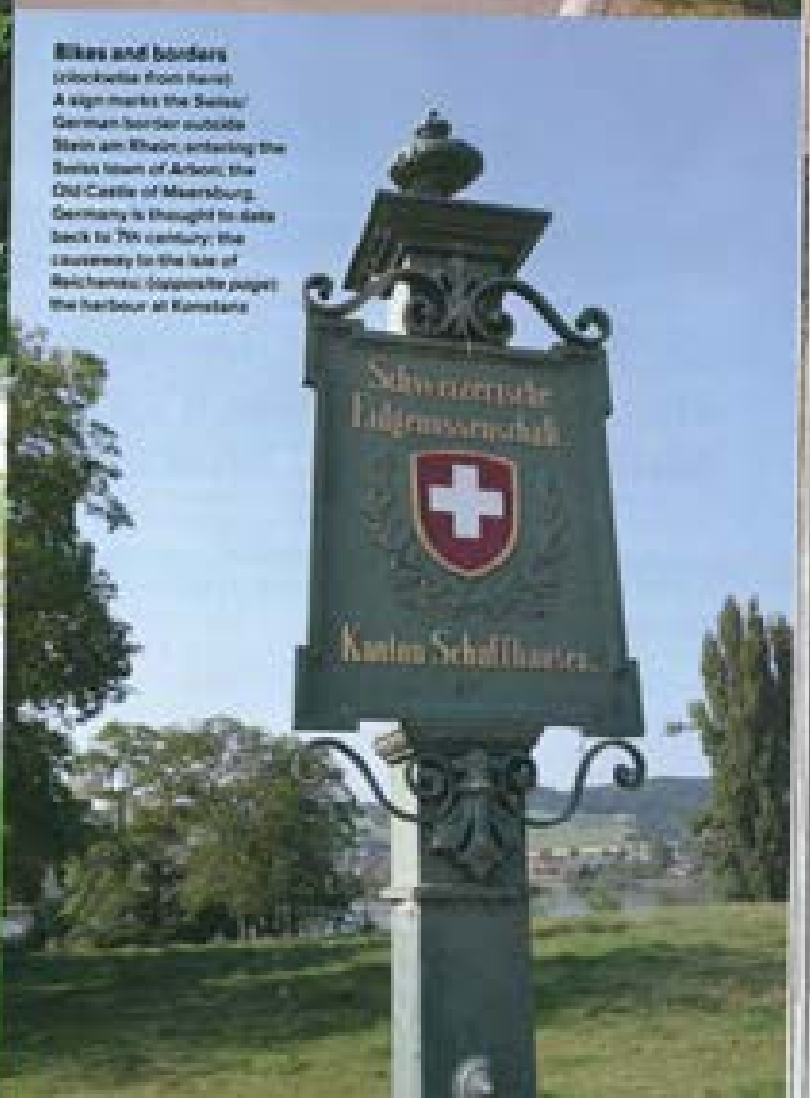
It was here that aircraft manufacturer Ferdinand von Zeppelin was based, and

from where the first commercial transatlantic Zeppelin flight took off in 1918. It marked the start of a golden era of German passenger aviation, which came to a tragic end in 1937 with the Hindenburg disaster. Since then the city has relied on tourists, who come to stroll on Friedrichshafen's promenade and recapture past glories on Zeppelin pleasure flights.

When I arrived one of the enormous balloons was hovering overhead while a summer festival was taking place on the lakeshore. I joined the families that were sipping beer from steins, eating bratwurst and pretzels, and enjoying the evening sunshine while brass bands played. All the while I found myself stealing glances over at my bike, eager to crack on with our adventure. ▶



**Bikes and borders**  
 (clockwise from here)  
 A sign marks the Swiss/German border outside Stein am Rhein, entering the Swiss town of Arbon, the Old Castle of Meersburg. Germany is thought to date back to 7th century; the causeway to the lake of Balchensee; corporate project the harbour at Konstanz





**Isle of adventure**  
Checking out the island town of Lindau, the last stop in Germany before crossing back into Austria

**‘Sitting on an island, Lindau is guarded by a Bavarian lion statue and lighthouse, it’s a beautiful collection of small boutiques, cobbled squares and ornate buildings’**

**4 DAY 5**  
**Distance to cycle: 34km**  
**Ice cream count: too many to admit**

I left Friedrichshafen early. At a farm, two llamas looked up at me curiously; a man waved hello. In the next hamlet, marked by a totem pole of shields, I stopped to watch the lake’s waves lap right up to the street. It was a Sunday and it seemed the whole village was either heading to Mass or cycling. Switching it up a gear to pass a crowd of pedallers, I realised my own cycling must have stepped up a level.

The scent of apples and cherries punctuated the air as I passed row upon row of orchards before arriving in Lindau, one of the best-preserved medieval towns on the lake. Sitting on an island and guarded by a much-photographed Bavarian lion statue and lighthouse, it’s a beautiful collection of small boutique shops, cobbled squares and ornate buildings.

It was a bittersweet moment when I left the island and found myself crossing the border into Austria. By now the bike and I moved in unison, the pedals felt like an extension of my legs, the handlebars like

my own arms – yet soon we would be parted forever. I watched as Pfänder Mountain came closer and felt my pace begin to slow; Bregenz was in my sights. “You don’t need to lock it up,” said the woman in the bike rental office. But I pretended not to hear her, tightly clamped the padlock shut and tossed her the key. It may have been a short-lived romance, but it was a special one. My two wheels had enabled me to cross country borders, cover ground at my own pace and still stop to admire any curiosities that caught my eye. This had been an affair to remember. **✎**

# Lake Constance Footnotes



## VITAL STATISTICS

**Regional hub:** Konstanz  
**Regional population:** 3.8 million  
**Languages:** German; also (in Switzerland) French, Italian and Romansh. English not always understood in villages.  
**Time:** GMT+1 (Mar-Oct GMT+2)  
**International dialling code:** +41 (Switzerland), +43 (Austria), +49 (Germany)  
**Visas:** Not required by UK nationals  
**Money:** Euro (€), currently around £1.2 to the UK£, and Swiss franc (CHF), currently around CHF 1.5 to the UK£. ATMs available in larger towns.

### When to go

|     |     |      |     |     |     |
|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Jan | Feb | Mar  | Apr | May | Jun |
| Jul | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec |

- Spring/Autumn: Best times for biking, less crowded. Spring sees wildflowers bloom.
- Summer: warm, good for lake dips. Cycle trail and towns can get crowded.
- Winter: cycling possible but many places close; can be foggy and grey.

**Health & safety**  
Health care is excellent. EU citizens should take a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). No vaccinations required. Tap water is safe to drink. Take insect repellent – midges and mosquitoes can be a pain.

**Further reading & information**  
Most guides to Germany, Switzerland and Austria have chapters on Lake Constance (often called the Bodensee). [www.bodensee-radweg.com](http://www.bodensee-radweg.com) – Lake Constance Cycle Path Service [www.austria.info](http://www.austria.info) [www.germany.travel](http://www.germany.travel) [www.myswitzerland.com](http://www.myswitzerland.com)

## THE TRIP

The author travelled with **Headwater** (0845 554 9349, [headwater.com](http://headwater.com)) on its self-guided Lake Constance Cycling trip. Prices start at £1,275pp for a ten-night (includes non-cycling/nighttime) days) hotel-to-hotel itinerary including all accommodation, breakfast, eight dinners, bike rental, route notes and maps, and luggage transfer service. Price excludes international travel; Headwater can organise self-drive or air-rail travel.

**Getting there**  
The most convenient entry point is Zurich. Direct flights to the Swiss hub are available from most UK airports with several airlines. The author flew with **Swire** (0845 600 9956, [swire.com](http://swire.com)); returns cost from £750 and flight time is around 1.5 hours. Frequent and efficient trains run from Zurich Airport to Bregenz, in Austria, requiring two changes. Journey time is 1hr 48mins; singles cost CHF 40 (€28) from [\*\*Getting around\*\*  
The most enjoyable and efficient way to travel around Lake Constance is by \*\*bike\*\*. You can rent one from a local outfit in Bregenz, Konstanz, Sölm, Friedrichshafen or Dornbirn. If you tire or it rains, jump on a train, bus or ferry. Most will accept bikes, prices are low and journeys quick – timetables are available in tourist offices and hotels.](http://www.sbb.ch/en</a>.</p>
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**Accommodation**  
Choices range from hostels to camping, guesthouses to five-star hotels. The author stayed at **Hotel Weisses Kreuz** in Bregenz ([hotelsweisskreuz.at](http://hotelsweisskreuz.at)), **Hotel Seeparten** in Arbon ([hotelseeparten.ch](http://hotelseeparten.ch)), **Hotel Rheinblick** in Stein am Rhein ([rheinblick.ch](http://rheinblick.ch)), **Hotel Helen** in Konstanz ([hotel-helen.de](http://hotel-helen.de)) and **Hotel Buchhorn** in Friedrichshafen ([buchhorn.de](http://buchhorn.de)).

**Cost of travel**  
Lake Constance will suit all budgets. To keep food costs down, stick to set menus and buy from bakeries en route. Expect to pay around €15 (£10.50) for one course in a restaurant and around €4 (£3.30) for a large beer.

**Food & drink**  
It’s a good job you’re cycling: portions are generous and carb-heavy – think potatoes, pasta, noodles and dumplings, often with cheese. Being lakeside means fish – krebser (crayfish), zander (pike-perch) and trout – appears on many menus. Other local delicacies include wurstli (sausage salad), interspette (cheese noodles) and schtirol (meat fried in breadcrumbs). Try the local **Seewine** (lake wine) – moody crisp, floral whites.

## LAKE CONSTANCE HIGHLIGHTS



- Pfänder, Bregenz** When you’ve finished your lake circuit, take the cablecar up 1,064m Mt Pfänder ([www.pfaenderbahn.at](http://www.pfaenderbahn.at)) for a perfect panorama of your cycling achievement and great views over to the Alps.
- Stein am Rhein** Wander around the old cobbled streets, gaze at beautiful frescos and grab a celebratory coffee or beer in the main square.
- Reichenau** This island, connected to the mainland by a causeway, has a rich ecclesiastical history, vineyards and a great distillery (on the left, at the end of the causeway, as you enter).
- Konstanz** The region’s informal capital is home to some great restaurants and the controversial rotating Imperia – a statue of a courtesan holding a pope and an emperor in her hands (pictured above).
- Weersburg** Climb the steep steps up to the fortress in this picturesque town that looks as though it was plucked from the pages of a storybook.
- Friedrichshafen** Forget the slightly tacky promenade and check out a piece of aviation history in this striking museum ([www.zoepfelin-museum.de](http://www.zoepfelin-museum.de)).



**More online**  
Visit [www.donaureisen.at](http://www.donaureisen.at)

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