

Cycling London to Athens Trip Return Report 2019

By Joseff Davies and Michael Wilkinson

We set off on our cycle trip to Athens on the 3rd of July and arrived on the 19th of August. The trip was incredibly successful and a breakdown of the key parts are to follow...

England – London to Dunkirk

Leaving London bright and early on the 3rd of July we headed for the garden of England, Kent. It was slow moving getting out of London but once out the concrete opened out to rolling hills and fields. Time for some rest in a bed in Headcorn for the first night. The next morning, we headed to Dover, got a midday crossing to Calais and then headed for our first campsite in Dunkirk.



Norther France/Belgium/Luxemburg – Dunkirk to Strasbourg

During the first day in France we had the only accident of the trip, involving a surprise car door. Luckily only minor scrapes were incurred and after a wheel had been retuned in a small bike shop, we were back on our way. The easy rolling landscape of France and Belgium allowed for easy 100km+ days and we quickly reached Luxembourg City. The cycle from here to Strasbourg was mainly on cycle paths and canal towpaths which made for easy cycling.





Southern Germany/ Switzerland – Strasbourg to lake Bodensee

We had our first brief rest day in Strasbourg, where we saw the sights of the old city and did some much-needed bike maintenance. We also met up with two fellow students undertaking a rapid 9-day trip from London to Umbria. The first big hills were encountered in southern Germany just before traversing Lake Bodensee. These felt huge compared to the Pennines from our training trip but not close to what was to come. Lake Bodensee provided a day of flat cycling along its shore followed by a quiet wild camping spot, before entering the Alps.





The Alps Austria/ Italy -Lake Bodensee to Venice

Next, we were straight into the Austrian alps, our route was to involve 4 major passes.

The Hochtannberg Pass (1679m) was the first and smallest of these. It quickly introduced us to the impressive scenery and alpine weather, with torrential rain forcing us to take refuge in a bus shelter near the summit. After descending into the valley, we found a wild camping spot near the river for the night.



Early the next morning we set off out the valley up the 15km Hahntennjoch (1894m). In contrast to the previous day the weather was outstanding and provided excellent views, the decent was open and fast. During the afternoon we started to climb again up to the Sölden Ski resort where we splashed out on a campsite as our kit was in desperate need of a wash after two days of wild camping.





The monster Timmelsjoch Passo Rombo (2509m) was the task of the next day covering 25km of ascent with sustained gradients of +10% at places. This climb took us to the highest point of the trip with banks of snow lining the road to the summit indicating the altitude. The 30km descent was covered in hairpins and took us into Italy. It was the height of tourist season and finding a place to camp proved tricky with wild camping being strictly prohibited and enforced, due to a language barrier issue with a caravan site owner causing an extra 300m of climbing at the end of the day to a campsite that was excessively out of budget and a thunder storm looming. Luckily, we eventually managed to negotiate a lower rate.





The next day was an easy flat 50km day that was covered by lunchtime, we took the decision to continue and take some of the 2000m+ of climbing out of the next day. We then wild camped in a quiet spot at the foot of the next days climb deep in Italian bear country.

The next day we tackled Passo Manghen (2042m), our final pass before Venice with a brutal 8% average gradient over the 16km climb and regularly included in the giro d'Italia. Surprisingly we were caught and overtaken on the climb by the Italian Nordic skiing team. This was the most physically exerting week of the trip. We finished this section with a day cycling down to Venice for another rest day, which coincided with the festival of the Redeemer. This meant big street parties and a firework display over the bay.



Northern Italy/Slovenia - Venice to Rijeka

Once reaching Northern Italy the temperature soared, reaching up to 40°C, making cycling significantly harder. Extra water bottle cages were added to the bikes in northern Croatia and most of the cycling was shifted to earlier in day to avoid the worst of the heat. Once out of Italy we quickly passed through Slovenia and on to the rugged Adriatic coastline.





Croatia

Croatia made up a significant portion of the trip with its long and unrelenting coastline. It did however provide the first opportunities to take breaks and go in the Mediterranean Sea. We visited the Sibenik national park before cycling through a massive storm towards Split; this had at least put out the wild fires. Once in Split we stayed there for 4 days resting up and seeing the Roman sights and the beautiful surrounding islands.





Bosnia and Herzegovina/ Montenegro

We were in Bosnia and Herzegovia for only a few hours so we hardly got a huge grasp for the country but we did avoid all the land mines. We were then back into Croatia to visit the incredibly pretty Dubrovnik. Montenegro took a day and a half to cycle through, which proves to be the fastest way. There is one road that follows the coast which is a constant traffic jam, where bridges are have been replaced with a train of boats.





Albania

As we entered Albania it was clear we had left western Europe, eating at restaurants and accommodation prices dropped drastically. But this came with the penalty of poor road quality and little attention given to cyclist by drivers. The coastline was again surprisingly mountainous with climbs starting at sea level rising to over +1000m. Due to the ridiculously low cost of living we slowed down in Albania having frequent rest days on the beach. This was also good as we had travelled faster than expected and the later we got to Athens the cheaper flights back. Albania's lack of minor roads forced us to do stretches on motorways which wasn't ideal. We met a fellow cycle tourer Paulo from Brazil, in Vlore he was cycling from Poland to Athens and back so we spent a week cycling with him.





Greece

In Greece roads improved but the number of large guard dogs unfortunately increased. The new motorways had left large A roads relatively traffic free. Having crossed onto the Peloponnese we quickly reached Athens on the 19th of August. We spent 4 days in Athens resting and seeing the ancient sights, before flying back (with our bikes) to London to complete our trip.



Conclusion

We have both become much fitter, have become much keener cyclists and have thoroughly enjoyed the art of bike packing. Through the trip we have managed to explore large sections of Europe that we otherwise would have not. We would like to kindly thank the Imperial Exploration Board, RCSA, CGCU and Lord Mayor Trust Fund for their amazing financial contributions.





Map Link (with more photos): <https://www.polarsteps.com/JoseffDavies/1929881-london-to-athens-cycle>

