

Two Weeks, Three Countries, Four Regions

by Bill Clay & Anna Rivola-Clay

Anna and I took a couple weeks this October (2007) for a tandem tour of Alsace. *Where?* You remember from high school. Alsace-Lorraine. The northeastern corner of France. Swapped between Germany and France after each war like a poker chip. The Maginot Line. etc.

Like most of our previous trips, this was a self-catered tour. Anyone familiar with Alsace thinks immediately of Strasbourg, the regional capital and seat of the European Parliament. But even though Alsace is France's smallest administrative region, with only two departments, it still seemed to us to have four quite distinct regions, each with its own ambience.

- Rhine valley plain
- wine-growing foothills
- Vosges mountains
- Sundgau's low undulating hills

Switzerland in four hours

St. Louis was our base for the first night. It is a close-in suburb north of Basel right on the border with Switzerland – France, Germany, and Switzerland meet where the Basel city limits cross the Rhine. St. Louis is home to Basel's airport, which is entirely on French soil (though half of the airport terminal is officially Swiss territory)

We arrived at the hotel a bit before noon on a cool but sunny Saturday, Sept. 29, left our bags at the hotel and hustled by bus to the center of Basel for lunch, then to the tourist office for their daily 2:30 walking tour. This turned out to be the only time we had for Basel, and our guide gave us a much better tour of the



historical center than we'd have seen on our own.

Like every other city on this trip, we saw lots of folks of all ages and classes using bicycles for practical everyday transportation.

Basel is full of historic buildings, eclectic art museums, and theaters. It merits at least a weekend, if not a week, but Saturday afternoon was all we could spare for it. We still had to assemble our S&S-coupled tandem for the first leg of our trip on Sunday!

The Rhine valley plain

We started our tour in earnest on Sunday, Oct. 30. The region has a number of canals of varying vintages, mostly running parallel to the Rhine. Some of them have cycle routes along the old tow paths; some paved, some surfaced in fine, well-packed gravel. We headed north along a canal on the Bike Path of the Planets: it stretches for a mile or two, with markers showing the relative positions of the planets from the sun, its starting point.

Outside Niffer began what we came to know as the typical Alsacian Rhine plain: lots of corn fields punctuated by small towns and an occasional industrial plant. There were virtually no isolated houses in the countryside. Everyone lives in towns or villages, which are only 3-5 miles apart.

Minor roads took us north a mile or two west of the Rhine to the village of Ottmarsheim where there was a lovely little octagonal church sheltering the remains of the local Saint Otmar and consecrated by the Pope in 1055.

We crossed the Rhine and continued on the bike path along its right bank. We soon encountered a large rally of horse-drawn carriages. Some attractive modern carriages sported cast alloy wheelsets that might make some of TWTC's weight-weenie members jealous. Our Sunday destination was Freiburg, known as Germany's greenest city, where 30% of local trips are by bicycle. Bill wanted to look at some of the well-designed commuting bikes produced here and we both wanted to see the lovely old city center with its fine old Romanesque/early Gothic Munster. But Freiburg is off the plain, about 15 miles west of the Rhine, just inside the edge of the very hilly Black Forest.

A well-marked cycle route to Freiburg gave us our first taste of riding in wine country. The vineyards started with the first hills. Mile after mile of perfectly-tended trellised vines with small paved lanes running through them, perfect for pleasant cycling. The hills were not too strenuous -- about like riding in Charlotte -- and you could stop and taste the grapes for a break. The locals were out in full force riding, running, and walking on this lovely Sunday afternoon.



We found our way to our Freiburg hotel in time for a couple hours' ramble to see the sights, chief among them the impressive and well-preserved Munster church. Freiburg University's campus is right in the old town, making it a lively combination of modern young people and fashionable stores populating a 15th- to 18th-century urban landscape.

Back to Alsace

Monday morning Bill went take care of his commuting bike lust and Anna got an in-depth look at Freiburg's historic sites.

We headed back toward Alsace, starting on a bike path that follows the babbling Dreisam river down from the Black Forest. There was one obstacle before we could reach the Rhine plain: a steep, high ridge covered with vineyards. We pedaled up to enjoy the view. We found a good view – and also ripe walnuts. We collected enough for snacks that lasted a couple of days.

We zoomed down the other side of the ridge, through the village at its foot, and as we entered the next town, Anna saw a sign advertising "Neuer Suesser" (German new wine) in front of a restaurant at the edge of the next town.



Good call! This was the first of several tastes of several distinct varieties of new wine, and it turned out to be

the best. The rest of lunch was just as good!

We crossed the Rhine on a busy 2-lane bridge and arrived at Neuf Brisach, an octagonal-walled, fortified city built by Vauban in the 17th century. Another hour of riding and we reached our destination, Colmar, a city almost as pretty as Strasbourg.

Home for the next two nights was the Martin Jund house (<http://martinjund.com>), an old winemaking family farmhouse right in the middle of town. The Jund family was cleaning up the courtyard from a day pressing grapes when we arrived. The tandem stayed in the entryway to the winemaking "cellar" and we went up to our spacious but basic mansard apartment



Colmar's pride is the Unterlinden Museum, a former convent and cloister with an extensive collection of centuries-old local art and crafts. The museum's masterpiece is the early 16th C. carved and painted Issenheim Altarpiece.

A leisurely walk showed us Colmar's well-preserved historic center with its many interesting public and private buildings as well as lovely take-out delis. Their windows were full of the local gastronomic specialties like "Baeckaoffe," a terrine with different meats, potatoes, onion, celery, and carrot -- basically

pot roast with three kinds of meat and "tarte flambe'," a specialty that we saw everywhere. It's a super-thin crust, a bit like pizza, garnished with a variety of different toppings.

Colmar, like most large towns on the Alsatian Rhine plain, has a major portion that's criss-crossed by streams and canals,



called – you guessed it! – "Little Venice."

The wine-growing foothills

Tuesday through Thursday were a close-up view of Alsace's "Route des Vins," 110 miles north-south along the eastern base of the Vosges mountain chain. We rode its northern two-thirds, a seemingly endless chain of picturesque villages full of flower-bedecked, half-timbered houses and old Romanesque churches alternating with perfectly-kept vineyards stretching down to the plain and up to the mountain forests.

Needless to say, this is prime tourist territory. The official Wine Road is fairly heavily traveled, but there are many lanes between the vineyards that are very pleasant cycling -- at the cost of more hills, of course.

Our first stop was the village of Kaysersberg, tucked tightly into hollow of a stream rushing down the mountain-side. A bit further up the road, Riquewihr is probably the most famous Route du Vin tourist stop. Disneyland couldn't do better. We bought lunch at a take-out featuring local specialties and had pleasant hour people-watching from a bench at the edge of a park.

Bergheim was Anna's favorite Alsatian village, as pretty as the others, but more genuine and less touristy. We followed the route of an old Roman road to our afternoon's objective, Kintzheim, and our first unreserved overnight stay. Picking a modest chambre d'hote "by nose," we found a comfortable room and a very hospitable hostess.



After cleaning up, we took our host's suggestion for dinner, Wistube Jenny, which seemed to be full of regular customers and had a delicious dinner of Alsatian choucroute (sausages and sauerkraut) -- after starting with tarte flambe, of course. Just another perfect day in Alsace, topped off by the best bed and quietest room of the trip. But the next day started with a real challenge, at least for us.



On Thursday, we decided to get going early because this was our climbing day.

Haut Koenigsburg, a 15th century Habsburg castle that was

fully-restored by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1908, looms 1600 ft. over Kintzheim from a peak about 3 miles away as the crow flies. As one of Alsace's main attractions, we had to visit it.

We left our panniers at the chambre d'hote and covered the 5 miles of curvy but nicely-paved road in about 1:15, including several stops to ... admire the lovely surrounding forest. We arrived just as the first tourist buses pulled up.

The view from the castle is a breathtaking panorama of the Alsatian plain to the east and the forests on the eastern flank of the Vosges mountains to the west. The castle is furnished with an interesting collection of antiques of local provenance dating as far back as the castle itself as well as a number of large, beautiful tile heating stoves. A collection of antique guns, cannons, and mortars was on display in some of the covered ramparts. After a pleasant tour on foot, we rejoined our tandem and were back at the chambre d'hote in only 15 in spite of using the drag brake.



We finally started the day's journey north along the Wine Road a bit after Noon, but we didn't get far. At the next village, Chatenois, less than 2 miles later, we found a wine-maker's showroom that offered free tasting. We bought a bottle of chilled pinot noir (the Alsatian kind that's really a rose') and, persuaded the hostess to find us a couple of plastic cups to take along. A full mile further along we encountered the roadside park the wine merchant had told us about. We enjoyed a nice picnic in the shade under the cloudless sky and took advantage of the tranquil setting for a refreshing post-prandial nap on the picnic table benches.

In the afternoon we continued on through Diefenthal and Dambach la Ville, where we saw a class of first-graders being taught by the local gendarme how to cross the street carefully. A brief stop at the local patisserie provided us with the energy to carry on to Andlau, after passing other charming not-too-touristy villages. We pressed on to Barr and finally reached Obernai, our

planned target for the night.

Our hostess at the chambre-d'hote provided by the local tourist office was an overenthusiastic German-French lady who greeted us warmly and fed us with a fabulous breakfast the next morning in our spacious room.

We started our day by touring Obernai briefly, without visiting any of the few interesting buildings which scatter the center of town, such as the largest cathedral in Alsace. But we still had a long, interesting road ahead.

We resumed our touring on the Route-du-Vin to Molsheim, site of a significant Abbey and Convent, as well as of a small park along a canal where we finally saw storks. ... behind a large outdoor cage. Theoretically storks migrate at times in this area, but we had not seen any until then. Molsheim is also where we encountered an Austrian couple on a tandem. We exchanged a few words with these very nice people and carried on, regretting soon after that we had forgotten to take a picture of them.

In Avolsheim we stopped for a picnic lunch in a quiet spot in front of the oldest church in Alsace. This is a well proportioned Romanesque structure with a wide green lawn on one side and an old cemetery in the back. A really peaceful spot for a picnic: good for the body and for the soul.

Further north, around Wassellone, the landscape changed abruptly. No more vineyards to be seen, just pastures, corn fields and forest. It is obviously a less wealthy area and even the houses are more austere in appearance. We reached Saverne just in time to consult the Tourist Office for lodgings, where we talked to a very charming lady who told us that she and her husband have a tandem and like bicycling.

The next day we spent most of morning in Saverne, which has an imposing palatial castle reflected in the canal. Because of distance and difficulty, we decided to



change our itinerary and not to visit one of the highlights of this region: La Petite Pierre. Instead, we continued along the foothills of the northern Vosges -- up and down, up and down.

The Vosges du Nord

At Neuwiller-les-Saverne we spent quite a bit of time at the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, another interesting Romanesque church with a number of lovely 12th and 13th century carvings. On our way out of town we bought some food for a picnic and stopped at the entrance of a deserted forest road to enjoy it.

We had barely started lunch, when we were surprised by the arrival of several cars which parked all around us. We were puzzled to see the passengers get out plastic buckets and baskets and move into the forest. Finally curiosity prompted us to ask one of them. They were going to pick chestnuts and mushrooms on a balmy fall afternoon in a lovely forest. What else!

After more ups and ups and some downs, we arrived at Niederbronn-les-Bains, where we had a reservation in a hotel for

two nights. Yippie!

Our reservation included dinners and breakfasts. Though the hotel was almost empty at the end of the season, we had excellent food and plentiful breakfasts prepared by the hotel owner, manager and chef.

The next day we rode unloaded! We climbed out of Neiderbronn to Windstein castle. The road to this ruin and very imposing rock formation turns very steep at times and we had our only 50 yards of “pushing the tandem” in the entire trip.



We continued through the next stream valley and lovely woods to Chateau Fleckenstein, which we reached after a steep climb of about 400 feet. The commanding view of the valley below from the castle ruins was worth the effort. We were looking into Germany, at the town of Hirschthal.

We zoomed down and went to the Lembach's Maginot Line facility, the Four a Chau, where, because of time, we could not visit the interior of the fortification. On the way back, however, we stopped at Foreschwiller, where the local apple festival was

in full swing. We tasted some of the specialties and enjoyed the local color before returning to our hotel and to an excellent dinner with chocolate mousse on top.

Back to the Rhine Plain

The next day, we started off to Riechshoffen, mostly downhill, at last! We rode through peaceful



fields and forests, part on a bike path, part on small roads paralleling a minor rail line, occasionally passing through pleasant rural villages.

The morning highlight was a beautiful patisserie-chocolaterie at Mommenheim,. We just had to buy a present for Anna's upcoming birthday!

We finally joined the Canal du Marne and followed it along the paved bike path. We had an easy, picturesque ride past occasional locks, sometimes watching the upper part of the boats pass by high behind the dike. In all leisure, we finally reached Strasbourg, rode behind the European Parliament and the Palais d'Europe and reached the center with the help of our maps and of a kind young man



(he has a tandem) who offered the final directions.

Our inexpensive hotel was a bit of a disappointment at first, because, due to a leak we had a replacement room for one night that was decidedly below standard. But we put up with it and went shopping and doing what we do best - eating. We had a light and tasty Slavic dinner at a new little restaurant close to the hotel.

October 9th was Anna's birthday and it started right immediately, as we were assigned another, much better room. The day was spent in wandering the town, visiting the impressive Cathedral, taking a boat tour along the canals that surround this lovely city, and walking, walking, walking. Needless to say – we had an excellent lunch and a fantastic dinner. The latter was in little restaurant, S'Kaechele, close to a very touristy section of town called la Petite France, but hidden away enough to be almost deserted when we arrived. The food (rabbit and deer) was outstanding.

The next day took the train to Mulhouse. It was an easy ride to the station but had some minor hassle with purchasing the tickets, the elevator and finding the appropriate train car to store our tandem.

Because there was no luggage car attached to the train, the very cooperative conductor allowed us to put our tandem in the last car, which obviously was for railroad and official personnel. When we told the curious conductor that Bill was from the US, he jokingly commented: “Nobody's perfect!” Nonetheless, he and the “policiers” we rode with helped us to unload the tandem at Mulhouse.

At our Hotel St. Bernard, where we were enthusiastically greeted by Una, a friendly canine of the appropriate species. We dumped our bags and rode to Sultz. We did not have much time to explore this little attractive town, which would have deserved better attention.

Mulhouse is another town that would deserve more than the few hours we spent there on the following day. The highlights included a typical and tasty lunch in a restaurant we discovered by chance and which is frequented mostly by locals, a visit by Bill to the renowned and well stocked Train Museum, and an evening spent at the Fairgrounds for the Jours d'Octobre, the local “state fair”. We also ran across the interesting idea of “typical US” that you see to the right.



Whirlwind tour of Sundgau

Leaving Mulhouse, instead of following the (flat) roads and canal straight like an arrow to St. Louis, we chose to tour the somewhat hilly Sundgau region. We took the road along the canal in direction southwest, passing by Zillisheim and Illfurth. Then had to go cross-country to Altkirch and continued to Hirsingue by climbing a very steep hill and riding on an unpaved road for a while. We were rewarded for all the effort at the entrance of Hirsingue, where Bill spotted a nice and popular inn

for lunch, Auberge des Trois Valles. It looked simple, but was very nice and almost formal inside with lots of nicely-dressed older patrons. Had an excellent lunch, with Bill trying his last Alsatian specialty, Rognon de Veau in a mustard cream sauce.

After lunch we continued on our hilly path towards St. Louis, following a more direct but more trafficked road. This section of the Sundgau is very pretty, with open views of pastures and no vineyards. Actually, we saw a sign calling the road we were traveling on: "la route du lait"

Our arrival at St. Louis late in the afternoon concluded our bike tour of 350 miles and 10 thousand feet of elevation - and thus we conclude this article. The next day we rented a car to pick up Bill's new bike in Freiburg and tour the main crest of the Vosges. But that is another story.

Posted 12/27/2008

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