

Bicycle Adventure Club
Tips on Directing a BAC Ride in Europe

By Sid Russak
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1. Hotel Reservations

- The Ride Leader reserves rooms and pays the bill for the entire group.
- Make hotel reservations as early as possible, preferably 18 months to a year in advance, but no later than Aug-Oct of the year before the ride.
- Obtain an acknowledgment commitment from all hotels prior to submitting your ride proposal budget to BAC for approval.
- Request a group rate (e-mail is preferred, but some hotels still require fax) and one or more free rooms, depending on group size. Hotels usually offer 1 person in a double room free for 20 paying persons, and 2 people in a double room for 30 paying persons. With a group size of 26 people we ask for 1 double room free and about half the hotels grant it. The word “gratis” is more readily understood in Europe than “free”.
- Hotels are much more likely to accept groups for just one or two overnights if you take your dinners with them (demi-pension, half-board). This is especially true of small resort hotels or country inns.
- Don't let hotels put you off with the statement that the rates are not yet determined that far in advance. State in your original request that they can quote the current group rates with an understanding that the rates may increase slightly.
- Request free and secure bike storage and van parking.
- When the hotel sends an offer, immediately confirm your reservation. Offer to pay them a deposit the equivalent of about \$500 within 2 months. If they want a larger deposit to secure the reservation, ask if you can send the smaller amount initially with the balance of the deposit to follow. Do not send any deposits until you have obtained all your hotel reservations and have received initial rider deposits to cover them. In many countries, accepting your deposit makes your reservation a binding contract.
- Require that hotels send you an acknowledgment of receipt of your deposits!! Take all receipts and payment records with you on the trip!
- Get each hotel's cancellation policy in writing. Even if a hotel's cancellation policy is posted on their website, it may be different for groups.

2. Finances

- Use e-mail for all rider communication.
- Require initial deposits of at least \$500 from each rider signing up for the trip. These rider deposits can be used to pay the initial hotel deposits. Schedule the remainder of rider deposits in 3 additional payments so the trip is fully paid 4 to 6 months in advance. Riders are less likely to drop out if they have completed all payments prior to Christmas of the year preceding the trip. Inform riders of the payment schedule and send a payment reminder in a trip update e-mail prior

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to each due date. An announced late payment fee policy will reduce the incidence of late payments.

- Set up a system (spreadsheets, Quicken, etc.) to record all receipts and expenses for the tour.
- Keep tour funds in a separate account. Notify the BAC office of the bank and account number.
- Payments may be made by credit card, by Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT), or by checks from a company that provides worldwide currency payments. If you pay by credit card, check to see if there is a surcharge for European payments. Most credit cards add 1% to 3%. If yours has a surcharge, it would be worth it to obtain a credit card from a company that doesn't have a surcharge. As of August, 2008, Capitol One credit cards had no European surcharges.
- Banks and credit unions can make payments directly into hotel accounts via EFT, but they often charge up to \$35 per transaction. If you are a special or long-time customer your bank may waive your charges. It is worth checking with your bank.
- Homeland Security has introduced reporting requirements and restrictions on foreign currency accounts that have made it prohibitively expensive to hold foreign currency accounts in banks operating in the US. Banks that offer such accounts (Credit Suisse, etc.) have very high minimum balance requirements and their transaction charges are several times what they charge their customers in Europe. If you show up at a bank in Ireland with your US passport you can open an account there and conduct all your business over the Internet. Irish bank accounts are in Euros, their Internet interfaces are among the very best, their transaction fees are minimal and their customer service people speak better English than most US customer service departments!
- If you have a personal business entity (professional, consulting, etc.) your business can obtain an account with Ruesch International, now Travelex a global business payments company in Washington, D.C. (For those of you who dealt with Ruesch in the past, due to Homeland Security restrictions Travelex no longer does business with individuals and foreign currency holding is limited to 90 days.) Checks in Euros or 19 other currencies cost \$5.00 and EFTs in over 130 foreign currencies cost as little as \$8.00. You can lock in tour costs by buying foreign currencies and holding them up to 90 days for future purchases, or by obtaining a forward contract to purchase currency at a set price at a future date. You can set up an account with Ruesch over the phone without depositing any money. Once you are set up with access to Travelex's online account management system, you can purchase currency or order checks. You can pay by faxing a copy of your payment check to Travelex. Of course, everything can more simply be handled out of holdings if you do maintain a balance with Travelex. Contact Travelex at www.travelexbusiness.com/na or at 1-800-424-2923. While a Travelex account is convenient, it is not without cost. On test transactions conducted on the same day, the Travelex exchange rate was 3% higher than the exchange rate applied to a Capitol One credit card charge.
- If you order checks for the final payment to hotels, plan on leaving a residual to pay with a credit card so that, if someone cancels at the last minute, you won't have the BIG problem of trying to get a refund from the hotel(s) for a portion of your check.
- Tom Leever and Randy Glover, functioning as the Club's Foreign Transaction Study Committee, have published a study of foreign transaction costs during 2008, a period in which the dollar was falling, in eBulletin Volume 5, Issue 3. This document is accessible through the Member

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Services window on the BAC website. Contact either of these individuals for further discussion of foreign transactions during the time period of your planned ride.

3. Van Rental

- Important notes follow for passenger vans and cargo vans. Most web addresses below are for one and not the other. Read all following notes before going to a website.
- There are many companies to choose from. You should be willing to make several inquiries. Popular rental agencies include Hertz, www.hertz.com, Avis, www.avis.com, Sixt, www.sixt.com, and Europcar, www.europcar.com. For Italian rentals try www.amicoblu.it. They have had great rates for a 1-month rental in the past, however you may have to call the office and ask for their best price. Use the websites' retail locations guides to find Tel, Fax, e-mail numbers and addresses for rental agencies in your pickup city. Check the Internet for more companies. To facilitate comparisons, try to find a site that lists many companies. Kemwel, www.kemwel.com, and Auto Europe, www.autoeurope.com, are car and passenger van rental discount brokers who obtain rentals through all these agencies and more, consistently at rates far below those available from the agency directly. Keep checking rates; they often improve in the late spring.
- Get maximum available liability, collision and comprehensive insurance. Get a comprehensive rental rate, which includes taxes, insurance and unlimited mileage for passenger vans or a generous mileage allowance for cargo vans. CDW coverage provided by charging to your credit card usually applies to 7-passenger vans or smaller and never to cargo vans. Be sure to check with your credit card company before relying on your credit card's CDW coverage. Insurance for the van's contents is almost never available, so advise your ride participants to have their own insurance to cover their luggage and other articles on the van.
- If riders are expected to share the driving, state that in the tour description and in your first rider communication. Rental agencies charge for additional drivers and most agencies limit the number of additional drivers to 3. If the parent agency limits the number of drivers, you may be able to negotiate directly with the agency where you will pick up your vehicle for any number you require. You must provide each driver's actual drivers license (no photocopies). If you pick up the van before your riders arrive, you can return to the agency to add additional drivers to the rental contract. Europcar has even allowed additional drivers to be added to the contract in a different country than the pickup country. Keep a list of drivers in the van with a note authorizing them to drive. It can be difficult for a driver stopped by authorities if the van papers are in your name there is no note authorizing the driver.
- There are many other rental agencies in Europe. Check them out, but remember, the bigger, longer established companies are the one most likely to deliver the vehicle on time and in good condition. If you use one of the auto rental brokers such as Kemwel or Auto-Europe, make sure to confirm that they have an office at the pickup and drop off sites. They usually fix you up with a major agency, but on the rare occasion they don't, you don't want to be looking for some guy waving a sign with your name on it at the terminal. If they don't arrange a rental with an agency that has a permanent office (even shared), find an agency that does.

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- Make sure your van has a spare tire and that you know where the tire tools are and how to remove them. In some vans you can see the tool box, but it is not obvious how to remove it. Ask to be shown how the kit is removed and verify that it contains the necessary tools.
- Your van should also have emergency and first aid kits. Most countries in Europe now require that an emergency triangle, a reflective vest and a first aid kit be in every vehicle. Since tools and kits are removable, always check for their presence. If required equipment isn't in the vehicle, purchase it or risk a citation in the event of an accident or at occasional police checkpoints.
- In case of an accident try to involve the police so there is an official police report. If there is not an accident report form in your van, Google "auto accident information form" and print a copy for the van. When an accident happens the driver is often flustered and an accident report form or checklist is a great aid for obtaining required information. You need to obtain all the same information you would at home: Drivers license information of the other driver, the other vehicle's registration and insurance information, names of other persons involved in the accident, and names and addresses of witnesses, if possible. Keep the accident report form and a pen in the van at all times. In addition to printed information, use your camera to take pictures of everything, including the other driver's license and insurance information, vehicle license, damage and injuries.
- Send the van directly to the next hotel to unload luggage before allowing personal use. There is always the possibility of theft and extreme hardship would ensue if riders lost their luggage. One van was broken into while within view of a driver who had stopped for coffee.
- Make arrangements for a van of suitable size. Decide whether you can use a passenger van or require a cargo van. Passenger vans are available from car rental agencies, discount rental brokers and "buy-back tourist lease" providers. Cargo vans have their own considerations.

Passenger Vans

- ◆ Also available are 18-day and 21-day minimum "buy-back tourist leases" which give you a better rate, because insurance is included and there are no taxes or airport charges. With this arrangement you actually purchase the vehicle (with a promissory note) and then the agency repurchases it from you for an agreed upon amount at the end of the "lease". You pay the difference between the purchase price and the return price to pick up the vehicle. The promissory note only comes due if you don't return the vehicle. Advantages are that the vehicle is brand new, is the exact vehicle you order, is 100% insured (zero deductible), and 24-7 roadside assistance is provided throughout Europe. You also can go into many countries not allowed in rental agreements, and since you actually own the vehicle, you can give permission to any number of licensed drivers to operate it. Pickup and return is free all over France, and at an additional charge in other countries. [This is a tax free program subsidized by the French government on French vehicles (Renault and Peugeot) and is available only to people who reside outside the EU. No French citizen may operate the vehicle, but this is enforceable only within France. Insurance covers all drivers, including French citizens.] 18-day minimum "leases" on Peugeot vehicles are available through Kemwel and Auto Europe. 21-day minimum "leases" on Renault vehicles are available from Renault Eurodrive, www.renaultusa.com. Peugeot's largest

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passenger van is quite small (comparable in size to a US 7-passenger van). Renault has much larger passenger vans.

- ◆ Rates (plus rental taxes) in some countries are much higher than in others. If you have options, then rent and return in the country with the lower rates. Make sure that you are permitted to take the van into the countries that you will be touring. If not doing a circle tour, then you may need to return the van in another city or country, and pay drop-off charges. These charges vary greatly among rental companies. Compare charges!!
- ◆ Request a 9-passenger van (with a luggage rack, if possible). Not all 9-passenger vans are created equal. Renault Traffic, Ford Transit and Mercedes-Benz Sprinter are quite large. Some vans rated 9-passenger are quite small. Be sure to check the size by surfing the Internet. All the large passenger vans have a cargo van version. You can determine the size of the cargo space by looking at the specs for the cargo van. If you don't remove the rear seats, remember to allow for the space they take up.

Cargo Vans

With the increasing use of large hard-sided bike cases, carrying and/or storing these objects becomes a problem. The solution often is to rent a cargo van large enough for all the luggage and bike cases (for example, Iveco Daily). Cargo vans are not available through discount brokers or on "buy-back tourist leases" and usually can't be rented through an agency's US affiliate, but can be rented by fax, phone or Internet directly to the local agency in the European town. They must be returned to the same town.

- ◆ Europcar is the only company mentioned here that makes it easy to rent a cargo van throughout Europe. (In France only, RentACar, www.rentacar.fr, also makes cargo van rental easy.) You can view Europcar's fleet by going to www.europcar.com, clicking on Vehicles and then Vans & Trucks. Hertz does rent cargo vans and trucks in various European countries, but you have to visit the specific country's Hertz website to find them. For example, to find Hertz van rentals in Germany go to www.hertz.de, select English and then Transporter & LKW. To find Hertz van rentals in France go to www.hertz.fr, select English and then Other Hertz Operations.

4. Maps

These can be expensive, and difficult to obtain. Fortunately, there are a number of sources that have been used successfully to obtain maps in quantity at reduced costs. A number of these are listed below. After you locate the maps you want, or to help you locate the maps you want, most of the maps referred to below are also available from map retailers in the United States.

The following US stores specialize in maps. They may or may not give a quantity discount. We have obtained quantity prices from owner Russell Guy at Omnimap, a small family-run map supply company, that beat the best prices from several European map suppliers, and ships from North Carolina. Contact Russell at guy@omnimap.com, identify yourself as a BAC Ride Director for a BAC discount.

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Browse the following sites to find both road and specialty bicycling maps:

Omnimap, www.omnimap.com/catalog/int/bicycle.htm for bicycle maps or Maps menu for road maps

Amazon.com, www.amazon.com

Map Link, www.maplink.com

Maps.com, www.maps.com

Maps Unlimited, www.mapsunlimited.com

Globe Corner Bookstore, www.globecorner.com

Smallworldmaps, www.smallworldmaps.com

Italy

The best maps for cycle touring in Italy are from the Touring Club Italiano (TCI) (available at Omnimap, www.omnimap.com/catalog/int/bicycle.htm). The 1:200,000 series covers each of the major regions, such as Tuscany, Umbria, Puglia, etc. If you join TCI (their website is at www.touringclub.it) for 25 Euros, you can get a 20% discount on all their maps and other publications, such as travel guides for different regions, restaurant guides, etc. They charge 15 Euros for shipping, so try to order everything at one time.

Litografia Artistica Cartografica, located in Florence (Firenze) produces dozens of maps of important Italian towns and local districts. They offer a volume discount. Their Italian language website is at www.globalmap.it.

France

Michelin France Regional Series maps 1:150,000, Kummerley+Frey France Regional Road Maps 1:180,000, and IGN maps are available at Omnimap, www.omnimap.com. The new IGN 1:100,000 topo/cycling series is excellent for cycle touring and is available at Omnimap, www.omnimap.com/catalog/int/bicycle.htm.

Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary

The superb HAUPKA 1:100000 bicycling maps (*Radtourenkarte*) of all of Germany (49 maps, but you don't have to order the whole set) can be obtained from ADAC Verlag. They also have ADAC 1:100,000 & 1:75,000 bicycle touring maps, which are excellent. You can check out the regions best covered by each set on their German language website, www.adac-verlag.de.

Lots of other bicycling maps can be obtained from MairDumont: Phone 011 49 711 4502 304, Fax 011 49 711 4502 150 (the number of digits can differ between phone & fax numbers in Germany & Austria). MairDumont offers quantity discounts of 30%-35%. Their catalog, available free, is fascinating.

MairDumont has all the maps of the 27 map set of the ADFC (General Cycling Club) 1:15000 *Radtourenkarte*. They also have the complete 30 set of KOMPASS 1:125000 *Radwanderkarte* specialty maps for the major cycling routes in Germany, Austria, Czech Republic and Hungary.

For large scale, but not special cycling maps, MairDumont also produces and sells 1:200,000 set in the Marco Polo series. MairDumont also has 1:150000 & 1:200000 *Die Generalkarte* series for Austria (3 maps), all of Italy (12 maps, almost as good for cycling as the TCI series), Belgium, Holland, portions of

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Spain, Portugal, France, Czech Republic & Slovakia (available at Omnimap, www.omnimap.com/catalog/int/bicycle.htm). Also available, are specialty large scale booklets for favorite cycling routes, such as the Danube, Bodensee, Alsace in France, Adige in Italy, etc.

MairDumont's website at www.mairdumont.com is not an on-line store, but call Rebeca Capriles, or e-mail r.capriles@mairdumont.com, for suggestions on the best type of maps for your routing and for discount pricing. For delivery in the US, all MairDumont products are also available from MairDumont's US distributor Omnimap, at www.omnimap.com/catalog/int/bicycle.htm.

Excellent Austrian cycling maps & books of maps can be obtained from the publisher Verlag Roland Esterbauer, Trade name BIKELINE. Their full line includes a multi-country bicycling map series at 1:100000 to be completed by 2006, but with most available now. They have about 150 bike touring map books (similar to an AAA triptik) for Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary, France and Switzerland. These all are for specific regions, especially suited for bike touring (such as Danube Bike Path). Fax: 011 43 2983 28982-500. Their website German language website is at www.esterbauer.com. You can also find BIKELINE maps at US stores listed below.

A great source for European cycling guides is www.cartovelo.fr/index.php?cPath=34.

Greece

The Efstathiadis Group in Athens publishes a series of maps of Greece. Contact them by e-mail at sales@efgroup.gr. Their Greek language website at www.efgroup.gr is not easy to use.

Holland

Cycling maps can be purchased from the publisher (no discount), ANWB Museumplein 5, 1071 Amsterdam, Holland (available at Omnimap, www.omnimap.com/catalog/int/bicycle.htm).

Belgium

The 1:50,000 cycling series for Belgium is available at Omnimap, www.omnimap.com/catalog/int/bicycle.htm.

Ireland

Maps may be ordered from Kennys Bookshop, Dublin. E-mail: mapsandprints@kennys.ie

European Countries, also Australia and New Zealand

If you have identified a map, and wish a quantity purchase, ask with Stanfords (London), www.stanfords.co.uk. They stock many series of maps and guidebooks under various labels. The ISBN number of the map that you are seeking is a good starting point.

5. Other Information

If you haven't already done so, be sure to read *How to Organize a Ride* (on the **MORE...** page of the BAC Website). It contains important information applicable to rides led in any country.

As noted in Section 2, eBulletin Volume 5, Issue 3 (reached through the Member Services window on the website), contains a study of foreign transaction costs during 2008. The authors, Tom Leever and Randy Glover, are available for individual consultation.