



**WHERE** Belgium to the Black Sea  
**START** Brussels **FINISH** Constanta, Romania  
**DISTANCE** 3,000km **WORDS** Chloé Mispelon  
**PICTURES** Chloé Mispelon



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# BRUSSELS TO THE BLACK SEA

**Chloé Mispelon** and her partner and **Jérôme** spent the summer cycling 3,000km across Europe – accompanied by their two-year-old daughter, **Rose**

**I**t was a misty Sunday. We left home quietly, just the three of us. Two bikes, a trailer, six legs, and all the luggage we could carry. We took the usual road to the park but this time we didn't stop there. The plan for the day was to reach Leuven. The plan for the next three months was to reach the Black Sea.

We had been talking about it for a while. It was the kind of idea that only dreamers can have, and only someone in love with a dreamer could make happen. Travelling as a family was definitely part of it. We had never done such a long trip before: who can manage to get enough money to be off work for three months? Well, the Belgian state gives three months of parental leave to both parents. Not full salary and not always easy to arrange with the employer, but still: three months to focus on our family. What else could we have done other than go travelling?

So there we were: Jérôme, Chloé and Rose on the first day of our big adventure, gently moistened by the Belgian rain. For the first day, 30km seemed reasonable. For the rest of the trip we thought we would do 50km a day, six days a week.

Of course, things didn't go as planned and we spent



## DO IT YOURSELF

For information about the EuroVelo network, visit the EuroVelo.com website. Some of the more developed routes (such as EuroVelo 6 and EuroVelo 15) have their own websites. The Danube route (EuroVelo 6) is at [eurovelo6.org](http://eurovelo6.org), while the Rhine route is at [rhinecycleroute.eu](http://rhinecycleroute.eu)

the first night wild-camping in a field. Unable to reach our intended destination, we were wet, exhausted and pensive. The next morning, two things were obvious: Jérôme's back needed a rest, and we could not rely on only a GPS and signposting. And so when we finally made it to Leuven, an expensive hotel room and a cycling map of the region were on the agenda.

## A SOGGY START

The key when you leave unprepared is to be flexible enough to be able to handle anything that might come up. That said, some practice rides with the bikes fully loaded and the purchasing of some paper maps in advance would have helped. Nevertheless, we went on, trying to find the best rhythm and the best path – learning more about each other every day, discovering new landscapes, and enduring the rain.

On day five we were hoping to take a proud photo of our first border as we crossed into the Netherlands but we ended up in the centre of Maastricht. Darn it! We had missed the shot. But thinking back, at an earlier point in the day, the cycle path had become wider and better

## “We decided to skip Prague and get to the Danube early, using the orientation tools nature and engineers had given us: rivers and canals.”

marked – how come we hadn't noticed? The Netherlands hosted us just for a night but didn't disappoint: wide cycle paths, reliable signposting, a choice of itineraries... and a proper rainstorm.

We could see that the trailer was waterproof, at least when the water wasn't coming up from the ground. (Have you ever noticed that heavy rain drops can bounce higher than 15cm?) That night we had wet sleeping bags, but that was the last time we let the rain surprise us. From then on, anything that could get wet was wrapped in double plastic bags, rain jackets were placed on the top of the panniers, and the rain cover of the trailer was rolled in a way that wouldn't require more than ten seconds to unwrap and zip down. Every day during the first three weeks we had to use the rain jackets.

### FOLLOWING BIG RIVERS

Three weeks was also the amount of time we needed to find a working rhythm for the three of us. Leaving a place

was always complicated so we decided to avoid frequent stops and instead do longer ones. It was also useless to try to be pedalling early in the morning; no matter how early we woke up, we were never on the road before 10am.

Upon reaching the Rhine, we felt liberated. The river meant that there was no need for the GPS or even the maps. Following a river is the most obvious route you can find. It is mainly flat and you can never be lost for too long. Moreover, the Rhine cycle route (EuroVelo 15) is one of the most developed cycle routes in Europe; infrastructure and facilities for cyclists were numerous. We really felt welcomed.

We enjoyed cycling along the Rhine so much that it made us reconsider our itinerary. The original plan was to reach Prague and then to go south to Vienna, but we decided to skip the Czech capital and get to the Danube as early as possible, using the great orientation tools mother nature (and human engineering) have given us: rivers and canals. Thus we went along the River Main and then the Main-Danube canal to reach the Danube in Kelheim, in the south of Germany.

The Danube cycle route (part of EuroVelo 6) is one of Europe's most frequented long-distance cycle routes, particularly between Germany and Austria. This section was like a cycle-touring Disneyland. Plenty of accommodation, restaurants and shops along the way, >

#### IN THE PHOTOS

**1)** The statue of the Dacian king Decebalus, near the city of Orsova in Romania, isn't ancient it was completed in 2004

**2)** Following rivers made navigation easy. Chloé, Jérôme, and Rose cycled by the rivers Rhine, Main, and Danube





**IN THE PHOTOS**

**3)** The Hungarian Parliament in Budapest

**4)** After the cycling, it was time to break out the Lego. So long as each day's ride wasn't too long, Rose didn't get bored. She even napped in the trailer

**5)** Arriving at the Black Sea, after 3000km of riding

**“When we mentioned the idea, our families were unenthusiastic. ‘What will you do with Rose?’”**

Other cycle tourists to talk to, and some good but redundant signposting (you just had to follow everyone else). Seeing as we are French, we found reasons to complain: the path was crowded; we were overtaken by groups of elderly tourers on pedelecs; and camping was expensive... But it was undeniably one of the easiest parts of our entire trip.

**JOURNEY'S END**

We proudly reached Budapest, where we met up with some family and friends, and enjoyed the pleasure of having a kitchen. After that, the journey changed dramatically. We faced a heat wave and some not-so-touristic areas. We struggled to find diapers. It was sometimes difficult to achieve our usual intake of calories.

We switched to fizzy drinks there. Easily accessible on the road, many tiny grocery shops were all selling cold (well, cooler than 30°) Coke. It was way easier than finding milk or meat. By the end of August, we were on 1-litre of Coke a day each (except Rose, who was drinking juice).

Our legs had gotten stronger, and our daily routine was set. We were confident. The landscape was beautiful, the peak tourist season over. The end of the journey was not so far, and there were no doubts we would make it.

And we did. We reached the sea on a late afternoon after the longest day of cycling: 80km, hilly, with heavy traffic

in places. Walking the bikes on the promenade, we felt like the kings of the world.

**TOURING WITH A TODDLER**

When we first mentioned the idea of the tour to our families and friends, they were unenthusiastic. ‘What are you going to do with Rose?’ Obviously she was coming with us. ‘But how? Poor little girl!’ My mother-in-law was not impressed.

We saw the trip as three months of family time, while everyone else seemed to think that we had a whim and would be locking Rose in a trailer all day. So we had to explain time and again that we would be doing a maximum of four hours of cycling per day, when Rose would be in a comfortable trailer, full of toys and books, where she could take her daily nap.

I guess it doesn't work for all kids. But our two-year-old could enjoy staying quiet, focusing on her books or her Playmobils, and even the landscape, for two hours in a row.

The biggest challenge when travelling with a toddler is the restriction it puts on your flexibility. You need proper food and a place to spend the night after every four-hour ride. We found that cycling any longer made her way too edgy and us way too tired to enjoy the end of the afternoon. Even though EuroVelo routes are pretty well developed in terms of restaurants and accommodation along the way, a four-hour ride with a heavy load doesn't allow you to cover that much ground. So there were not always services where and when we wanted them.

Food can also be tricky. Two adults can postpone a meal or just have some canned food once in a while.

**EUROVELO ROUTES**

EuroVelo incorporates existing and planned national and regional cycle routes into a single European network. The network consists of 14 separate routes, each with their own theme (e.g. EuroVelo 1 – Atlantic Coast Route, EuroVelo 13 – Iron Curtain Trail, etc). The EuroVelo routes can be used by long-distance cycle tourists, as well as by local people on their daily journeys. In the UK, EuroVelo routes link to parts of the National Cycle Network.

EuroVelo is coordinated by the European Cyclists' Federation (ECF), who expect that the routes will be completed by 2020, at which time the network will total over 70,000 km. There is already official EuroVelo signposting installed in many places around Europe, including parts of Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland and the UK. But until the routes are complete, it is helpful to know which national or regional routes you should follow rather than just relying on the EuroVelo signs.

For more on the European Cyclists' Federation, see the website [ecf.com](http://ecf.com)



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## FACT FILE BRUSSELS TO THE BLACK SEA

**When:** We cycled from Brussels to Constanta, Romania, on the Black Sea. We took the train twice: from Budapest to Belgrade and from the Danube Gorges to Bucharest.

**When to go:** We left on the first of July and came back at the end of September. It was a rainy July and a sunny August. From June to September is the best time for cycle touring if you plan to camp.

**Distance:** Our GPS recorded 2,826km but there were times when it had no battery so we estimate that we reached the 3,000km threshold. We aimed for 40km per day.

### Cycling conditions:

Scenic cycle paths in Germany. Main roads in Serbia and Romania, shared with traffic or horses pulling carts.

**Accommodation:** The first part of the trip (until Budapest) we mainly camped. We spent the night in a hotel (preferably with a bathtub) once a week. We stayed in small rooms in Serbia and Romania as they were affordable, and campsites

were infrequent and not especially nice.

**Getting back:** From the Black Sea, we reached Istanbul with a 12-hour drive by night bus. Then we took a flight back to Brussels. We had checked that the company would allow us to take the bikes. They did: 40 Euros each.

**Bike used:** City bikes. Mine (Chloé's) was the one I use to go to work: a 3 year-old Grandville, basic (only six gears) but robust. Jérôme borrowed one from a relative. It had gears and brakes in the hub. We had many issues with it and it always took ages to fix. Our main investment was the trailer: a Chariot Corsair 2.

**I'm glad I had:** my leather-and-cork flip-flops – my only footwear for three months. And Rose's bed: a pop-up tent (set up in our tent or room). It enabled her to sleep in the same environment each night.

**I wish I'd had:** a smaller and more discrete camera than our SLR. A pair of lycra shorts that could dry overnight.



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Children, however, need regular food and a balanced diet. We made sure that Rose had regular fruit and vegetables – bananas, cucumbers and watermelon were widely available. Added to this was a weekly dose of broccoli (her favourite vegetable), defrosted in a hotel bathtub.

The other challenge was milk. She was on two baby bottles a day. Sometimes it was easy to find small portions, sometimes not. We then had to add 1-2 litres of milk to our load. That said, only twice during the three-month trip did we fail the milk mission, meaning that she had to have dinner or breakfast without.

### LOOKING BACK

I do wonder what will she remember of these three months. She knows a lot of bicycle vocabulary. She knows that a flat tyre needs to be repaired. She knows that if you follow a river long enough, you end up at the sea. She knows that food needs to be bought from somewhere. She knows that cycling is harder uphill.

Will she remember days starting with a sleeping-bag hug? How much she enjoyed throwing stones in the river? Skype sessions with grandparents – 'Grandma, you know we are very, very, very far away.' Or the night she had to sleep without diapers? Her fall into the Danube? The frustration when we could not find our way?

I am not sure. But I know I will never forget that misty Sunday afternoon when we took the road to the park and didn't stop there. ☺

### IN THE PHOTOS

**6)** Hidden castles in Austria. 'Like Disneyland', Chloé called this section of the Danube route

**7)** In Western Europe, evening meant camping; in the east, an inexpensive room

