

Get on your bike

JEANNINE WILLIAMSON enjoys a scenic cycle ride along the Danube

It certainly wasn't your usual energy drink, but a tentative taste of Magenbitter, rather unappetizingly translated as 'stomach bitters' revealed a surprisingly sweet tippie.

It might usually be appreciated in Austria before and after meals, but at just €1 for a miniature shot-sized bottle the warming elixir provided an injection of pedal power.

We'd stopped for a photo opportunity at Engelhartzell, on yet another picturesque bend of the River Danube. Home to Austria's only Trappist monastery, the enterprising monks have long been renowned for making beer and Magenbitter, the latter from a customarily secret recipe involving 42 herbs and sold to them by a Swiss pharmacist in 1930. Whatever the contents, it did the trick and we headed happily off down the track towards our next stop at Schlongener Schlinge.

With or without a boost of Magenbitter, a cycle trip is a wonderful way to see the legendary Blue Danube. Taking in areas such as the UNESCO-listed Wachau Valley, arguably the most picturesque stretch of Europe's second longest river, the ever-changing panorama proved a wonderful distraction from thoughts of sore legs and posteriors as our group of mostly rookie pedallers embarked on the seven-night 180-mile trip from Passau to Vienna.

Passau occupies a unique location on the confluence of the rivers Danube, Inn and Ilz in southeastern Germany. Our first afternoon included a boat trip, where we raised our first beers to the adventure that lay ahead.

But you don't need to channel your inner Chris Froome or be clad head-to-toe in Lycra to complete the journey. With wide cycle paths that easily accommodated my initial wobbles and which are, most importantly, flat, it's a leisurely journey that's equally achievable for families with children as it is for silver surfers. There are various 'get out' clauses, such as the option to hop on trains or boats to shorten some of the days, and for an extra £65 you can even get a power assisted e-bike and cover the miles with the greatest of ease.

Adding to the comfort, our luggage was

whisked away each morning and magically reappeared by the time we checked into the next night's stop. The three and four-star hotels were all casual and welcoming, which is just the job when you arrive with ruddy cheeks, seriously flattened 'helmet hair' and longing for a shower and restorative meal.

A stopover highlight was Hotel Donauschlinge, set on a horseshoe bend on the river. Along the route there are various places where you criss-cross the Danube on charming ferries, sometimes ringing a bell to summon the ferryman. We caught one to reach the hotel and it was a wonderful way to arrive. We even found the energy to clamber up to the viewing platform at the top of steep Schlogener Blick which overlooks the spectacular 180-degree curve in the river.

The next day brought Linz, Austria's third largest city and a former European Capital of Culture where the futuristic high-tech Ars Electronica museum is lit up at night by a kaleidoscope of colours.

Another morning we stopped off for coffee and apple strudel in the historically contrasting town of Grein, where actors still tread the boards in Austria's oldest municipal theatre dating back to 1791. A tour of the tiny playhouse revealed that Grein once had the most cultured prisoners in the area. The theatre was connected to the jail where inmates could watch the performances through a window. Back on the other side, bygone theatregoers were probably adept at crossing their legs as anyone wanting to answer the call of nature had to use the very public toilet only separated from the auditorium by a flimsy curtain.

Stops in towns and villages were interspersed with long stretches of leisurely cycling, where we'd see swans and geese flying low over the still, morning water and exclaim at the herds of deer grazing in lush pastures, momentarily forgetting any connection with the venison widely featured on restaurant menus.

Sometimes the path would meander away from the Danube and cross tracts of farmland where we passed through apricot orchards against the backdrop of terraced

vineyards that produce the region's crisp and aromatic Gruner Veltliner wine. There was never any danger of getting lost as the cycle path is well-marked and we had the most detailed maps and information sheets pointing out places of interest.

Hearty and filling, Austrian food is the perfect fodder for active pursuits and our week was fuelled by pumpkin soup, hearty dumplings, all manner of pork, seasoned cabbage and rich stews - which we tucked into guilt-free.

The trip culminated in the grand Austrian capital and after dropping off our trusty bikes on the outskirts of town, we caught a train to the city centre.

Our final morning was spent on foot, and as we filed into a Viennese coffee house we chuckled at how easily we still fell into 'bike order', which had seen us cycling in front, behind or alongside the same person during our time on two wheels.

On one of the river ferries we'd spotted a wonderful old black and white photo of a group of female cyclists kitted out in jaunty tweeds and knits with a caption that roughly translated as "Women - we are trained, powerful and erotic". In our assorted mismatched cycle wear - and with some who hadn't ridden bikes since childhood - we didn't exactly match up. Nonetheless, a shot of the monks' wonder brew instilled a fleeting sense of two of them as we pedalled to our next destination with renewed vigour. And as I fell into bed early that night and went out like a light the third was certainly never going to be on the cards.

The Engelhartzell monks are a silent order, and in common with Trappist monks are only allowed to speak when absolutely necessary and not indulge in idle chat. Fortunately, we could raise our diminutive bottles of Magenbitter and rather larger glasses of beer and wine consumed during the week to say cheers. After the final toast at the end of the ride we certainly went home with plenty to talk about.