

Michael Cramer



# IRON CURTAIN TRAIL



IRON CURTAIN TRAIL

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*Shines in new splendor: the long market of Gdańsk*

## Introduction



The Iron Curtain stretched over a distance of almost 7,000 km through Europe from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea and divided the continent into east and west. Until the fall in 1989 it was a physical and ideological border between two hostile blocs. Not only were many neighbouring countries separated thereby, but also Germany was divided into east and west.

Today there is hardly anything left to see of the former death strip, the remnants are no longer a dividing line. Memories however must be made visible! We know that there are no mutual memories between west and east. The eastern and western Europeans have very different memories of the border. What the Warsaw Pact countries glorified as an 'anti-fascist protection barrier' was seen as by the western countries as a symbol of the lack of freedom that socialism actually provided.

The "Berlin Wall Trail", a 160 km trail along the former border around West Berlin, is one example of how visible, shared memories can succeed. As a Member of the Berlin Chamber of Deputies, I initiated this trail in order to allow people to 'experience' the history, culture and politics in the truest sense of the word, and as a vivid and exciting way to combine soft mobility with city tourism. We can learn a lot from this successful concept for larger-scale projects. The "Berlin Wall Trail" concept was successfully transferred to the national level with the creation of the 1,400 km "German German Border Trail" along the former Inner German border.

The aim of the Iron Curtain Trail, which is still in development, is to also transfer the idea of 'experiencing history' to a European level as well. This 6,800 km trail guides cyclists with an interest in history from the Barents Sea on the Norwegian-Russian border to the Black Sea along what used to be the Iron Curtain, which is now no longer a dividing line but a symbol of a shared, pan-European experience in a reunified Europe.

This was also a reason why, in the autumn of 2005, my proposal to include the project in the European Parliament's report on 'new prospects and new challenges for sustainable European tourism' was adopted by a large majority. Twenty countries, 14 thereof EU Member States, are involved. The "Iron Curtain Trail" is part of Europe's collective memories which can help promote the much talked-about European identity.

In addition, particularly due to its isolation, the former border zone has paradoxically now become a unique habitat for plants and wildlife. Since 2002 this 'Green Belt' has been under the patronage of Mikhail Gorbachev, the former President of the Soviet Union and now President of 'Green Cross International' (GCI).

The present brochure provides an overview of this unique project of pan-European remembrance and gives you a vivid impression of the multifaceted stages and the most important points of interest along the 'Iron Curtain Trail'. For those inspired by this brochure to take their own cycle trip through Europe's history and culture, a series of three books covering the entire trail is currently being produced by the Austrian publisher, Esterbauer Verlag. These books from the "bikeline" series not only contain a detailed description of the route and points of interest but also provide accurate maps and tried and trusted tips on where to shop, eat and stay.

Wishing you pleasurable reading and lively hours on the cycle,

Michael Cramer



## Acknowledgments

This brochure could not have been written without the support of various individuals and institutions. I therefore offer warm thanks for the generous help provided by the Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur, which gave me access to its archives and many historical photos.

Since, in contrast to my approach to other projects such as the Berlin Wall Trail and the German German Trail, I was unable to cycle and describe the entire route myself, I want to thank all those friends across Europe who did so in my place.

Timo Setälä covered the Norwegian-Russian and Finnish-Russian section, followed by Frank Wurft, who documented the Estonian-Latvian section as far as Tallinn. My thanks go to Stephan Felsberg for completing the section from Tallinn via Lithuania, Kaliningrad and Poland as far as the German-Polish border. The Czech-German border route was tackled by Pavel Svoboda, while Dr Pavel Sroubek took on the Slovakian-Austrian section. Adam Bodor was responsible for the routes along Hungary's borders with Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. Finally, I have Marco Bertram to thank for the final stretches through Romania and Bulgaria, with detours to Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece and Turkey, and on to the end of the Trail at the Black Sea.

I am also most grateful for the tireless assistance I received in coordinating the project and drafting this brochure from Christoph Gelbhaar, Uwe Giese, Korbinian Frenzel, Antje Kapek, Liesa Siedentopp, Jens Müller and Erdmute Safranski.

Last but not least, let me also thank the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources that launched the European Green Belt project, with the support of environmentalists from all over Europe. I am also grateful to Mikhail Gorbachev, co-founder and President of Green Cross International, for his warm support for that project.

# IRON CURTAIN TRAIN



From the Barents Sea to the Black Sea: The Iron Curtain Trail

## Overview

### The route of the “Iron Curtain Trail”



The trail begins at the Barents Sea and follows the Norwegian-Russian border and the Finnish-Russian border to the Baltic Sea before heading along the coastline of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Kaliningrad, Poland and the former GDR. From Lübeck it follows the former border between East and West Germany to the point where Saxony, Bavaria and the Czech Republic meet. Then it leads through the heights of the Bohemian Forest, past Moravia and Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia and crosses the Danube by Vienna. Along the southern border of Hungary the trail borders on Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. It then mainly follows the course of the Danube between Romania and Serbia before crossing Bulgaria and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, with detours into Greece and Turkey and finally ending at the shores of the Black Sea in Bulgaria. The trail runs through numerous national parks and combines a wide range of unique landscapes which have largely remained untouched due to their location on the border and the former exclusion zones. It also links countless memorials, museums and open-air facilities commemorating Europe's divided history and how it was overcome by peaceful revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe.

As with the “Berlin Wall Trail” and the “German German Border Trail” the Iron Curtain Trail can use any of the paved border patrol roads that still exist. The project is being worked on in many countries and regions of Europe, and numerous sections have already been completed and signposted. There are naturally many alternatives for the route the trail can take. Whether on the western or eastern side, whether closer to the border or further away, or on perforated slab patrol roads or asphalt. The proposed route runs as close to the former border as possible on surfaces that are comfortable to cycle on, avoids busy roads, often crosses the former border, provides information on monuments and museums and includes many sites that bear witness to history.

### History of the Iron Curtain

The history of the division of Europe did not begin with the end of World War II, but rather when Hitler seized power on 30 January 1933 and when German troops marched into Poland at the beginning of the World War II on 1 September 1939. Without the triggering of World War II by Nazi Germany, Europe would not have been divided. The anti-Hitler coalition, despite its differing ideologies, was united in the common fight against National Socialist Germany.

Things changed, however, shortly after the German army's unconditional surrender. On 5 March 1946, the former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had been voted out of office after the end of the war, stated in his famous speech in Fulton, Missouri that part of Europe had disappeared behind an 'Iron Curtain', creating a divided continent. The Cold War had begun.

Since the leaders of the Warsaw Pact States were not willing to grant political freedom and proved incapable of solving their countries' economic problems, there were repeated uprisings. The popular uprising in the GDR on 17 June 1953 was the first in the Soviet-controlled bloc after World War II. It was followed by the Poznań demonstrations in June 1956, the Hungarian Revolution in October 1956, the Prague Spring in 1968, the Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia as well as the birth of the Solidarność movement in Poland in 1980. The activities of the Solidarność trade union in Poland, Hungary's success in reaching out to the West, the independence movements in the Baltic states and the removal of the barbed wire fence at the Hungarian-Austrian border by the two countries' Foreign Ministers Gyula Horn and Alois Mock on 27 June 1989 all paved the way for the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe.



## Through the vastness of Scandinavia

The route through Norway and Finland



The Iron Curtain Trail starts in the very far north of Europe, near the Norwegian town of Kirkenes. From here, the first section leads to Neiden on the Norwegian-Finnish border. A notable characteristic of Kirkenes, the only larger town in the far north, is the closeness to Russia. The Border Country Museum and the war memorial, which commemorate liberation by the Red Army after four years of German occupation in the autumn of 1944, provide a good introduction to the cycle tour.



If you want to have first hand experience of the division of Europe, you can go to the town of Storskog, Norway's only official border crossing to Russia, which is about ten kilometres from the centre of Kirkenes. It is however difficult to enter Russia due to the visa requirements, which is why the planned route through Scandinavia runs along the Russian border, but not on Russian soil.

From Kirkenes, the first stage of the journey along the Iron Curtain follows along the Finnish-Norwegian border. Neiden, the centre of Norway's East Sami people, is the first town to be



Above: With a friendlier face today - the Finnish-Russian border near Raatteertie. Left: A "Green Belt" instead of the Iron Curtain - the route near Kuhmo



*Relaxation guaranteed - on the way to Vartius*

passed, which is also famous for its excellent salmon fishing. On the way, it is worth making a detour to Vaggatem near the border, where a restored World War II prisoner-of-war camp serves as a reminder of the region's history. From there you can also easily walk to the signpost marking where the borders of Norway, Finland and Russia meet, but beware: it is strictly forbidden to go beyond this point!

If you continue to follow the main route, you will cross the Norwegian-Finnish border at Näättämö, and after another 30 kilometres or so you will reach Sevettijärvi, the centre of the Inari Skolt Sami. Their homes are built along the roadside and the 'Heritage House' offers an insight into this Nordic culture.

### **History of Norway**

After centuries of foreign rule by Sweden and Denmark between 1380 and 1905, only interrupted by a brief period of independence in 1814 when the country established a constitution that remains largely unchanged to this day, Norway finally gained independence in 1905. Prince Carl of the House of Glücksburg, Haakon VII, was the first king.

In World War I, Norway declared neutrality alongside Denmark and Sweden. In World War II however, neutral Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany in April 1940 as part of Operation Weserübung, the main aim of which was to secure access to Swedish raw materials and to cut the British supply lines. This would not only help the economy of the German war, but would also promote the creation of a "European economic area" dominated by Germany.

The Norwegian resistance held for six weeks, but the German navy was too strong. The majority of the Norwegian

population rejected the occupiers and numerous resistance groups were formed. When the German troops withdrew they pursued a scorched earth policy, leaving many towns and factories in northern Norway burnt to the ground.

In 1949 Norway was one of the founding members of NATO. In 1960 the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) was formed with Denmark, Austria, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The history since 1969 is characterized by growth and prosperity from crude oil. Although referendums have repeatedly rejected membership of the European Union, Norway is, as a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), treated in many respects as an EU Member State and is also, as part of the Nordic Passport Union, a member of the Schengen Agreement..



The route continues through isolated woods and moorland, where you get a feel for Finland's vastness, and not just in your legs. In the next larger village, Inari, you can replenish your supplies and also visit the remarkable Sami Museum, also known as the National Museum of Sami Culture. It is also worth taking a one-day detour to the southern end of Lake Inari, known as the 'meeting point of three cultures', since the population here is made up of Inari Sami, Finns who moved here in the 1920s and 1930s, and Russian Orthodox Skolt Sami, who settled here during World War II.

You then cycle past Saariselkä, the most northern village in the EU, and Tankavaara, where you can learn the art of panning for gold. The nature-lovers among you will love the picturesque path over the Ilmakkaaapa bog, a few kilometres to the south. A little further on, a special attraction awaits you in Savukoski, if you are willing to make a short detour. According to legend, Santa Claus lives on the nearby mountain of Korvatunturi.

Your journey continues along the former east-west border through Salla and the Oulanka National Park with its gorges, canyons, valleys and river beds. The route then passes through the fisher's paradise of Hossa and on to Suomussalmi. Here a permanent exhibition on "The Winter War in Suomussalmi" invites you to learn about Finland's history in World War II. Immediately afterwards you cycle along an authentic part of this history, the Raate Road. This was the site of the decisive battle of Suomussalmi in 1939-40, in which the 44th division of the Soviet army was annihilated. At the other end of the road you will find the only frontier guard post in Finland from the period before World War II which houses a museum and that has been restored to its original 1939 condition. The Winter War Museum further south in Kuhmo, which gives you an impression of the Winter War, rounds off this historical programme. Kuhmo is also famous for its new Finnish wooden architecture by the internationally celebrated





*Monument for the veterans of the Soviet-Finnish War (1939/40) at the theatre of war Raate*

architects Mikko Heikkinen and Markku Komonen, and for its annual summer chamber music festival.

Further along the road towards Lieksa you will pass the Jyrkänköski war memorial before once again entering a mostly deserted landscape. Lieksa, with its beautiful backdrop of lakes and hills, is worth a visit to see the second-largest open-air museum in Finland. The Iron Curtain Trail now passes through Ilomantsi, where the decisive battle in the Finnish-Russian Continuation War took place in the summer of 1944. There are several monuments and the "Fighter's House" commemorating these events. From Ilomantsi, the trail passes a number of small villages until you reach Värtsilä, which was divided into a Finnish and a Russian section after the wars and has thus become a special monument to the division of the European continent. Not far away is the border checkpoint of Niirala, the most eastern border checkpoint on the EU mainland.

The route then follows along a narrow gravel road along Lake Kiteenjärvi to Kitee. It continues through Puhos, Lappeenranta and Uukuniemi to Siikalampi, the most interesting bird lake in Finland, which is not only enthralls birdwatchers. South of the town of Simpele lies a man-made attraction: the old hydroelectric power stations of Ritakoski and Lahnasenkoski, which are worth visiting.

For those who would like to treat themselves to refreshment after the many kilometres in the saddle, there is a beautiful lake with crystal-clear water not far from Laikko. Those who prefer to

concentrate on the history should cycle to Miettälä, where there is a garrison post. The army reservist barracks were built in the 1880s and are certainly worth a visit as a historic site.

After Miettälä you ride along a museum road built in 1989, which takes you along a section of the border that was much fought over in the past. Further south, near the town of Imara, there is the border museum at Immola garrison, which was originally founded by local border officials as a way of passing the time. The main focus of the permanent exhibition is on the history of Finland's borders and border guards after the country became independent. Near Imatra you should also admire the famous Imatrakoski waterfalls, one of Finland's most popular tourist destinations. You will be left with less pleasant impressions by the Konnunsuo Penitentiary a little further south, which was founded in 1918 and is still in use. Together with the surrounding housing it forms a unique cultural and architectural unit.

The path continues along the Saimaa Canal, which allows the Finnish-Russian border traffic on the water. In Nuijamaa you should have a look at one of the many 'reconstructed churches' built to replace churches destroyed during the war. Before you reach the end of the Scandinavian section there is one last particular historic attraction in Miehikkälä: housed in an old bunker, the Salpa Line Museum (Salpalinjämuseo) commemorates a heavily fortified World War II line of defence on the eastern border. Just a short distance further on you approach Virolahti, which is eight kilometres from the Russian border and marks the end of this section of the trail.

## **History of Finland**

Finland's history was largely one of foreign domination until into the 20th century, since the majority of what is now Finland was under Swedish rule for many years. The south of present Finland became a permanent part of Swedish territory in the 14th century and its population was converted to Christianity. In the Middle Ages an Estate society developed.

In the 18th century, however, Sweden's power in the region waned. After constant clashes it was finally forced in 1809 to cede its Finnish territory to Russia. The area then became the Grand Duchy of Finland and an integral part of the Russian Empire. The new foreign rulers however allowed a considerable degree of self-government to the areas they controlled so that a Finnish nationalism gradually began to develop. The increasing efforts of the foreign rulers to centralise and Russianise the empire ultimately led to growing tensions from the end of the 19th century. After the Russian tsardom collapsed as a result of the February Revolution, Finland declared independence in 1917.

In 1919 the young Finland adopted a republican constitution and achieved international recognition as well as agreement with Russia concerning the border. However, already in 1939 the state's very existence was once again threatened: as agreed upon in the Hitler-Stalin-Pact, the Soviet Union attempted to take over Finland in the so-called "Winter War". The country only narrowly escaped being dissolved, and entered the war on the German side in 1941. After further threat from Soviet troops, Finland concluded a separate peace treaty with the Soviet Union which required it to expel

the German troops. This led to the Lapland War which ended in 1945 with the withdrawal of the last German troops.

After World War II, Finland remained independent. It retained a special position in the Cold War, since it endeavoured to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union as a neutral state right up to the end of the conflict, for which it was criticised by some of its western European partners. In 1969 Finland made an important contribution to securing peace in the Cold War with its proposal to organise a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Finnish economy, which was heavily focused on Eastern Europe, faced a crisis, and the country turned its focus to the west. This ultimately led to its accession to the EU in 1995.



*An iron witness of the Cold War near Jyränkoski*

## Small area, wide diversity

The route through Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania



The section through the Baltic may be relatively short in terms of the trail as a whole, but it offers a remarkably wide range of countryside, culture and history, as well as the opportunity to discover three countries in quick succession.

Your journey through the Baltic starts in eastern Estonia, or better said at the little port of Silamäe which in earlier times was not marked on official maps because it was an important producer of fuel rods for Soviet nuclear power stations. The town centre still bears traces of 'Soviet Baroque'.

From Silamäe you first follow the coast road heading west. This brings you to Estonia's oldest national park, Lahemaa, or 'land of inlets'. Here you pass by old farms and the fishing village of Altja, and in summer you can visit the beach in Võsu, the main town in the national park. Tracing Estonia's Cold War history, you can visit the 'Memorial Park for the Victims of Cruelty' in Hiiumäe, which has commemorated those deported



Above: A monument for the dark episodes in Estonia's history in the Museum of occupation in Tallinn. Left: The Estonian-Russian border near Narva today





*The visitors centre of the Lathemaa national park was built in the 18th century*

to Siberia since 1992. Many of Estonia's representatives have planted memorial oaks here.

The route then takes you past Cape Purekkari, Estonia's most northern point and the location of a Soviet radar station in the Cold War. You continue over the Pärисpea peninsula, go past a large cemetery with sarcophagi dating to 500 BC, and on through Loksä to the Estonian capital of Tallinn, which was known as Reval until 1918.

In Tallinn you must first go through the tower block section of Maardu before you reach the medieval part of town, which is still mostly surrounded by a city wall. The most common explanation of the present name of the city comes from "Taani linn", which means "Danish city" in Estonian and dates back to when the Danish King Waldemar II conquered Tallinn in 1219. Today the highlight of the "Danish city" is the old part of town with its numerous towers. Since 1997 it has been an UNESCO World Heritage Site. For those interested in history, the Museum of

Occupations is another must, commemorating various periods of occupation. Other popular attractions include the Museum of Modern Art and Katharinental Palace, a small Baroque palace from the 18th century.

Once you have explored Tallinn you continue your journey heading south-west. After just a few kilometres you go past Estonia's national open-air museum 'Rocca al mare', which, if you are interested in history, takes you back into the past with its reconstructed village houses from different regions of Estonia.

The route continues through the coastal villages of Laulasmaa and shortly afterwards Kloogaranna, and then over the Pakri peninsula, which was a missile launch site for the Warsaw Pact countries during the Cold War. In Paldiski, a port that used to be a secret Soviet naval base, you can still see the ruins of the Red Army installations. From here the trail continues through Padise and Nõva to the old cathedral town of Haapsalu, partly situated on a peninsula.

Once you are out of Haapsalu again you can continue either by ferry via the islands of Hiiumaa and Saaremaa, or on land to Põmu. The two islands are particularly worth a short visit for nature-lovers. Those opting to continue by road will head through flat countryside in the direction of Latvia. You pass the lovely 13th century Gothic church in Ridala, and you can take a break in the Nehatu nature reserve or visit one of the many islands off the coast. You also pass Pärnu, Estonia's "summer capital", which thrives in the warmer months. You will then finally reach the Latvian border near Ikla.



*A new kind of "watchtower" on Hijumaa island*



*Not only history lovers get what they are looking for in the Baltic states*

### **History of Estonia**

Estonia, the most northern of the Baltic States, has always had close ties with German culture. Before it was actually founded, the region of Estonia was the subject of a dispute between Denmark and the Teutonic Order, both of which attempted to convert the country and bring it under their control. In the 14th century it was finally the Germans who succeeded, resulting in the settlement of large numbers of German vassals who soon began to regard themselves as a separate ethnic group and were known as 'Baltic Germans'. There was also a Swedish minority, the 'Estonian Swedes'.

In the Middle Ages many Estonian towns belonged to the Hanseatic League, and this dominated life in the northern Baltic until Estonia came under Swedish rule following attacks by Ivan 'the Terrible' in the Livonian War. This Swedish period in Estonia lasted until 1710, when the country became one of the Russian Baltic governorates under Tsar Peter the Great. The Russian rulers pursued a strict policy of Russianisation which reduced the influence of the Baltic German upper classes.

In the Estonian War of Independence, which lasted from 1918 to 1920, Estonia won its independence and flourished for a brief period. Shortly afterwards, however, its independence came under threat once again: first the territory of Estonia was annexed

to the Soviet Union under a secret agreement as part of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, but then in 1941 it was occupied by German troops after the launch of the assault on the Soviet Union.

When the German troops withdrew in the autumn of 1944 the Red Army took control of Estonia. The Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic was restored after 24 years, but large areas were annexed to Russia by shifting the borders. Estonia was thus under Soviet control from the start of the Cold War, but its relative proximity to Finland and the fact that it could receive Finnish radio stations meant that it was not entirely cut off from the west.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Baltic States soon sought independence and this movement reached its peak on 23 August 1989 when, on the 50th anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, two million people formed a 600-kilometre human chain between Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, demanding national sovereignty for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In 1991 they jointly achieved this. In the 1990s the little country of Estonia experienced a considerable economic revival, which was an important factor in its accession to the EU in 2004. Since that same year Estonia has also been a member of NATO and thus a recognised part of the western community.



Once in Latvia, the Iron Curtain Trail first runs through the North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve, an area of mixed woodland, moors, dunes, coastal meadows, natural lakes and rivers. Those who like sailing will love Ainaži, the site of Latvia's first sailing school where a museum is now located providing information on the subject.

Continuing along the route you then come to Limbaži. In this hanseatic town – one of eight in all of Latvia – it is as if time has stood still. People are just beginning to discover its cultural heritage.

A better-known piece of history from the Cold War is to be found further south in Ligatne. Below a sanatorium there is an atomic-bombproof bunker that was used by the government of the Latvian Soviet Republic. It is particularly interesting since it is still in its original condition.

On the road towards Riga you will also find the town of Sigulda, the centre of which is not particularly attractive today due to the drab buildings of the late Soviet era. The cable railway over the Gauja Valley between Sigulda and Krimulda Castle is worth a visit. On the other side of the river, in Turaida and Krimulda, there is an impressive castle which is one of Latvia's most popular attractions.

Once you have left Sigulda again, you approach Riga. Among others you will pass through Ulbroka-Stopinu, where the first Latvian radio station was set up after the war where 125-metre radio tower still stands. On 22 August 1991, soldiers from the Soviet special operations unit OMON broke into the radio station during the 'August Putsch' and attempted to blow up the equipment without success.

Riga, the capital of Latvia with a population of approximately 730,000, is the largest city of the Baltic States. The old hanseatic city on the Daugava is famous for its art nouveau architecture and well-preserved centre. As in Tallinn, Riga also has a Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, commemorating the sufferings of Latvians under German and Soviet occupation (1941-1991). In this museum you can read the section of the Hitler-Stalin Pact that was kept secret.

From Riga the route then heads for the sea. On the way, in the biggest spa town in the Baltic, Jūrmala, you pass sleepy villas and weekend cottages before finally reaching the beach. During the season the town offers a first-class cultural programme.

From Jūrmala you follow the beach until you come to Klapkalnciems, where you will find Finnish, Soviet and German military cemeteries. If you head further south, shortly after Engure



*The city of Ventspils*

you will reach the Lake Engure National Park, where you can relax by the lake.

About 20 kilometres beyond Kolka a particular cultural surprise awaits you in Mazirbe, which is the centre of one of the smallest ethnic communities in Europe, the Finno-Ugric Livonians. Traces of the Iron Curtain can be visited a little further on in Irbene, where the abandoned and ruined tower block houses and military installations are all that is left of what was a strategically important base on the Baltic coast for the Soviet army.

If you follow the coast road further south you pass the old hanseatic town of Ventspils, whose well-restored old town is worth exploring. The Livonian Order Castle now houses the Ventspils Museum, which depicts all aspects of Latvian and Livonian fishing and farming life. Today this wealthy port is the main Baltic outlet for Russian oil and coal.

Heading south you leave Ventspils on a well-constructed road. Near Priednieki you pass a monument commemorating the

inhabitants of the area who drowned while trying to escape from the Red Army to Sweden in 1944/45.

A few kilometres further south you come to Liepāja, one of the jewels of the Iron Curtain Trail. Western tourists are only just beginning to discover this town, whose architecture appears to have been frozen in time at the turn of the 20th century. Visitors are entranced by its six-storey houses, mansions and in particular the villa district by the spa gardens with its art nouveau buildings. Liepāja Museum, which includes a detailed section on the town's German past, is also worth a visit.

You will also be surprised to discover, among the tower block buildings, the breathtaking St. Nicholas Cathedral. Equally impressive is the former Russian Baltic navy base at Karosta, north of the town, which was located here because of its proximity to Germany and because it is permanently ice-free. The open spaces created when the Russian fleet withdrew have been discovered by artists, and today Karosta is a trendy centre for contemporary art projects from around Europe. The route then continues via Nica and Rucava to the Lithuanian border.

### **History of Latvia**

The history of Latvia is in many ways similar to that of its Baltic neighbours Estonia and Lithuania and is closely bound to them. After being ruled by local princes, the country came under the control of the Teutonic Order in the 13th century, resulting in the arrival of large numbers of Germans who joined the upper classes.

In the Middle Ages many Latvian towns, as in all the Baltic States, joined the Hanseatic League and thus developed extensive trade networks. As a result of the reformation the order state became a duchy. After the end of the war between Livonia and Lithuania the country underwent a number of territory changes before Sweden gained control of most of the national territory in 1629 when it conquered Livonia.

The next change of rule followed at the beginning of the 18th century, when Latvia became mainly Russian following the Great Northern War. A short period of independence then followed between the two World Wars, when, as in Estonia, Latvia succeeded in defending itself against Russian rule and becoming recognised as independent.

The Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939 however once again put the country at the mercy of foreign powers: Soviet troops occupied Latvian territory in 1940 under threat of violence, and some 100 000 Latvians were deported to Siberia. Just one year later German troops took the country with the help of Latvian supporters, and Latvia suffered the ravages of the Holocaust.

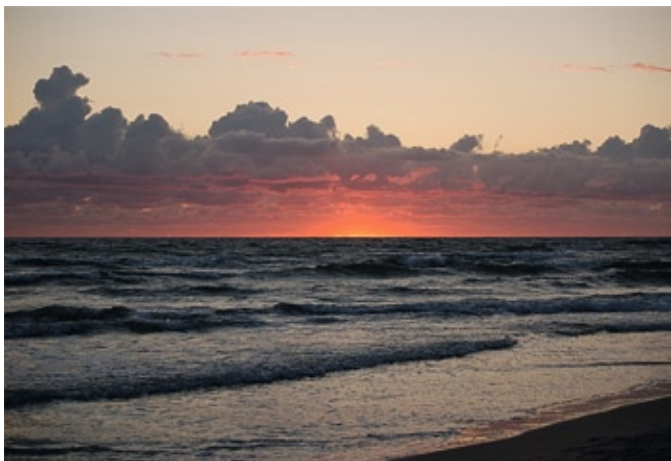
After defeating the German troops, the Soviet Union again took control at the end of World War II. Latvia became the 'Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic' and part of the Soviet Union. Initial resistance was crushed and large numbers of people were

deported to Siberia. Since this was accompanied by the arrival of massive waves of immigrants from other parts of the Soviet Union, the Latvians were at risk of becoming a minority in their own country. Today the Russian minority represents around 28% of the population.

Latvia did not seek independence again until 1991, after the Iron Curtain had fallen. Together with its Baltic neighbours it is able to join the EU and NATO in 2004 following a period of economic recovery.



*View on the baltic beaches*



*Absolute tranquillity: sunset at the Lithuanian coast*



After crossing the border into Lithuania, the trail continues through the little tourist town of Šventoji with its popular promenade and holiday houses dating from the Soviet era. A few kilometres further you will find yourself on the Palanga pier, visited by hordes of tourists in the summer.

Just a short ride further south, you will pass a small historical curiosity: two houses in the woods are all that remains of what was once Nemirseta (Nimersata in Curonian). Until 1920 it formed the northernmost point of Germany and was known by the name Nimmersatt ("Nimmersatt, where the Empire ends"). The former customs house and what used to be the last restaurant before you reached the border have now been converted into houses.

The Iron Curtain Trail continues on to Klaipėda (formerly Memel), which was founded by merchants from Dortmund in 1253 beside a medieval castle built by the Livonian Order. Today the town is an important ferry terminal and commercial port. The Simon Dach Fountain on Theatre Square is a popular tourist sight and the town's landmark.

Leaving Klaipėda, the remaining kilometres of the Lithuanian section take you along the Curonian Spit, which can be reached by ferry. A well-marked cycle path along the Curonian Spit hugs the dunes. In Nida, you can visit the Thomas Mann House right by the lagoon.

That takes you almost to the border with Russian Kaliningrad, the last stop on this section of the Iron Curtain Cycle Trail.



## History of Lithuania

The history of Lithuania differs from that of the other Baltic States because unlike them it successfully resisted the Teutonic Order in the 13th century. In 1385, Lithuania, ruled by the Lithuanian Jagiellons, formed an alliance with the Slavic Poles and the country was Christianised. It developed into a major European power that also ruled parts of Ukraine and western Russia.

The union with Poland lasted four centuries until Lithuania was annexed to Russia in 1795 following the third and last partition of Poland. The uprisings of 1830/31 and 1863 failed and a strict policy of Russianisation was imposed. Among other things, it required that Lithuanian texts were published in Cyrillic script and children taught in Russian.

In the 19th century a growing national movement emerged in Lithuania, as in the rest of Europe. Although the ban on publishing texts in the Latin alphabet was lifted in 1904, the Lithuanian people continued to call for independence and in 1905 Lithuania was declared an autonomous state within the Russian Empire.

After World War I, Lithuania declared itself an independent Lithuanian Republic. The period of revival was suddenly cut short in 1926 by a putsch led by Antanas Smetona and by the dissolution of parliament.

During World War II, Germany initially managed to annex parts of the territory of Lithuania. Under the Hitler-Stalin Pact Lithuania was at first assigned to the German sphere of influence, but under a further German-Soviet treaty it was transferred to that of the Soviets. In 1940, the Red Army marched into Lithuania and the Soviet Union annexed the entire country.

In a sudden seven-day invasion, German troops took control of the territory in 1941. Jews were persecuted mercilessly and the entire country declined rapidly. In 1944 the Red Army managed to recapture Lithuania and restore the 'Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic'. Large numbers of settlers were moved in from other parts of the Soviet Union and industrialisation began. Despite attempts of Russianisation, the Lithuanian language and culture managed to survive.

After Lithuania had spent decades in the Soviet sphere of influence, an independence movement emerged a few years prior to the fall of the Iron Curtain. This non-violent struggle for independence succeeded in 1990/91 and the final operations undertaken by Soviet troops failed. After an initial period of instability, Lithuania developed along very positive lines in the 1990s and in 2004 it joined both NATO and the EU.

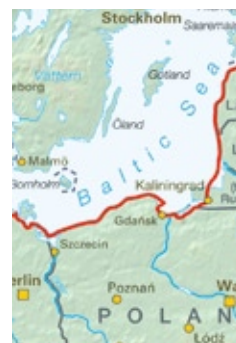


## From Kaliningrad to the German-Polish border

The route along the Polish Baltic Coast



This stretch is very varied and historically fascinating. After crossing the area by Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg), which belongs to Russia, the trail follows the sandy beaches and steep cliffs along the Baltic coast to the German-Polish border at Świnoujście (Swinemünde). Although no actual wall or barbed wire fence was constructed along this stretch during the Cold War, there certainly was a kind of Iron Curtain since large areas of the coastal region between St Petersburg and Usedom were inaccessible military areas and have only been opened up again in recent years. You still find reminders of the past everywhere, apart from relics of the Cold War also traces of the settlement and rule of various tribes over the centuries.



Here the trail offers an ever-changing panorama of sea views, lovely scenery and towns with a long and eventful history. Since it runs alongside the beach, you can take a cooling dip in the Baltic at almost any point. This section begins at the border between Lithuania and Russia near the town of Nida, which is situated at the southern end of the long Curonian Spit. The route along the Russian side of the Spit is a true delight for nature-lovers, lined on both sides by a forest untouched by man for decades. Coming to the end of the Spit, you approach Kaliningrad.

A visit to Kaliningrad is not to be missed. In the course of its turbulent history, the town has not only been part of the Hanseatic League, the hometown of Immanuel Kant and a German exclave, but later also became a no-go area and is now a Russian exclave. While it was spared any fighting for a long time in World War II, in 1944 British and American air raids destroyed much of the inner city. In April 1945 the Red Army took the town and annexed it to the Soviet Union. It remained a no-go area until 1991. The Amber Museum and the Bunker Museum are well worth a visit.

*Left: Former military command post of the German Navy*



From Kaliningrad you continue towards Poland, crossing the Russian-Polish border near Mamonovo and heading towards the Baltic. This takes you past Frombork (Frauenburg), where Nicolaus Copernicus served as canon and was buried in 1543. You can still view his astronomical observatory, his studies and his tools in the city museum.



*Destroyed not by men but by the forces of nature: the church of Trzęszacz*



### **History of Kaliningrad (German Königsberg)**

What is now the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, situated on the Baltic coast between Lithuania and Poland, was known as Königsberg until the end of World War II. The Teutonic Order built a fort there in 1255 in honour of King Ottokar II of Bohemia. From 1457 to 1525 the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order had his official seat here, then from 1525 to 1618 Königsberg became the residence of the Dukes of Prussia. Around the fort, three communities sprang up, which became members of the Hanseatic League and merged to form the city of Königsberg in 1724. The town grew into a major economic and industrial centre, linked by a canal to the seaport of Pillau on the Baltic. It also became an important university town, thanks largely to the fact that the famous philosopher

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) spent most of his life working there, publishing among others his Critique of Pure Reason and his essay on 'Perpetual Peace'.

With the establishment of the German Empire in 1870/71, the formerly Prussian Königsberg became part of the newly formed all-German state. During World War I it was the scene of bitter fighting between German and Russian troops but remained under German control in the end. It became the capital of the German province of East Prussia, which was now only linked with the German Empire by a corridor, as a result of the territory lost to Poland. During World War II, large parts of the town were destroyed and in 1945 the Red Army took it after a four-month siege. Upon decision of the Potsdam Conference, Königsberg became part of the Soviet Union under the new name of Kaliningrad.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Baltic States gained independence in 1991, Kaliningrad became a Russian exclave on the Baltic. Under the German-Soviet Partnership Agreement of 9 November 1990, the unified Germany formally recognised Kaliningrad as belonging to Russia. Following EU enlargement eastward in 2004, special travel regulations were agreed with Russia for Kaliningrad's Russian citizens.



From Frombork you take the ferry to Sztutowo (Stutthof), which was originally a German prison camp, later a concentration camp, and is now commemorated by a memorial. You then follow the coastal road westward along the Baltic. After Mikoszewo you continue to the old trading and hanseatic city of Gdańsk (Danzig), the next must-see metropolis on the Iron Curtain Trail. The Nazi bombardment of Westerplatte in 1939 triggered World War II here, but it is also the birthplace of the solidarity movement of the early 1980s, which was a major contributory factor in the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe.

Next, you cycle on to Gdynia (Gdingen), the hills of which still show evidence of the Cold War, such as restored gun emplacements. A few kilometres further you see the Hel peninsula, reaching far into the sea. It was once an important Polish military base and a barred military area between 1945 and 1990. Today you are allowed to cross it, and although remains of the coastal defences survive, this strip of land is reverting to tourism. You can do a day trip of the peninsula along a new, 50-kilometre cycle trail.

You then continue along the coast between dunes and forests and the banks of Sarbsko Lake. You will pass Czołpino and Rowy as well as several small lakes and can visit abandoned Cold War military installations in Łazy, while never moving far from the Baltic coast. The Polish section finally ends near the German border at the tourist town of Świnoujście (Swinemünde).



*What better place to rest? Well-deserved recreation at Dolgie-Wielkie-Lake*

### **History of Poland**

The history of the Central European state of Poland begins with Slavs settling in the territory of what is now Poland during the Slavic migration. Christianisation began in 966 and was followed by a cultural blossoming in the early Middle Ages, which came to an end in 1138 with the fragmentation of Poland into individual duchies and large-scale destruction by the Mongols in 1241.

From the late Middle Ages until modern times, Poland has had close ties with its northern neighbour Lithuania, thanks to which Poland grew into a major European power, first in an alliance with

Lithuania and then by uniting into a single state. In the 18th century, however, the state collapsed and its territory was carved up between the Russian Tsars, Prussia and Austria. For more than a century Poland vanished from the map of Europe. The few uprisings against foreign rule failed, although a national movement did begin to emerge during the second half of the 19th century.

During World War I Poland became a savage battleground. After the war, with the agreement of the Central Powers, Poland regained its sovereignty as the Second Republic, although within reduced borders.

Yet the conflicts with neighbouring states, mainly border disputes, continued and the young state remained in a state of unrest. Nazi Germany's attack in September 1939 triggered World War II and once again Poland's very survival came under threat. It was attacked from two sides, both by Germany to the west and by

the Soviet Union to the east, and suffered brutal oppression. The Nazi machinery of destruction was especially harsh in Poland and more than six million Poles died. Almost 90% of the Polish Jewish population was annihilated, most of them in concentration camps on Polish soil.

In Poland, the end of World War II led to the extension of its western boundary, to the benefit of the Soviet Union, which dominated Poland during the Cold War decades. In the early 1980s, the independent Solidarność (Solidarity) trade union movement, born in the shipyards of Danzig (Gdańsk), gave an early impetus towards the fall of the Iron Curtain.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland regained full sovereignty. Unified Germany officially recognised Poland's western border along the Oder-Neisse line. This opened the way to a new relationship not only with its western neighbours but also with Western Europe as a whole and with the United States. After adopting a new constitution following the 1997 referendum, Poland joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. That sparked a sustained upturn in its fortunes and Poland has once again become an important European state.



*Glass facade instead of iron curtain: the modern Kolobrzek*



*Barb wire is still present at a military camp in Poland*

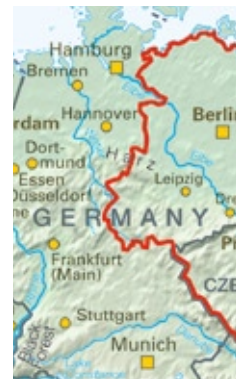
## Along the German Baltic coast and the German border

The route through Germany



The German section of the Iron Curtain Trail combines the routes of two existing cycle trails. First the cyclist is led along the Baltic Coast Trail from the German-Polish border at Swinemünde to the Prival peninsula at Travemünde. From thereon, the “German German Border Trail” leads along the former inner German border to the Czech border.

The first stretch along the Baltic coast is well worth a visit for its varied coastal landscapes and many historic spas and hanseatic towns. The starting point lies west of Swinemünde (Świnoujście) in the very interesting Usedom Nature Park. From Usedom, “Berlin’s bathtub”, with its fantastic beaches, the trail continues – still close to the sea – via the old hanseatic and new university city of Greifswald, past the Bodden and the Strelasund up to Stralsund. The next stretch takes you around the island of Rügen with its chalk cliffs. Then you continue through the West Pomeranian Bodden landscape with its long sandy shoreline, banks overgrown with reeds and shallow waters. Before reaching Warnemünde you cross the extensive forest land of the Rostock Heide and you can take a detour to Rostock from. After that, the trail winds its way alongside unspoiled natural beaches and impressive steep cliffs, on through tranquil, gently sloping farming country, past Wismar and along the Mecklenburg Bay, until you finally reach the coastal town of Travemünde.



It is at this point, where the borders of the Federal Republic and the GDR once intersected at the Baltic Sea that the trail along the former inner-German border begins. Following the track of the German-German Border Trail, which has further commemorative sites, memorial stones and preserved border installations than any other section of this trail, you now head along small country roads towards the old hanseatic town of Lübeck.

*Left: A small bridge crossing a big divide: former inner German border at Mödlareuth*





*At "point Alpha" near the Thuringian-Hessian-border NATO and the Warsaw Pact States were standing face to face*

Before reaching this, you can visit the Customs House Museum in Lübeck-Schlutup to learn about the significance of the inner German border for the region. Of course you should also take a look at Lübeck itself, one of the most important of the hanseatic cities, with its old part of town that is an UNESCO World Heritage Site.

You now cross the Lauenburgische Seen nature park and the picturesque town of Ratzeburg situated between four lakes and then, after Schlagsdorf, cycle along part of the preserved original border paths used by the GDR border troops, before continuing along the Elbe. On the way you will see memorials of the outpost of Neuengamme Concentration Camp, Gorleben, known above all for its controversial nuclear waste disposal centre, and the Schnackenburg Border Museum. After passing through the medieval village of Salzwedel you continue past Zicherie-Böckwitz (also known as 'Little Berlin'), a village that was once split in two by the border installations, and along the Drömling nature park to Wolfsburg. You can then visit the memorial site of the former Marienborn checkpoint or the 350-metre-long original border

installations at Höstensleben before continuing past the lignite opencast mine at Schöningen.

The trail now takes you to the Harz nature park, and you could well take a trip from there to the mysterious Mount Brocken before going on to the picturesque towns of Duderstadt and Heiligenstadt. At the Duderstadt-Worbis border crossing you will find another informative border museum, which also comprises the former customs administration and control buildings. A few kilometres further, in Böseckendorf, you should also take a look at the border memorial by the German-American sculptor Roger Bischoff. The stones symbolise the desire of the people of Nesselröden and Böseckendorf to reunite. Now the Trail follows the banks of the Werra, passing Eschwege and the post-war documentation centre in Wanfried and, not far from Geisa, brings you to Point Alpha, one of the most important sites on the entire German section of the trail. At Point Alpha, the westernmost point of the Warsaw Pact and easternmost point of NATO territory, the armies of the two blocs came face to face at a distance of only 200 metres. Today it is the site of one of the most interesting of all

border museums, with preserved sections of the border defence installations.

After cycling through the Rhön Biosphere Reserve, you go on past Bad Königshofen and the cross of peace on the Dachsberg hill, set up in memory of the forcible resettlement policy under "Aktion Ungeziefer" (pest control) in the year 1952. A little further, on the former border strip between Bavaria and Thuringia, between Mellrichstadt and Meiningen, it is also worth taking a short break in the spectacular sculpture park. If you want to take a look at the former border strip from above, you can do so near Zimmerau, the site of the 38-metre Bayernturm tower, from which you could once view the GDR's border installations. Back on firm ground, you cycle on towards Ummerstadt. This was once the smallest town in the GDR and today has a jewel-like quality, with its half-timbered houses, market place and fountain. Go on past the Görzdorf memorial of the Wall, Kronach and the medieval Lauenstein castle and continue through the Thuringian-Frankish schist mountains towards the Czech border. Shortly before you reach it, you pass through another divided village or 'Little Berlin', Mödlareuth, which was split in two by the German-German border during the Cold War. There are still traces of that split in the form of observation towers, border posts and a remnant of the concrete wall. At Prex, you finally reach the border with the Czech Republic, the end of the German section.



*Above: A great view without barb wire. Right: Facing the former death-strip: an old watchtower at the inner German border*





*The inner German border at the time of the Cold War*

### **History of Germany**

In the third century AD, Germanic tribes began to settle on the territory of what is now Germany and emerged from conflicts with the Roman Empire as a heterogeneous culture with rudimentary national structures. From the end of the 10th century, the inhabitants of the areas north of the Alps began to perceive themselves as specifically 'German' and became part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Yet due to external and internal conflicts, such as the wars of religion and rivalry between the two great powers of Prussia and Austria, in the end the fragmented empire never managed to establish a unified German state. It fell apart in the early 19th century during the coalition wars against Napoleon and was replaced by the German Federation after the wars of liberation and the Congress of Vienna which is however not able to hold back the national movements.

It continues to gain strength, but the attempts of civil revolution fail. Not until after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 does the political unification as a constitutional monarchy succeed. Under the leadership of Chancellor Bismarck, the young Empire manages to defuse the acute social tensions with clever compromises while at the same time gaining international power. This period however came to an abrupt end in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I which was also provoked by the German Empire. The Germans are defeated and condemned to pay huge reparations

under the Treaty of Versailles. The Weimar Republic rose from the ruins of the Empire. This first democratic regime on German soil does not last long though since it is too weak.

On 30 January 1933, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler Chancellor. The National Socialist government soon established a brutal dictatorship and, with its attack on Poland in 1939, initiated World War II. German troops and their allies took the horrors of war beyond the borders of Europe and a wave of massacres beyond belief cost at least six million Jews their lives. Finally, thanks to the united efforts of the anti-Hitler coalition led by Great Britain, the USA and the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany was defeated, bringing one of the darkest chapters in the history of mankind to an end.

Under the Yalta Conference decisions (February 1945), Germany was divided into four occupation zones. The gradual separation of the Soviet-occupied zone eventually led to the "Cold War" and the division of Germany into two states forming part of two different blocs. In 1955 the "Federal Republic of Germany" became a member of NATO, while the "German Democratic Republic" joined the Warsaw Pact. The first uprising occurred in the GDR on 17 June 1953, is however put down by Soviet tanks. The Berlin Wall which was erected on 13 August 1961, finally demonstrated the dividing line of the two blocs running through Germany.

The situation did not change until the 1980s, when the governments of the Warsaw Pact States were subject to increasing pressure from growing economic and political problems. Thanks to the policy of openness ('glasnost') and restructuring ('perestroika') initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev as well as the peaceful revolution in eastern middle Europe made it possible that there were massive protests in the GDR and the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. On 3 October 1990 the two German States were reunited.



*A former death strip is a green biotope today: the former inner German border near Görsdorf*



## From the former Triangle Border to the Danube

Through the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria



The area where the borders of Czechoslovakia, the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany once met marks the beginning of this stretch of the Iron Curtain Trail. The starting point is near Hranice in the Czech Republic. Once you have set off, you will find it worth making a first stop at Trojmezí (Gottmansgrún), the oldest settlement in this region, at the point known as the Triangle Border, where the borders of Saxony, Bavaria and the Czech Republic meet. Two kilometres past Trojmezí you come onto the road used by military convoys alongside the former signalling fence, where you can still see an old checkpoint.



You then continue from Aš to Cheb (Eger), passing the Libá/Dubina checkpoint, and follow the Czech tourist board signs. Along this route you will find a large number of historic border stones. Near the Pomezí checkpoint on the Zelené Hory (Grünberg), note a restored stone lookout tower; the views are well worth the climb. Back on your bike, you continue towards Cheb and come to the former checkpoint of Svatý Kříž (Waldsassen), where a monument commemorating 82 victims of the Iron Curtain was erected in 2006 on the Czech side.

The trail now continues along the German side of the border to the village of Bayerisch Eisenstein (Železná Ruda). There, you cross the border again and cycle along the Vltava to Vyssi Brod, where you can cross into Austria and get onto the Kamp-Thaya-March cycle trail.

*Left: Everything in view - former watchtower of the Czech border patrol on Havran hill*



*A memorial that cannot be ignored: watchtower near Cheb*

### **History of the Czech Republic and Slovakia**

Until shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the two modern states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia formed the single state of Czechoslovakia. It was not until 1992 that the Czech Parliament decided to split it into two.

Originally, Czechoslovakia was made up of Bohemia, Moravia and Moravian Silesia, Slovakia and – until 1939 – Carpathian Russia. In 1921, this multiethnic state had a population of around 9 million Czechs and Slovaks, 3.1 million Germans and large minorities of Magyars, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews and Poles. Until 1945, the majority of the inhabitants of the Sudetenland were German. The official languages were Czech and Slovak.

The state of Czechoslovakia was born from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I, when the Allies also supported the Czech and Slovak movements for national self-determination. The new state was proclaimed in Prague on 28 October 1918. In the mistaken assumption that this would satisfy Hitler's expansionist interests, the Munich Conference (1938) accepted the annexation by Nazi Germany of areas with a majority of German population (Sudetenland). Under the Vienna Awards, the southern part of Slovakia and the Carpathian part of Ukraine went to Hungary. The Teschen area was annexed by Poland. In breach of international law, German troops occupied what was known as 'rump Czechoslovakia' in March 1939 and placed it under German administration as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

After the end of the war in 1945 the Czechoslovakian Republic (ČSR) was re-established within the pre- World War II borders, except for Carpathian Ukraine, which became part of the Soviet Union. Henceforth, however, it was no longer an entirely sovereign

state. As a member of the Warsaw Pact and of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance it came under the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union on the other side of the Iron Curtain and was cut off from developments in Western Europe.

In 1968 Alexander Dubček, the First Secretary of the Communist Party, attempted to create "socialism with a human face".



*Only a stone statue is left at the border*

The Soviet Union and other Communist states however put a violent end to the so-called "Prague Spring", in what was to become a worldwide symbol of the brutality of Soviet rule over Central and Eastern Europe.

Yet that only temporarily broke the resistance. A civil rights movement under the name of Charter 77, led by the writer Václav Havel, again stood up against the regime. In 1989, after Mikhail Gorbachev's calls for the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence to become more open, the resistance grew, taking the form of day-long protests, which finally forced the Communist government to resign.

Václav Havel was elected first President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (ČSFR) that lasted from April 1990 to the end of 1992. Then, however, clear conflicts of interest emerged between the Czech and Slovak ethnic groups. In 1992, without holding a referendum, Parliament announced the partition of the country.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the two states, now going their separate ways, underwent a period of economic and cultural revival. In 1999 the Czech Republic joined NATO, followed in 2004 by Slovakia. That same year both states also became members of the European Union.



From Kunšach you head north to the Draice nature park beside the river of the same name. The Draice valley used to be the site of the largest ironworks in Bohemia. The military supply route continues towards Nová Huť and thence to Přední Maršovina, where you can still see a building once used by the border troops which is now a guesthouse. North of Staňkovský lake, near the Chlum u Třeboně border crossing, you can visit a deer park. The original gate of the border fortifications still stands on the northern side of the park.

The next point of interest is south of the village of Artole, where you will see a lookout tower once used by the border troops. Soon after, you come across another piece of history on the outskirts of Čížov, in the form of a well-preserved section of the

military supply route, including the barbed-wire fence and a watchtower. From the Mikulov/Drasenhofen border crossing, the trail runs eastward along a railway track, past the Valtice/Celnice border crossing and the preserved buildings used by the border troops. In the Soutok red deer park you can admire the pragmatic use made of the past: part of the fencing around the animals is made from remnants of the Iron Curtain. Finally, some 14 kilometres further south, you reach the confluence of the rivers Morava and Thaya, where the Czech section of the former Iron Curtain ends.

That brings you to the Slovakian section of the Trail. At only about 90 kilometres long, it represents a fairly small part of the whole, but thanks to the many sights and its picturesque riverside routes, it is worth an extra effort. First, the route runs along the river March. A few kilometres later you will discover the first traces of history at the side of the road: a well-preserved, complex defensive system consisting of some 100 bunkers and fortifications in the alluvial meadows. The Czechs built them in the 1930s as a defence against Hitler's Germany.

You then come to the delightful nature reserve of Záhorie, where the Trail runs for several dozen kilometres through a mainly flat landscape of alluvial forests and meadows. You continue through forests, past the picturesque towns of Moravský Svätý Ján and Hohenau, with its ancient fortress that once offered protection against invasion by the Turks. You also pass a former



*Above: Who said a history tour could not be combined with relaxation?  
Top right: History can be seen along the road. Bottom right: Barbwire has served its time on the Slovakian border*



barracks used by the border troops. After cycling along the Malolevský Canal and the Lakšársky Potok stream you come to the little town of Malé Leváre. Once again, you will find relics of the Second World War: a line of defence with several bunkers was built here on the model of the Maginot Line.

The trail carries on through expanses of forest, and you will still see some concrete roadblocks and tangled barbed wire left over from the past. The next stop is Suchohrad, which was regarded as a "place with no prospects of development" during the period of Communist rule. That is why no new building or settlement was allowed there and strangers had to be registered on arrival. The same fate struck Záhorská Ves, the westernmost place in Slovakia, which today looks like an open-air museum of the Communist era.

After Vysoká, where barbed-wire fencing split people's gardens in two during the Cold War, you ride on beside the remains of the fence towards the Slovakian capital of Bratislava, passing through the wetlands of the March-Schwemmland nature reserve, one of the most important in Slovakia. On the way you will also see the historic Devín Castle, a national monument dating from Roman times. Not far from there, you will find a memorial to the victims of Communist rule. The trail then continues along the Danube, between the slopes of the Carpathian foothills, through the suburbs of Bratislava and to the Austrian-Slovakian border crossing at Petržalka. Finally, you reach the capital of Bratislava, which is well worth a visit if only for its historic centre. This



section of the Iron Curtain Trail ends at the intersection of the borders between Hungary, Austria and Slovakia, the site of a large complex of barracks during the Cold War.

## **History of Austria**

The inhabitants of modern-day Austria today are descendants from Bavarian and Alemannic tribes that permanently settled on the territory following the gradual fall of the Roman Empire. From the 8th century, most of this area formed part of Charlemagne's Frankish Empire, within which the Habsburg dukes gained an important position as early as 1278 and eventually became a major power in the Holy Roman Empire.

From the late 15th to the end of the 17th century, the territory of what is now Austria was subject to constant invasions, mainly from the Ottoman Empire, which was seeking to expand westward from Hungary. Even after a second siege of Vienna in 1683, however, the Ottomans' attempts to expand ended in failure.

After numerous internal quarrels, Francis II managed to establish the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1804. He took the title of Emperor Francis I and for two years also became the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Under pressure from Napoleon, however, he had to surrender that title in 1806, which spelled the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire.

The new, multiethnic state lay under the stern rule of Chancellor Metternich. His aim was to restore the old order after the revolutionary unrest of the late 18th century, which he largely achieved in alliance with Prussia and Russia.

In 1848, the inability to adapt to the profound changes of the 19th century led to revolution. The era of Metternich came to an end. Yet the army managed to prevent the democratic powers from taking power. Nevertheless, the emperor became increasingly weak and was forced against his will to transform the state into a constitutional monarchy and to grant Hungary new rights under the 1867 Compromise Agreement.

That formally created an Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, which exerted considerable power in southeast Europe. After the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne Francis Ferdinand, the monarchy was inextricably implicated in the outbreak of World War I due to the defensive pact it had signed with Germany. The defeat in 1918 led to the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy.

It was succeeded by the new Republic of Austria, which was democratically organised and introduced significant social reforms. Yet the young republic did not last long. The National Socialists who had come to power in Germany exerted massive pressure and in 1938 they incorporated Austria as an integral part of the Third Reich.

With the defeat of Germany, Austria once again became an independent, democratic state, although like Germany it was divided into occupied zones until 1955, the Soviet zone being the largest.

Unlike Germany, however, Austria was spared partition. Following the signature of the Austrian State Treaty on 15 May 1955 and its assurance (not enshrined in the Treaty) that it would remain neutral towards both the Western and Eastern blocs, the republic regained full sovereignty that same year. Austria was bound by the principle of non-alignment, which laid down its 'permanent neutral status', and observed that principle until the end of the Cold War.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, Austria relaxed its policy of neutrality and began a definite shift towards the West, as reflected also in its accession to the EU in 1995. Yet Austria is still not a member of NATO – the result of its special Cold War position.



*Memorial for the victims of the Iron Curtain near the border checkpoint Heiligenkreuz (Svatý Kříž)/Waldsassen*

## On the trail of the dual monarchy

The route through Hungary, Austria and Slovenia



The Hungarian section of the Iron Curtain Trail begins at the triangle formed by the meeting point of the borders between Hungary, Austria and Slovakia. The main attractions here are the cultural sights, such as the sculpture park with works by Austrian, Slovakian and Hungarian artists near Rajka. Then there is Bezenye, which is worth a visit for its multinational character; its three names – Hungarian, Croatian and German – testify to its eventful past.



Leaving this triangle, you cycle through charming country with a number of small towns of largely historical interest, such as Jánossomorja with its Baroque church and important altarpieces. A very unusual sight awaits you a few kilometres on in Fertőd: the Palace of Esterházy, once described as the Hungarian Versailles. A few kilometres further west you can visit Sopron, a place that played a major role in the Cold War. This is where the Iron Curtain was first pierced, on 27 June 1989 when the then Foreign Minister Alois Mock and his Hungarian counterpart Gyula Horn jointly cut through the border fence. In August that year a border gate between Austria and Hungary was symbolically opened at the 'Pan-European Picnic'.

Then you continue towards Hegykő, known for its thermal spas. You then follow the border, coming across places of historical interest where you may well want to stop off. Buildings such as the Baroque palace in Peresznye offer exciting insights into the colourful past of the region. Or you can take a trip to the beautiful nature reserve of Kőszeg that has inspired so many painters and composers. Retracing the past again, you can follow the Trail to Bozsok to look at the Roman aqueduct. In Horvátlovő, a name that already suggests a large Croatian presence, you should pay particular attention to the war memorial in the centre of town, which commemorates the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, the victims of the two world wars and the 1956 revolution.

*Left: This is where the Iron Curtain began to crumble: border post near Sopron*



*The center of the "bridge to the West" Sopron with its famous fire-tower*

The journey continues westward between fields and meadows, through the area round the river Rába, which forms part of the Őrségi national park and is familiar both to fishermen and rafting enthusiasts. The town became an important historical site in 1664 when it successfully drove back the Turks.

The trail now runs southward to the border with Slovenia. At Szalafő it is worth making a detour to the regional open-air museum. Art connoisseurs may also enjoy a trip to the village of Velemér, famous for its 13th-century, late Romanesque/early Gothic church with frescoes by Aquila János.

### **History of Hungary**

The history of Hungary begins far away from the national territory of present-day Hungary. The Magyars, ancestors of the Hungarians, left their western Siberian settlements and after centuries of migration eventually settled in the area that was to become the Kingdom of Hungary in about 1000 AD.

In 1540, however, the Christianised state came under Ottoman rule and was sliced in three. The largest part was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, another became a vassal state of the Empire and the third came under the Austrian sphere of influence. Immediately after the defeat of the Turks outside Vienna, Habsburg troops conquered the entire territory. Emergent independence movements were brutally suppressed again and again until in 1867. Following a compromise agreed with Austria, Hungary became the second constituent part of the dual monarchy, with a view to relieving tensions in the multiethnic state.

Hungary did achieve independence in 1918, but the democratic government only survived a few months, to be replaced by an authoritarian, conservative regime. Hungary lost large areas of its former territory – including Burgenland, Croatia, Slovakia and Transylvania – and was forced, on 4 June 1920, to sign the Treaty of Trianon in the Palace of Versailles, thereby confirming a situation that in practice already existed.

Between the two world wars, Hungary moved closer and closer to Germany and concluded various agreements with it. During World War II, Hungarian troops actively supported the German campaigns in the Balkans and against the Soviet Union, although following bitter defeats they opted for a rapprochement with the Allies. At that point, German troops occupied the country and hundreds of thousands of Jews were deported.

In the end, the Red Army captured Hungary and its capital Budapest. The Allies' hopes of a democratic constitution were soon dashed. In 1949 Hungary was given a constitution on the



*Today the former death strip can be explored*



*Historical insights on the Cold War and beyond can be found in the Ferenc-Móra-museum in Szeged, Hungary*

Soviet model and became a founding member of the Warsaw Pact. Despite early successes, the 'Hungarian Revolution' was brutally crushed in 1956. Economic reforms were introduced from 1968, under what came to be called 'goulash Communism'. Finally, 1988 brought peaceful regime change and economic reforms were introduced.

Soon afterwards, Hungarian border troops began to pull down parts of the border installations – for reasons of cost. On 27 June 1989 the Austrian Foreign Minister Alois Mock and his Hungarian counterpart Gyula Horn jointly cut the border fence. In August that year, a border gate between Austria and Hungary was symbolically opened on the same spot, at the 'Pan-European Picnic'. On 23 October 1989 – the anniversary of the 1956 revolution – Hungary was proclaimed a democratic and parliamentary republic, and in 2004 it joined NATO and the EU.

## The Balkans

Through Hungary, Croatia, Serbia and Romania

### Route

Leaving Slovenia behind, the trail now takes you along the border between Hungary and Croatia. The village of Bázakerettye, which was the cradle of the oil industry, is an interesting memorial to industry. Another memorial and a museum commemorate the first drilling for oil in 1935. A few kilometres further on, you come to the small village of Miklósfá where you can visit the Catholic church built in 1898/99, a splendid example of neo-Gothic architecture, and the war memorial built in 1994 in memory of the victims of the two world wars.

Further south you cross the Danube-Drau national park, popular with naturalists and sportsmen, and continue until you reach Mohács. This is the site of one of the greatest tragedies in the history of Hungary, the Battle of Mohács in 1526, which led to the occupation of the country by Turkish troops. The trail continues through a series of small villages many of which, like Bácsalmás, offer museums or local exhibitions.



The trail then passes through what is known as the Memorial Forest, a nature reserve created in 1944, and approaches the border with Romania. Before you reach it, however, it is worth stopping off in Rösztke to take a look at the relief of former Prime Minister Imre Nagy. Eventually you arrive in Szeged, the last town before the border with Romania and an important economic and cultural centre. Apart from its many interesting buildings, visitors are drawn by the squares in the heart of the town and the famous Reök Palace, a typical example of what is known as the Hungarian Jugendstil.

At Makó you finally reach the border between Hungary and Romania. You now follow the Serbian-Romanian border to the border between Serbia and Bulgaria, the starting point of the final portion of the trail. The next target along this stretch is the Serbian town of Kikinda, about 60 kilometres south, near the

*Left: Crossing the border – an all day thing today*







*Picturesque village centre in Negotin*

border between Serbia and Romania. This town with a population of 42,000 has many interesting churches, a popular national theatre that operates all the year round and a lively urban scene.



### **History of the states of former Yugoslavia**

Before the state of Yugoslavia was created after World War I there were two states, the Kingdoms of Serbia and of Montenegro.

Serbia, first mentioned in 822, fell to Byzantium for more than a century around the turn of the first millennium. In 1389 the Serbian army was defeated by the Ottomans at the battle of Amselfeld. That brought an end to the medieval Serbian state, which became part of the Ottoman Empire between 1459 and 1804. It took two uprisings before the Serbs slowly started to gain independence after 1817 – an independence which was officially recognised at the 1878 Congress of Berlin. A few years later, the principality was officially declared a kingdom. Similarly, Montenegro, which had been ruled by bishop princes since the early 16th century, came under the Ottoman Empire until 1878. However, it did not become a kingdom until 1910.

The assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo in 1914 by a Serbian secret society called the Black Hand triggered a chain reaction that led to the outbreak of World War I. Serbia and Montenegro sided with the "Entente cordiale" in the hopes that the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire would reunite the southern Slavs.

With the collapse of the dual monarchy this actually became a possibility after the end of World War I. Serbia and Montenegro joined the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. From the outset, however, it was faced with conflicts between various ethnic

groups practising different religions and all wanting to dominate in the new state.

In 1929, in an attempt to resolve the ensuing, constant internal political difficulties, King Alexander I created a military dictatorship with the object of bringing the southern Slavs together. Despite armed resistance, a Serb-dominated military and police state was established, which came into conflict with nearly all its neighbours.

When World War II broke out, Yugoslavia initially remained neutral. Dazzled by the German victories and the "new order" in southeast Europe, however, it entered the war on the side of the Germans in 1941. Soon afterwards, a military coup overthrew the regime and Yugoslavia concluded a treaty of friendship and support with the Soviet Union. Thereupon German and Italian troops marched into Yugoslavia and the country surrendered. Resistance was organised from abroad. Even before the Red Army took over, the Communist partisan army led by Josip Broz Tito had taken control of the country.



*Preserving the memory - a monument in Halovo*



*Enjoy the beautiful landscape while cycling*

In 1945 Yugoslavia was proclaimed a Federal People's Republic, closely tied to Moscow by a pact of friendship. Its economy was organised along socialist principles and the Politburo of the Communist Party became the centre of power, suppressing all opposition.

In 1948, Yugoslav resistance to Soviet rule led to a break with the USSR. Yugoslavia did not become a member of the Warsaw Pact, wanting to choose its own road to socialism. It introduced workers' control and established contacts with the West, to offset the pressure from the Soviet Union. Officially, the two sides were reconciled in 1955, yet differences continued to arise, not least due to Yugoslavia's active role within the movement of non-aligned states.

Tito's power continued to grow and in 1963 he was elected President for life. Although Yugoslavia criticised the suppression of the Prague Spring, internally the regime continued to put massive pressure on dissidents. It began taking steps towards federalisation.

That could not prevent mounting tension after Tito's death in 1980. There were increasingly loud calls for independence and

economic openness and riots broke out. In 1991 Croatia and Slovenia finally declared unilateral independence. Subsequently, violent conflicts erupted between the Serb-dominated Federal army and the respective people's militias. The troops soon withdrew from Slovenia, but civil war broke out in Croatia. The Federal army openly supported the Serbs. Attempts at mediation by the European Community failed and the country plunged into bloody chaos.

The civil war led to the final break-up of this multiethnic Balkan state. All that remained of the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was Serbia and Montenegro, suffering under the sanctions imposed by the UN. In late 1995 the Serbian President Slobodan Milošević signed a peace agreement in Dayton together with the Presidents of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. A short while later Yugoslavia was officially recognised and the sanctions were lifted.

The situation escalated once again in 1998, when Serbia tried forcibly to suppress the Kosovo-Albanian independence movement. NATO conducted a bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, which did not end until June 1999 with the withdrawal of all armed

Serbian forces from Kosovo. The parliamentary and presidential elections held in September 2000 were heavily criticised of vote rigging, and a wave of strikes and protests paralysed the country. In the end President Milošević had to acknowledge that Vojislav Koštunica had won the elections. In 2001 Koštunica surrendered to international pressure and delivered Milošević to the UN War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague.

All Serbia's efforts to retain what was left of the state failed. First Montenegro gained independence in 2006 and two years later Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence, although this has still not been recognised in many parts of the world. What remains is a fragmented Balkan land made up of a number of independent states. They are all seeking to take a new pro-West approach and looking to EU accession, although to date only Croatia is officially a candidate for EU accession.



*Only a stone marks the border today*



*Fresh colors in the centre of Zajecar*



The route continues southward via Žitište and Vršac, climbing hills of up to 650 metres in height. You will be rewarded for your efforts by views on either side of glorious countryside and acres of vineyards. En route from Bela Crkva to Berzasca along the Danube, you cycle along roads with hardly any traffic, although in return you are faced with further steep climbs with gradients of up to 12%. Your reward awaits you on the other side, where you can freewheel downhill.

You cross the Romanian border and then follow the course of the Danube and the Serbian-Romanian border for a few kilometres. You remain on the Romanian side up to the Derdap 1 dam, with views every so often of beautiful countryside. You then cycle along the increasingly steep slopes on the banks of the Danube, before once again crossing the border, this time into Serbia.

The ride then continues undisturbed between the checkpoints along the dam, built between 1964 and 1972 with its two hydroelectric power stations and two locks, enjoying the views of the Danube. Customs control on the Serbian side is relaxed and after cycling along the Romanian bank of the Danube you now continue for a number of kilometres inside the Serbian Republic. First you head off left towards Niš and Kladovo and then continue to Negotin, following the curve of the Danube.

You cycle along traffic-free roads towards Negotin, a small town with a population of 18,000, which became a modern cultural and economic centre in the 19th century after the Serbian

revolution. Now, instead of continuing on the main road, you can allow yourself a small detour and take the quiet little roads leading from village to village. Eventually you will reach the border with Bulgaria, near Zaječar, which brings you to the end of the Balkan section of the Iron Curtain Trail.



*Along the Danube - the Rumanian-Serbian border river*



### **History of Romania**

Romania is situated largely on the territory of the former Danube principalities of Moldova, Wallachia and Transylvania. After the first century AD these areas formed an integral part of the Roman Empire and most of the population was Romanised. During the mass migrations, however, ethnic tribes moved in from the east and drove out large swathes of the population.

The first records of Romanians date back to the 13th century, when the first states were established in Wallachia and Moldova. They managed to free themselves from Hungary but soon had to pay large tributes to the Ottoman Empire in order to maintain much of their new-won independence.

Various short-lived attempts to unite all Romanians in a single kingdom failed, and until the Crimean War in 1853/54 Russia exerted strong influence over the region. A sense of nationalism began to emerge in the 18th century, culminating in 1862 in the union of Moldova and Wallachia as Romania. Romania was recognised as a sovereign state at the Congress of Berlin in 1878.

During World War I, Romania initially remained neutral, but declared war on Austria-Hungary in August 1916. In the end, it managed not only to make up for temporary losses of territory but actually to gain territory through peace treaties.

Between the wars, strong dissatisfaction emerged with the established parties and right-wing groups became increasingly powerful. The internal political crisis eventually led to an open dictatorship in 1938. Upon the outbreak of World War II, Romania once again began by remaining neutral, but after the defeat of France began to shift towards the Axis Powers.

When King Carol II was forced to abdicate, a pro-Fascist military dictatorship took power. Romania joined the Tripartite Pact and supported Germany against the Soviet Union. With the defeat of Germany, the regime surrendered unconditionally in 1944 and Soviet forces occupied Romania.

After the war, Communist forces gained strength, carrying out agricultural reforms that broke up large land ownership and introduced collectivisation. Non-Communist parties were banned and in 1947 Romania was declared a people's republic.

The country was then rapidly incorporated within the Soviet sphere of influence, becoming part of Cominform and the Warsaw Pact (1955). With the withdrawal of the Soviet occupying troops in 1958, however, Romania managed to pursue a more independent course. The Head of State and Party Leader Nicolae Ceaușescu established an increasingly totalitarian regime, marked by an absurd personality cult that mainly drew on the support of the pitiless Securitate secret police.

Romania took a comparatively critical stance towards the Soviet Union. It did not take part in the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 after the Prague Spring and distanced itself from the invasion of Afghanistan. The disastrous economic situation and lack of respect for human rights led to popular uprisings in December 1989 against the background of the radical changes occurring in Europe. This resulted in the overthrow of the dictator Ceaușescu, who was executed together with his wife Elena in December 1989.

This initiated a process of democratisation. Previously banned parties were revived and free elections held. Yet the situation remained unstable and unrest broke out again and again, with frequent changes of government. Nevertheless, Romania managed to successfully integrate with the west and became a member of NATO in 2004, followed in 2007 by accession to the EU.

## The route to the Black Sea

Through Bulgaria, Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece and Turkey



This final section takes you to the end of the Iron Curtain Trail: the coast of the Black Sea, where well-deserved rest awaits you. The starting point of this section lies on the Serbian-Bulgarian border near Knjaževac, where you cycle through peaceful countryside and impressive scenery towards Dimitrovgrad.

Passing the popular spa town of Kjustendil you head southward. From here it is only 27 kilometres as the crow flies to the tri-border point of Bulgaria, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. To the west, the Osogovo Mountains rise to more than 2,000 metres. From Kjustendil the trail continues towards Blagoevgrad. Heading east, you can already see the foothills of the Rila Mountains on the horizon and shortly after Nevestino you cross the Kadin Bridge, 100 metres in length, over the river Struma. The bridge is a historic monument, combining eastern and central European architectural elements with Renaissance influences. Parts of the bridge date back as far as 1470.



After crossing the river, you continue through Dragodan to the university town of Blagoevgrad, which is situated at the centre of southwest Bulgaria and is also the site of the American University in Bulgaria. The town was built on the site of the old Thracian settlement of Skaptopara and developed into a major trading and commercial centre in the mid-18th and early 19th century.

The trail then leads into the territory of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. You cross the border at Delcevski Prohod, which lies at an altitude of 1,085 metres. Then you continue through a wide valley towards Berovo. Some distance away you may see the Golak mountain, which is 1,536 metres high. It is worth stopping off at Lake Berovo near the town of the same name.

*Left: Monument near Vukan*





*Attention steep hill upwards! Across the Prevedena-pass*

You now cycle through fields and meadows heading south towards the town of Strumica. The road is steep at times, but it winds through picturesque hills and offers wonderful views. You also have to tackle the Prevedena pass at an altitude of 1,167 metres. When you finally reach Strumica, you will find it a surprisingly lively place after the rather quiet town of Berovo. This region is of great historical importance as the site of early settlements dating back as far as 7,000 B.C.

Onwards towards Petric you return to Bulgarian soil and the route now takes you through a grassy lowland plain. To the right you can see the Belasica Mountains, to the left the Ograzden Mountains. In the Middle Ages, the Bulgarian town of Petric at the foot of the Belasica mountain range served as a stronghold in the wars with Byzantium. Today it is a centre for the processing of tobacco, fruit and vegetables.

If you are feeling adventurous, you can continue beyond Goce Delchev, climbing several metres up and passing through abandoned villages and empty landscapes. If you prefer an easier ride, you can opt for an alternative route. Goce Delchev lies in a long valley framed by massive mountain ranges.

## **History of Bulgaria**

The first Bulgarian state came into being in the 7th century after the early settlement of Romanised Thracians, followed in the 5th century by the first Slavs. At that time, however, it covered a far larger area than the territory of the modern state. After centuries of varying military successes, at the end of the 14th century the country came under Ottoman rule, which lasted 500 years and still leaves its mark on the collective memory of the Bulgarians. Popular uprisings against the foreign rulers were crushed and it was not until around 1800 that any serious national resistance movement emerged calling for independence.

The bloody suppression by the Ottomans of the "April Uprising" in 1876 led to the Russian-Turkish war of 1877/78. The victorious Russian troops annexed almost all the European areas of the Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of San Stefano, which ended the war, laid the foundations for the modern state of Bulgaria.

The Treaty of Berlin, signed by the European great powers in 1878, reorganised southeast Europe and created the province of Bulgaria, which nonetheless still had to pay tribute to the Ottoman Empire. The country was given a democratic constitution and was ruled by an elected government for a number of years. Bulgaria obtained real independence in 1908, when Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, who had come to power as a result of a Russian conspiracy, formally declared Bulgaria independent of the Ottoman Empire and appointed himself Tsar.

During the First and Second World War, Bulgaria sided with the Axis Powers. Their defeat had devastating consequences: Bulgaria lost a significant part of its territory and had to pay reparations. During World War II Bulgaria tried to remain neutral for as long as possible, but eventually fought with the Germans.

After the end of World War II, Bulgaria came under Soviet influence and joined the Warsaw Pact. Bulgarian troops took part in putting an end to the Prague Spring. For a long time the Communist dictator Todor Zhivkov managed to suppress all opposition, but in 1989 he was finally toppled. The successor party managed to stay in power as an elected government until 1997 and applied for EU accession the same year. In 2007 Bulgaria became a member of the EU and of NATO.



The trail continues along paths lined by pine-woods towards Dospat. You are now in the region of the Pomaks, Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. Dospat nestles on a slope, with the minaret of a mosque rising between tall buildings. You continue through Smoljan and Zlatograd, the southernmost town in Bulgaria situated in the Rhodope Mountains. After passing Ivajlovgrad, the trail now briefly enters Greek territory, passing the picturesque town of Petrotá with its bright, well-kept buildings and gardens, before taking you into Turkey. The contrast with the towns you saw earlier along this stretch makes it quite clear that you are now entering another culture.



A "Welcome" in white and blue in Greece

### **History of Greece**

Long before the birth of Christ, the territory of what is now Greece was the site of one of the most important cultures of antiquity. Early settlements with fortified centres were established and the Greeks began to expand in the Mediterranean. In most Greek states, rule by the kings gave way to rule by the aristocracy and the city-state and the "polis" developed. The military state of Sparta and the city-state of Athens emerged as the main rivals. A series of reforms in Athens laid the foundations for Ancient Greek democracy. Under the leadership of the statesman Pericles, the arts, poetry and science flourished, and that period is still regarded today as the ideal of Western civilisation. Under Philip II and his son Alexander the Great, Greece fell under the control of the Macedonians, until it passed into Roman hands around 200 AD. That meant the end of Greek independence and political supremacy.

Christianity gradually gained hold, but at the same time the territory was under Byzantine rule from 330 AD as part of the

Eastern Empire and was split up into various types of state. With the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 the Turks had also conquered Greece, which remained part of the Ottoman Empire until 1830. It was ruled by Turkish overlords, and during that period only the church and its independent constitution kept the Greek sense of nationhood alive.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 17/18th century paved the way in the early 19th century for the Greek War of Independence, hatched by secret societies. Following the successful Serbian uprising, the Greeks now revolted against the Sultan. The armed resistance began in 1821 and only a year later the National Assembly declared Greek independence. In the end, however, it was only thanks to the intervention of the United Kingdom, Russia and France that a modern Greek state was established. It was a hereditary monarchy and encompassed large areas of the present-day state, gaining further territory during the Balkan wars.

During World War I, Greece initially remained neutral but in 1917, after the Allies had forced King Constantine I to abdicate, it entered the war against the Central Powers and their partners, in particular Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire.

Greece gained a great deal of territory after the war and Constantine I returned to the throne. The war against Turkey in Asia Minor ended in defeat, however, and the Greeks living there were driven out and the borders with Turkey fixed once and for all. Attempts to replace the monarchy with a republic failed and a dictatorship was established in 1936.

During World War II, Greece was occupied by Italy, Germany and Bulgaria and its people were treated cruelly. At the end of that War, civil war immediately erupted in Greece between Communists and royalists. Following an agreement between the eastern and western powers to give Great Britain 90% influence over Greece and the Soviet Union only 10%, the Communists did not manage to gain control here, in contrast to what happened in neighbouring countries. A new constitution was adopted, for the time being the monarchy was retained, and in 1952 Greece joined NATO. Yet this led to another sombre political period when a group of conservative army officers set up a dictatorship in 1967. In 1974, however, the failure of an Athens led coup in Cyprus led to the collapse of the military dictatorship and a new parliamentary democracy was set created. From 1974 to 1980 Greece temporarily resigned from NATO; in 1981 it joined the European Community.



You now follow an exciting stretch leading from Edirne to Kirklareli. This route leads back towards Bulgaria along a northern curve until you cross the border again near Malko Tarnovo. Finally you follow the signs to Carevo.

That takes you to the end of the Iron Curtain Trail, where you will be rewarded for all your efforts. For here, where the water is warmer than elsewhere along the Bulgarian coast of the Black Sea, you can finally relax and enjoy life on the beach.

## History of Turkey

The starting point for the Turkisation and Islamisation of what is now Turkey was the sultanate of the Anatolian Seljuk, which came into being in 1071 after the victory of the Seljuk Sultan Alp Arslan over Byzantium. Many Turkish nomads moved to Asia Minor and the region flourished until the invasion of the Mongols in 1243. From the 14th century, the many small states came together to form the Ottoman Empire, so-called after its leader Osman I Ghasi, and began to expand westward. One by one Thrace, Macedonia, Serbia, Wallachia, Bulgaria and Thessalonica fell under Ottoman control. The last crusade to save the Byzantine Empire was repelled in 1444. At the end of the 15th century, the remainder of the Byzantine Empire was conquered and Constantinople became the new capital. The Empire reached its zenith in the 15/16th century with the conquest of further parts of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa and became a major political actor and the ruling sea power in the eastern Mediterranean. From 1517 the sultan was also the caliph and protector of the sacred sites of Mecca and Medina. At home, Suleiman II established a central administration that endured for centuries.

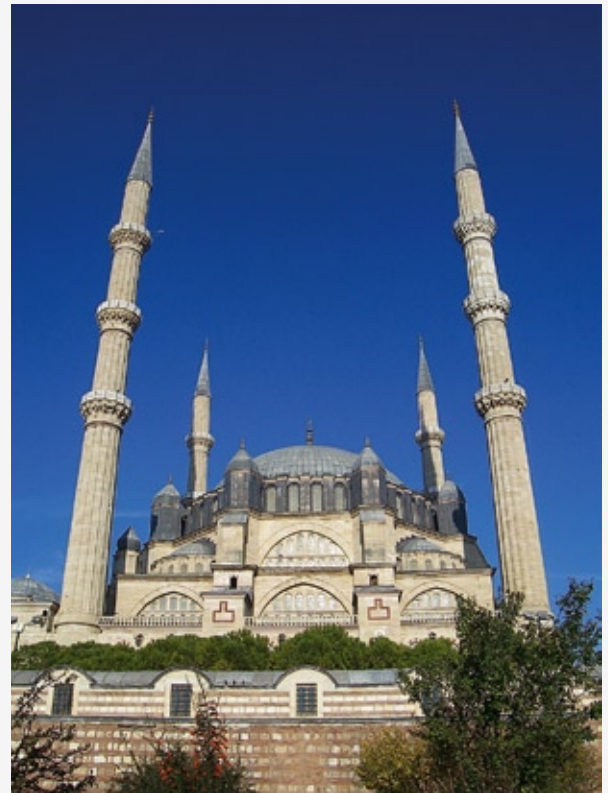
In 1571, however, the defeat of the Ottoman fleet by the galley fleet of the Holy League in the Battle of Lepanto meant the beginning of the end. Local rulers gained increasing power and uprisings weakened the government. The reforms that were introduced did not have the desired effect and the second siege of Vienna in 1683 was a failure. The ensuing 'Great Turkish War' against the Holy League resulted in heavy casualties, the opponents of the Empire gained strength and by the beginning of the 20th century the Ottomans had lost many of the territories they had conquered. After the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers in the First World War, its position as a great power finally came to an end.

The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) dissolved the Ottoman Empire and reduced the Turkish territory to the areas around Constantinople and parts of Asia Minor and Anatolia. This Treaty signed by Sultan Mohamed VI and his government was not recognised by the commander and politician Mustafa Kemal Pasha, later to be known as Atatürk (father of the Turks). As leader of the National Party he protested against the Treaty, toppled the government and founded the Turkish Republic with Angora (Ankara today) as its capital. His victory over the French, Italian and Greek army that had occupied Turkey until the end of the war led to new negotiations. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) brought a result that was more favourable to Turkey.

As president, Atatürk wanted to turn Turkey into a pro-European, secular state, which is why he also introduced the Latin alphabet. During World War II, Turkey began by staying neutral but joined the anti-Hitler coalition in 1945. During the Cold War it was granted a special position because of its pro-Western attitude, and in 1952 it became the easternmost and only largely Muslim member country of NATO. In 1964 Turkey also applied to join the European Community. Successive governments continued this pro-Western approach although there were also several bloody attempts at military intervention into politics. The

occupation of northern Cyprus by Turkish troops in 1974 was greeted enthusiastically at home but triggered a new conflict with Greece and the Western powers. A period of domestic instability ended in 1980 with a peaceful military coup, yet this was followed by arbitrary arrests, executions and the persecution of Kurds living in Turkey. The Kurds' aspirations to independence and the bloody conflicts between the Kurdish PKK and the Turkish army still cast a shadow over political life today.

In the 1990s, religious political movements gained increasing strength, yet for the time being the pressure of the military prevented them from forming part of the government for any length of time. In 1999 Turkey was granted the status of candidate for accession to the EU and in March 2001 the government presented a "national programme" for the accession process. In 2002, after a period of political turbulence, the AKP, regarded as a moderate Islamic party, led by the former mayor of Istanbul Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, emerged victorious. At first the new government introduced major reforms with a view to the EU accession process,



*Welcome to a different culture sphere: a quick side-trip to Turkey*



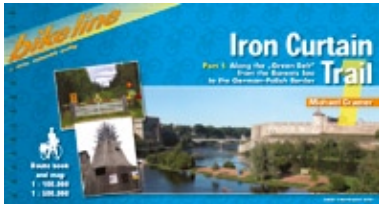


*Finally! Endpoint of the cycle route at the Black Sea*

but then the pace of reform slowed significantly. Accession negotiations with the EU officially began in 2005. During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Turkey acquired huge strategic importance as a NATO member because of its location and once again played a special role among Islamic countries. In 2007 the AKP was re-elected by an absolute majority and the former foreign minister Abdullah Gül became President. Opposition grew among the ranks of the secular forces and in 2008 plans were actually discovered for a state coup by a secret underground organisation called 'Ergenekon'.

## Your guide along the Iron Curtain Trail

The official cycling guides for a trip along the former Iron Curtain – published in the “bikeline” series by Esterbauer publishing house.



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### *Berlin Wall Trail*

*The model for the Iron Curtain Trail*

*ISBN 978-3-85000-147-2*

The Iron Curtain divided the Communist bloc from the capitalist West for half a century and instilled fear into a generation of Europeans. Now, twenty years after its fall, the former “death strip” will become a tourist cycling and hiking trail called the “Iron Curtain Trail”. The new cycle trail, which will run 7,000 km (4,350 miles) from the Barents Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, is aimed at promoting cross-border eco-tourism along the former militarised zone. Throughout its course, the route passes not only former monuments and memorials but also unique natural biotopes that evolved due to the decade-long isolation of the border strip.

In 2005, the European Parliament officially acknowledged the project as an example for Soft Mobility and as a symbol of the reunification of Europe and proposed to define it as the 13th long-distance route among the already existing 12 EuroVelo routes in Europe. The “Iron Curtain Trail”, likely to be the longest heritage trail in the world, will preserve the memory of Europe’s past and be a symbol of European reunification.



**The Greens | EFA**  
in the European Parliament