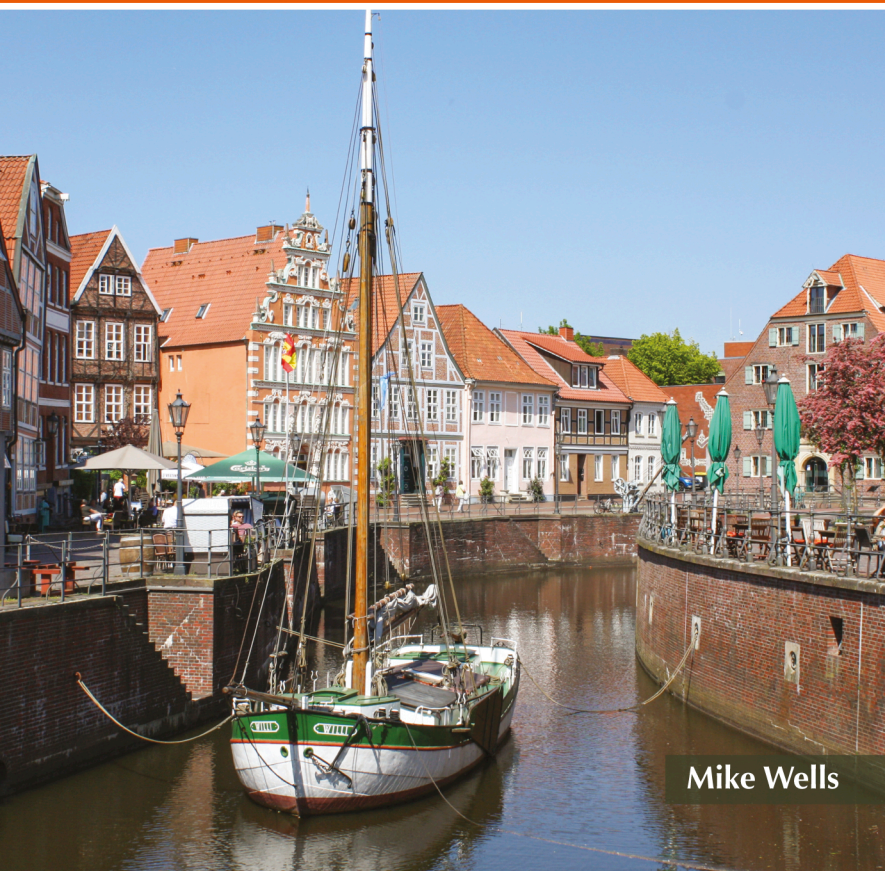


CICERONE

CYCLING THE ELBE CYCLE ROUTE

Elberadweg – Czechia and Germany
to the North Sea



Mike Wells

THE ELBE CYCLE ROUTE

THE ELBE CYCLE ROUTE

**ELBERADWEG
CZECHIA AND GERMANY TO THE NORTH SEA
by Mike Wells**

CICERONE

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL
www.cicerone.co.uk

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Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. This guidebook was researched, written and finalised before the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are not aware of any significant changes to routes or facilities at the time of printing, it is likely that the current situation will give rise to more changes than would usually be expected. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1055/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Note on mapping

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency. However, we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

Front cover: The old harbour in Stade (Stage 27)

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Christine, my partner of 23 years and companion on the research trips for all my walking and cycling guides. She died a few weeks after we had completed this guide, though she lives on in pictures throughout the book.

ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Start	Finish	Via	Distance (km)	Page
Bohemia					
Prologue	Vrchlabí	Labská bouda	Labe valley	26.5	46
1	Labská bouda	Hostinné	mountain route	40	50
2	Hostinné	Jaroměř		35.5	57
3	Jaroměř	Pardubice		46	65
4	Pardubice	Kolín		52	74
5	Kolín	Nymburk		27.5	81
6	Nymburk	Libeň (Prague)	Lázně Toušeň	54.5	87
7	Libeň (Prague)	Mělník	Vltava valley	52	97
7A	Lázně Toušeň	Mělník	Labe valley	33.5	105
8	Mělník	Litoměřice		47	110
9	Litoměřice	Děčín		50.5	117
10	Děčín	Bad Schandau		21	124
Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt					
11	Bad Schandau	Dresden		46	128
12	Dresden	Meissen		25.5	137
13	Meissen	Riesa		25.5	142
14	Riesa	Torgau		50	147
15	Torgau	Wittenberg		68.5	154
16	Wittenberg	Dessau		39	163
17	Dessau	Barby		41.5	172
18	Barby	Magdeburg		36.5	177
19	Magdeburg	Rogätz		31.5	185
20	Rogätz	Tangermünde		40	190
21	Tangermünde	Havelberg		36.5	195
22	Havelberg	Wittenberge		37	201
23	Wittenberge	Dömitz		53	206
Lower Saxony					
24	Dömitz	Bleckede		53.5	211
25	Bleckede	Geesthacht		40	218
26	Geesthacht	Hamburg		39.5	225
27	Hamburg	Stade		42 (+3 ferry)	232
28	Stade	Freiburg		41.5	239
29	Freiburg	Cuxhaven		51.5	244
Total distance				1227	

Suggested schedules





Magdeburg cathedral took over 300 years to build (Stage 18)

INTRODUCTION



Cycling along the Elbe flood dyke towards Tangermünde (Stage 20)

The 1094km-long Elbe is western Europe's third longest river after the Danube and Rhine. A waymarked cycle route follows the river from a kilometre below its source in the Krkonoše mountains of northern Czechia (the official short name for the Czech Republic) through former East Germany all the way to its mouth at Cuxhaven on the North Sea coast of western Germany. This route is mostly asphalt surfaced, either on dedicated cycle tracks or quiet country roads, though there are some stretches on gravel or unsurfaced tracks. After descending 40km from the mountains, the track continues gently

downhill all the way to the sea, making it the easiest long-distance cycle route in Europe as far as gradients are concerned.

Before 1990, it was impossible to cycle the length of the river. When the Second World War ended in 1945, Soviet Russian troops had control of eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Russian political power was exerted over these countries, which became Soviet satellite nations. A heavily armed border, dubbed by Winston Churchill as an 'Iron Curtain', was constructed by the Soviets to divide eastern and western Europe. Most of

the Elbe fell to the east of this border, and only the last 300km through the former West German *länder* (regions) of Lower Saxony and Hamburg was open to free travel. When the Soviet system collapsed in 1989, the border between East and West Germany was abolished, while that between Czechoslovakia and East Germany became first an easily crossed border before being abolished in 2004 when Czechia joined the European Union. As a result, free movement became possible along the whole length of the river.

There is plenty to see and visit on the Elbe cycleway, including three great cities, plus another just off the river. Dresden, the former capital of Saxony, is a city that was all but destroyed by bombing in 1945, then suffered 45 years of neglect under Communism. Since 1990, the city has been reborn. Palaces, cathedrals, churches and other Baroque and Rococo buildings have been restored, while many concrete Communist-era buildings have been demolished and replaced with more attractive structures. Further north, similar restoration and rebuilding has turned Magdeburg from a dull east European industrial city into an attractive place to visit. Shortly before the river estuary, Germany's second largest city, Hamburg, has seen its old brick warehouse district of Speicherstadt, on a series of islands in the Elbe, renovated in spectacular fashion. Although the river does not pass through the Czech

capital Prague, a short detour into the nearby Vltava valley enables cyclists to visit the city and see its famous castle, bridge and old town.

Of the large towns passed, Pardubice in Czechia is the home of the world's most challenging horse race, while Meissen, north of Dresden, is a leading centre for the production of high-quality European porcelain. Wittenberg was the home of Martin Luther whose protest in 1517 against excesses in the Catholic church led to the Protestant Reformation, while in nearby Dessau you can visit the Bauhaus school that influenced greatly the Modernist architectural movement. Smaller towns suffered under Communism in one of two ways; either they were over-industrialised with large now-derelict factories and tower blocks of workers' flats, or they were ignored and allowed to deteriorate. This latter group includes Litoměřice, Torgau and Tangermünde, all towns with little Communist industrialisation but with intact medieval centres that with care and attention have been brought back to life.

The route passes three great fortresses, built at considerable expense but none of which ever fired a shot in anger. Josefov and Theresienstadt in Czechia were built by the Habsburg rulers of Austro-Hungary to defend their empire against Prussia, while Königstein, on a hilltop in Saxony, was built by the Saxons to defend against the Habsburgs, but later used unsuccessfully for protection from



The Czech/German border is nowadays an open crossing place (Stage 10)

Prussian invasion. The greatest scenic attraction lies on the border between Czechia and Germany where the Elbe has cut two great gorges. On the Czech side is the Porta Bohemica, where the romantic ruins of medieval Střekov castle stand on top of an old volcanic cone overlooking the river. Then in Germany, Saxon Switzerland is a forested gorge through the Elbesandsteingebirge range surmounted by fantastic rock formations of weathered sandstone.

A fascinating aspect of the journey is to see how Czechia and East Germany have developed since the end of Communism. Apart from a few post-industrial towns surrounded by derelict factories and the evidence of declining urban populations, much of both countries is now indistinct

from their western neighbours. In particular, great parts of the DDR now look and feel like western Germany; not surprising considering the huge amount of money spent by the German government bringing eastern infrastructure up to western standards.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Following the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the former Czech regions of Bohemia and Moravia became a country known in English as 'The Czech Republic'. Subsequently there were moves to adopt a more succinct name and in 2016 the Czech government approved 'Czechia' as the official short name for the country. This name is used throughout this guide.

Tribal roots

The Elbe basin is populated by two ethnic groups, Slavs in Czechia and Germans in Germany. Germanic tribes arrived first, moving south from Scandinavia around 200BC, while the Slavs are relative newcomers, arriving from eastern Europe between the sixth and the eighth centuries AD.

At about the same time as the Germans arrived, Czechia was being settled by Celtic tribes pushed out of northern Italy and over the Alps by the Romans, particularly the Boii from which the name Bohemia is derived (*Boii-heimat*, German for Boii homeland). Though they captured southern Germany, an attempt by the Romans to capture the rest of the country was halted by a combined force of Germanic tribes at the Battle of the Teutoberg forest (AD9), described by Tacitus as ‘the greatest defeat the Romans ever suffered’. As a result, Roman civilisation never reached the Elbe basin which remained in the hands of many disparate tribes.

The Great Migrations

These tribal boundaries lasted until AD375, when the Huns (a non-Germanic tribe) arrived in eastern Europe from the Asian steppes, beginning a period known as the ‘Great Migrations’. A fiercely aggressive tribe, they pushed all before them causing a knock-on effect upon the various German tribes. The Vandals and Goths (until then occupying Poland and Silesia) were pushed

west into the territory of the Saxons, Swabians and others. Many Saxons took sail for England while the Franks and Swabians crossed the Rhine into Roman Gaul. As the Huns continued west (under King Attila, they reached Gaul in AD451 although they soon disappeared from the scene after Attila’s death), so the Vandals and Goths too were pushed into Roman-held lands in Austria, Switzerland and even Italy where the Goths sacked Rome in AD410. By then the Western Roman empire was under attack from all sides, eventually collapsing in AD476.

Western Europe was left with a patchwork of tribal nations, mostly descended from Germanic tribes. Not all Germans had participated in the migrations and those Saxons who had not crossed the North Sea to England became the dominant force in the lower Elbe basin. The Franks ended up in France and under Charlemagne (ruled AD768–814) established the Carolingian empire which encompassed most of France, modern-day Germany and northern Italy. Charlemagne was crowned the first Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. After the death of his son, this empire was divided into three with the eastern Franks taking control of the land between the Rhine and Elbe. This area dubbed itself the ‘Holy Roman Empire’ (HRE), a strange title as it was a mixture of independent German states each with its own ruler who paid little more than lip service to the emperor. However, it was long-lasting

and was still functioning eight centuries later, when Voltaire (1694–1778) called it ‘neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire’.

Bohemia

Meanwhile, another set of migrations had started. The move west by Germanic tribes, the rapid departure of the Huns and the collapse of the Roman empire left large empty lands which attracted Slavic tribes to move west from Russia and Ukraine into Poland and Prussia. This occurred in three waves between AD550 and AD800. The Saxons in the Elbe valley prevented expansion west of the Elbe, so the Slavs turned south into the Czech and Slovak lands, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.

A small Slavic tribe, the Přemyslids, settled in the Bohemian

basin around what is now Prague. From the accession of Bořivoj I (AD867) they grew slowly more powerful. Their Bohemian empire reached its peak in the 14th century under Charles IV (1346–1378) who greatly expanded the country to include parts of Germany and Poland while founding Prague university and building Prague castle and St Vitus cathedral (Stage 6). Towards the end of the 15th century, marriage brought the Hungarian and Bohemian thrones together. When Louis II, King of Hungary and Bohemia, was killed fighting Ottoman Turkish invaders at the Battle of Mohacs (1526), there was no heir and the titles passed through his sister to her husband, the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand I. This was the end of independent Bohemia which was



Charles bridge and Prague castle were built in the 14th century (Stage 6)

STAGE 1

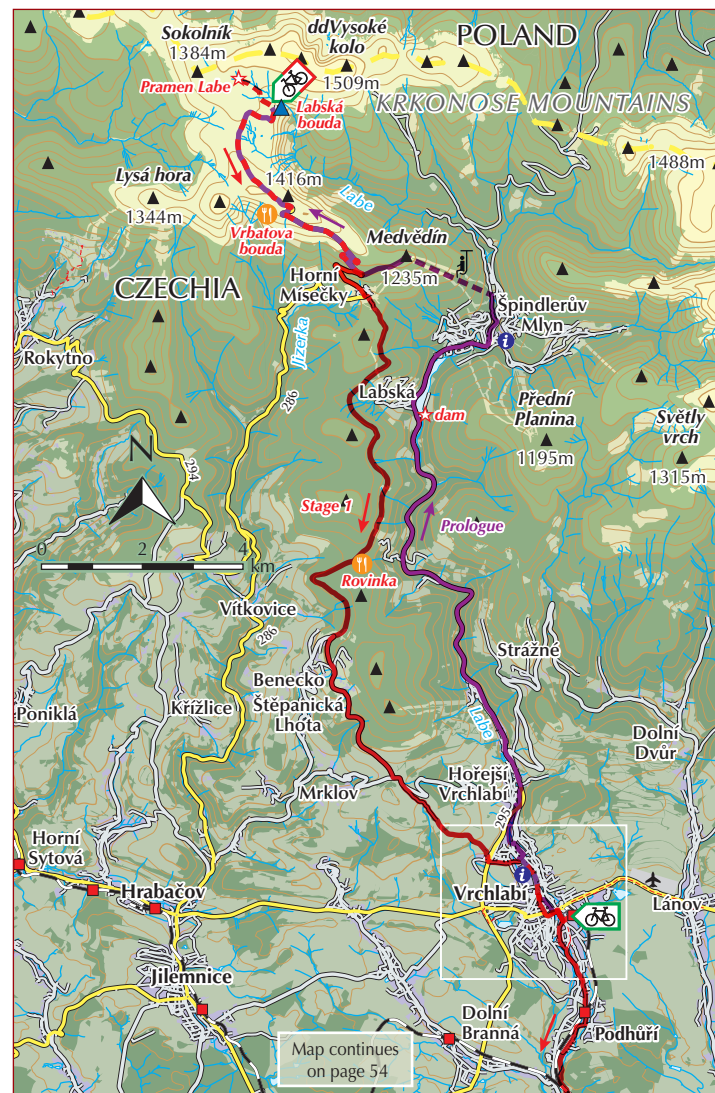
Elbe Spring to Hostinné

Start	Labská bouda (1340m) (1km walk from Elbe spring)
Finish	Hostinné, Deymova bridge (352m)
Distance	40km
Ascent	160m
Descent	1148m
Waymarking	none to Vrchlabí, then Czech National Cycle Route 2 to Hostinné

This stage descends steadily on forest tracks and quiet roads through the thickly forested Krkonoše mountains, past a series of small ski resorts to reach the Labe valley at Vrchlabí. It then continues through a narrow valley to the small industrial town of Hostinné, once a major centre for the production of paper.

The Elbe rises near **Pramen Labe** spring (1386m) in the Krkonoše mountains, close to the border between Poland and Czechia and one of the most popular walking destinations in the country. The ornamental spring and a wall depicting the coats of arms of 26 major cities on the river are between 150m and 300m from the true spring which is in a protected area inaccessible to visitors. Pramen Labe is only accessible on foot.

After visiting **Pramen Labe** (Elbe spring) on foot, return to **Labská bouda** refuge (1340m) (accommodation, refreshments). Cycle on asphalt road bearing R uphill and follow this across rolling open moorland to reach bus-turning circle at **Vrbatova bouda** refuge (3.5km, 1390m) (refreshments). Continue downhill round five hairpins to small ski resort of **Horní Mísečky** (8km, 1036m) (accommodation, refreshments).



Pass bus shelter L then where road bears R, turn L and immediately R on gravel track under chairlift across beginners' ski-run and into forest. Fork R into open area (Stadion) passing Chata Stopa bar R. Follow track ahead through barrier to re-enter forest and continue descending gently, now on asphalt. Pass under chairlift and cross ski piste then ascend slightly, now on gravel track, before descending to reach road at Tridomi hamlet. Bear R and continue on road winding through forest past **Rovinka** (14.5km, 853m) (refreshments). Pass Bellevue hotel R then emerge on main road at apex of hairpin bend. Fork L uphill into upper part of **Benecko** (18km, 866m) (accommodation, refreshments).

Follow road, now downhill, then turn L at T-junction beside sports club car park in Křížovky. After 300m, fork R slightly uphill to reach Kněžice hamlet, then bear R at T-junction. ◀ Continue descending with view of Vrchlabí ahead past **St Anne's** chapel L then bear R at triangular junction and go ahead over small crossroads. Turn L on pedestrian/cyclist bridge over Vrchlabí by-pass. Go ahead (Hřbitovní), passing Vrchlabí Krkonošská museum in old monastery R. Continue on Husova to Náměstí Míru

Ignore no through road sign, this applies only to motor vehicles.

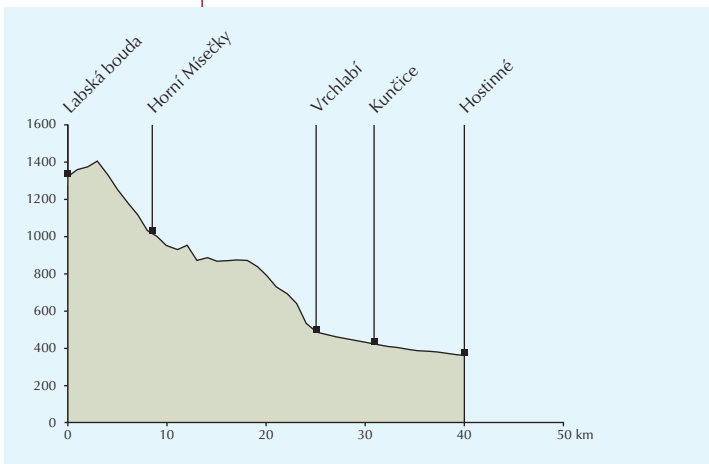


square in **Vrchlabí** (24.5km, (486m) (accommodation, refreshments, camping, tourist office, cycle shop, station).

Vrchlabí castle was the first Renaissance castle in Bohemia

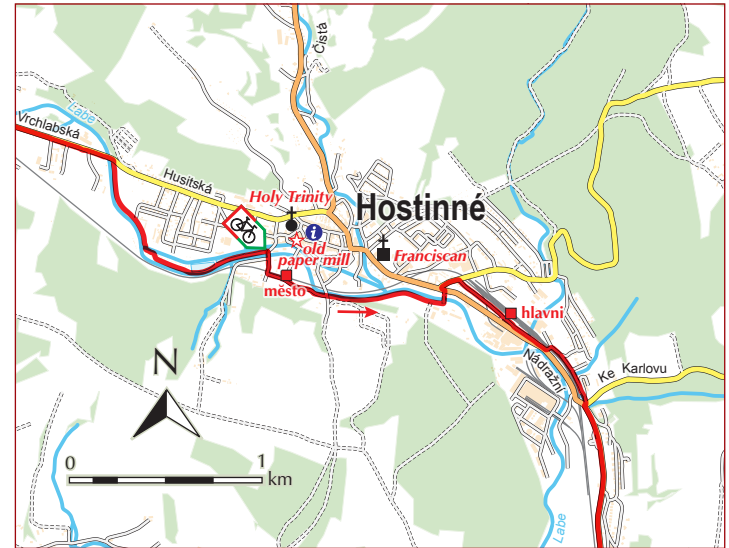
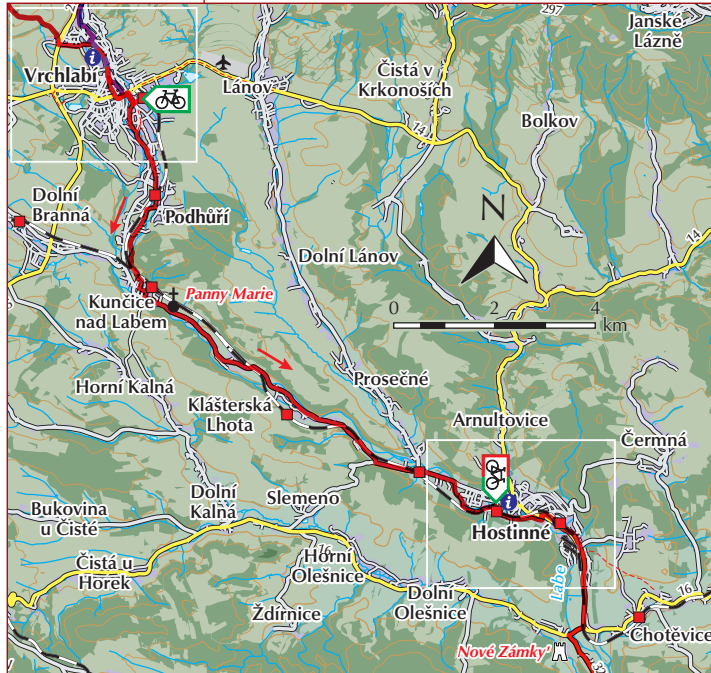
Vrchlabí (pop 13,000) is the first town on the Elbe. Known in German as Hohenelbe and populated mainly by German Lutherans, it grew from the 15th century as a mining and metal-working centre using power from the fast-flowing Labe. The castle, built (1546) for German industrialist Krystof Gendorf, was the first Renaissance-style palace in Bohemia. After the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1919, many Germans left. All remaining Germans were expelled after the Second World War. Nowadays, the main employer is a Škoda car factory which ironically is owned by Volkswagen, a German car company.

Turn R (Krkonošská) through town centre then go ahead at one-way system (Slovanská). Go ahead over two crossroads and join cycle track L of road. At next crossroads, go ahead onto main road (Tyršova) and follow this bearing L. Cross Labe and turn R at roundabout



(Dělnická, first exit, sp Hostinné). Turn first R (Ulice Žižkova) and pass through industrial area then turn R (rejoining Dělnická using cycle track L) past Škoda car factory L. Where cycle track ends, fork L (Ulice Poštovní). Cross railway and pass **Podhůří** station R (28.5km, 438m) (station).

Turn R at T-junction (Lipová), then L (Ulice Jana Opletala) just before railway crossing. Where road bears R, continue ahead on minor road. Where this bears R, turn L over stream and follow gravel track with wooded hillside rising L. Dog-leg R and L across railway then emerge on road and turn sharply L. Turn L at crossroads, then R at end to reach main road in **Kunčice nad Labem** (31km, 413m) (station).



Turn L (sp Hostinné), following main road past Panny Marie (Ascension) chapel L with Labe behind houses and trees R. Continue past KVK stone-works L. ▶ Cross railway and river, then pass through **Klásterská Lhota** (35km, 379m) (station). Cross railway again, then bear L at junction with minor road and cross railway beside Prosečné station R (station). Turn R at T-junction (Vrchlabská, sp Hostinné), then cross Labe on girder bridge and fork immediately R through barriers onto riverside track. Cross covered bridge over millstream then follow track along island between Labe R and millstream L to reach T-junction in **Hostinné** (40km, 352m) (accommodation, refreshments, tourist office, station). ▶

KVK stone-works has the longest industrial cableway in Europe. Now disused, it previously brought architectural limestone 8km from Černý Důl quarries to Kunčice.

For town centre, turn L (Deymova) over millstream then R (Karla Kliče) and second R (Horní Brána) opposite church to reach main square after 300m.

HOSTINNÉ



The giants on Hostinné town hall were turned to stone for terrorising the town

The medieval town of Hostinné (pop 4400), first mentioned in 1270, suffered a devastating fire in 1610. The town was subsequently rebuilt around an arcaded main square with a Renaissance-style town hall and Baroque plague column. The town hall façade holds statues of two 5m-tall giants who, according to legend, terrorised the town until they were caught and turned to stone. The Franciscan monastery (1684) fell into disrepair during the Communist era but has recently undergone major restoration and now houses cultural and social centres with a museum and art gallery. It won the Czech restored building of the year award in 2012. In 1835, the ruins of Hostinné castle beside the Labe were converted into the first paper mill in the country. Although it closed in 1985 and is now disused, the buttresses of the old castle are still evident on the rear of the building.

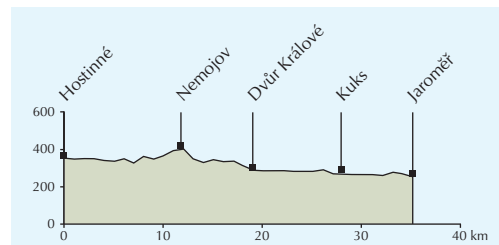
STAGE 2

Hostinné to Jaroměř

Start	Hostinné, Deymova bridge (352m)
Finish	Jaroměř, Jaromírova bridge (252m)
Distance	35.5km
Ascent	144m
Descent	244m
Waymarking	Route 2

This stage continues gently descending from the Krkonoše mountains following the Labe valley, though a short ascent is made to Nemojov, 75m above the river. The going is mostly on quiet country roads or dedicated rural cycle paths.

From T-junction on millstream island in **Hostinné**, follow road (Deymova) S over Labe. Continue across railway then turn L (V Lipkách), passing Hostinné město station L. Where road ends at T-junction, continue ahead on cycle track beside Labe L. At end, turn L over Labe then dog-leg L and R across main road into K Čapka. Turn first R (Kaštanová) and continue past Hostinné hlavní station L (**refreshments, station**) on cycle track beside railway. Where this emerges beside main road, turn L across railway and R along other side then fork R (U Konířů)





- 1227km from source to sea • suitable for all levels of cyclists • best undertaken on a hybrid, tourer or gravel bike
- visits Prague, Dresden and Hamburg • well waymarked

This guide describes the Elbe Cycle route which runs from the river's source in the Krkonoše mountains on the Czech/Polish border to Cuxhaven, on the German North Sea coast. Possibly the easiest long-distance cycle route in Europe in terms of gradient, it visits a part of the continent that was mostly inaccessible to foreigners before the fall of Communism in 1989 and which has changed dramatically since opening up to visitors.

On its gentle descent to the sea, the route passes through many small towns that were ignored during the Communist period but have now re-emerged as medieval gems, as well as larger cities such as Prague, Dresden and Magdeburg which have been rebuilt and restored since the fall of the Iron Curtain.



- follows mostly well-surfaced dedicated cycle tracks
- plentiful facilities and accommodation for cyclists
- can be completed in two to three weeks
- almost no hills for over 1200km

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