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CYCLING THE
RIVER RHONE CYCLE ROUTE

17
Rhone Cycle Route

From the Alps to the Mediterranean

Mike Wells

THE RIVER RHONE CYCLE ROUTE

FROM THE ALPS TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

by Mike Wells

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Updates to this guide

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Front cover: Yvoire castle and harbour (Stage 6)

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Distance marker on riverside cycle track in Laveyron (Stage 13)

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In France the planning of long-distance cycle routes is a national and regional government responsibility. However, the implementation of these plans by building the infrastructure is delegated to *départements* (counties), some of which are quicker than others in getting the job done. When the first edition was written, 75 per cent of the ViaRhôna route was definite and waymarked. The rest existed as proposed routings and these were used as the base for the guide. This was particularly the case in the départements of Isère, Rhône, Vaucluse and Gard, plus the city of Lyon. Subsequently, in a number of places the route finally chosen, provided with infrastructure and waymarked did not correspond with the initial proposals. This second edition incorporates all the new sections that have been completed in the last five years and the route is now 95 per cent complete. As a result the long detour following Swiss Rhone route R1 around the north side of Lake Geneva is no longer necessary and this edition follows a route along the south (French) shore of the lake.

There are still a few short provisional sections where roads have to be followed, particularly along the south side of Lake Geneva (Haute-Savoie), before and after Lyon (Rhône), and from Avignon to Arles (Gard). These sections are fully described in this guide, although they may change as the final pieces are put into place. As these sections are completed, details will be posted on the 'updates' page of the Cicerone website.

STAGE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Start	Finish	Distance	Waymarking	Page
1	Furka Belvédère	Brig (Naters), Rottubrigga bridge	55.5km	R1	48
2	Brig (Naters), Rottubrigga bridge	Sierre/Siders, Rue du Bourg	41km	R1	62
3	Sierre/Siders, Rue du Bourg	Martigny, Branson bridge	44.5km	R1	70
4	Martigny, Branson bridge	St Gingolph, boat pier	44.5km	R1/R46	78
5	St Gingolph, boat pier	Thonon-les-Bains, Port de Rives	28.5km	ViaRhôna	109
6	Thonon-les Bains, Port de Rives	Geneva, Pl de St Gervais	45.5km	ViaRhôna/R46	116
7	Geneva, Pl de St Gervais	Seyssel, Pl de l'Orme	59km	R1/ViaRhôna	126
8	Seyssel, Pl de l'Orme	Champagneux, dam	53km	ViaRhôna	136
9	Champagneux, dam	Lagnieu, bridge	63km	ViaRhôna	144
10	Lagnieu, bridge	Lyon, pont de la Guillotière bridge	64.5km	ViaRhôna	153
11	Lyon, pont de la Guillotière bridge	Vienne, Ste Colombe quay	35.5km	ViaRhôna	164
12	Vienne, Ste Colombe quay	Sablons, bridge	33km	ViaRhôna	173
13	Sablons, bridge	Tournon-sur-Rhône, bridge	36km	ViaRhôna	178
14	Tournon-sur-Rhône, bridge	Valence, monumental fountain	24km	ViaRhôna	184
15	Valence, monumental fountain	Le Pouzin, roundabout	33.5km	ViaRhôna	189

Stage	Start	Finish	Distance	Waymarking	Page
16	Le Pouzin, roundabout	Montélimar, Pracomtal bridge	30km	ViaRhôna	196
17	Montélimar, Pracomtal bridge	Pont-St Esprit, Le Bout-du-Pont	41km	ViaRhôna	204
18	Pont-St Esprit, Le Bout-du-Pont	Avignon, Centre station	56.5km	ViaRhôna	212
19	Avignon, Centre station	Arles, Bvd Clemenceau	58.5km	ViaRhôna	222
20	Arles, Bvd Clemenceau	Port-St Louis-du-Rhône, Tour St Louis	43km	ViaRhôna	231
		Total	890km		
		Switzerland	226.5km		
		France	663.5km		

Using route north of Lake Geneva

Stage	Start	Finish	Distance	Waymarking	Page
5A	Le Bouveret, bridge	Morges, Temple de Morges	50km	R1/R46	86
6A	Morges, Temple de Morges	Geneva, Pl de St Gervais	58km	R1/R46	101
		Total	917.5km		
		Switzerland	312.5km		
		France	605km		

A statue of Archangel Michael sits atop a limestone ridge overlooking the Rhone near Viviers (Stage 17)

TWELVE-DAY SCHEDULE

Day	Start	Finish	Stage	Distance
1	Furka Belvédère	Brig	1	55.5km
2	Brig	Martigny	2–3	85.5km
3	Martigny	Évian-les-Bains	4–5	61km
4	Évian-les-Bains	Geneva	5–6	57.5km
5	Geneva	Chanaz	7–8	81.5km
6	Chanaz	Montalieu-Vercieu	8–9	80km
7	Montalieu-Vercieu	Lyon	9–10	78km
8	Lyon	St Vallier	11–13	87km
9	St Vallier	Le Pouzin	13–15	75km
10	Le Pouzin	Pont d'Esprit	16–17	71km
11	Pont d'Esprit	Beaucaire	18–19	95km
12	Beaucaire	Port-St Louis	19–20	63km
			Total	**890km**
			Average	**74km per day**

The old Belvédère hotel is high on the Furkapass (Stage 1)

INTRODUCTION

The shore of Lake Geneva in Montreux is lined with floral displays (Stage 5A)

Running from the Swiss Alps to the Mediterranean Sea, the valley of the river Rhone has for many centuries been one of the great communication links of western Europe. The Romans conquered Gaul by marching their legions up the lower Rhone valley from the sea, while over 1850 years later the French Emperor Napoléon took his army the other way by using the upper valley as a route to invade Italy. For modern-day French families the lower Rhone valley is the *route du soleil* (route to the sun) which they follow every summer to reach vacation destinations in the South of France. For much of its length the river is followed by railways, roads and motorways carrying goods to and from great Mediterranean ports such as Marseille and Genoa.

In addition to being a major transport artery, the Rhone valley is host to an attractive long-distance cycle route that makes its way for 890km from the high Alps to the Rhone delta using a mixture of traffic-free tracks and country roads. As it follows a great river, the route is mostly downhill.

After many years of planning and construction, the Rhone Cycle Route is almost complete, making it a viable means of cycling from central Switzerland to the South of France

in a generally quiet environment by using two waymarked national cycle trails: the Swiss Rhone Route R1 and the French ViaRhôna. These have been adopted by the ECF (European Cyclists' Federation) as EuroVelo route EV17. This guide breaks the route into 20 stages, averaging 45km in length. A reasonably fit cyclist, riding 74km per day, should be able to complete the route in 12 days. Allowing for a gentler ride with time for sightseeing on the way, the route can be cycled in a fortnight by most cyclists.

The Swiss Rhone Route R1, part of the extensive Swiss Veloland network (www.veloland.ch), runs from the river's source near the summit of the Furkapass for 186km to the Swiss/French border at St Gingolph on the shore of Lake Geneva. En route it follows a deep glacial valley with snow-capped mountains rising on both sides.

After crossing into France, the ViaRhôna is followed firstly along the south side of Lake Geneva, then through a deep limestone gorge between the Jura mountains and the Savoy Alps. After passing through Lyon, France's second city, it turns south through a wider gorge along the geological fault line between the Alps and Massif Central to reach the Mediterranean. The main cities along this valley – Lyon, Valence and Arles – have history going back to the Iron Age and there is much evidence of Roman civilisation including the ruins of temples, arena, amphitheatres and bath-houses. Other cities, particularly Vienne and Avignon, were important medieval religious centres with large cathedrals and clerical palaces.

ViaRhôna (www.viarhona.com) is a dedicated cycle track being built to French *voie verte* standards (traffic-free, 3m wide, asphalt surface) all the way from the Swiss border to the sea. While this is about 95 per cent complete, there are sections, particularly in Haut Savoie south of Lake Geneva (Stages 5/6), before and after Lyon (Stages 10/11), and between Avignon and Arles (Stage 19) where quiet country roads need to be used. Heavy traffic is only encountered on one stage, when heading south out of Lyon (Stage 11). This can be avoided if desired by taking the train for 36km from Lyon to Vienne.

Throughout the route there are a wide variety of places to stay, from campsites through to youth hostels, guest houses and small family run hotels, all the way up to some of the world's greatest five-star hotels. Local tourist offices in almost every town will help you find accommodation and often book it for you. It is the same for food and drink, with eating establishments in every price range including two of France's most famous (and expensive!) three-star Michelin restaurants (Paul Bocuse near Lyon and Maison Pic in Valence). In both Switzerland (where the birthplace and grave of César Ritz is passed on Stage 1) and France, where culinary skills are in evidence in almost all establishments, even the smallest local restaurants offer home-cooked meals using quality local ingredients. If you like wine, there are plentiful opportunities to sample local vintages in both countries as the route passes through the Swiss wine-producing areas of Valais, Lavaux and La Côte, and many French ones including Côte-Rôtie, Condrieu, Hermitage, Côtes du Rhône and Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

The Rhone Cycle Route passes through two countries. Although both countries speak French (albeit only partly so in Switzerland) they have very different histories, culture and ways of government.

Switzerland

Switzerland is a federation of 26 *cantons* (federal states). It was founded in 1291 (on 1 August, now celebrated as Swiss national day), although some of west Switzerland through which the route passes did not join the federation until 1803. Modern Switzerland is regarded as a homogenous, prosperous and well-organised country, but this was not always the case.

Roman occupation

Before the arrival of the Romans in 15BC, the land north of the Alps that is modern Switzerland was inhabited by the Helvetii, a Gallic Iron Age tribe. More than 400 years of Roman rule left its mark with many archaeological remains. During the fourth century AD, the Romans came under increasing pressure from Germanic tribes from the north and by AD401
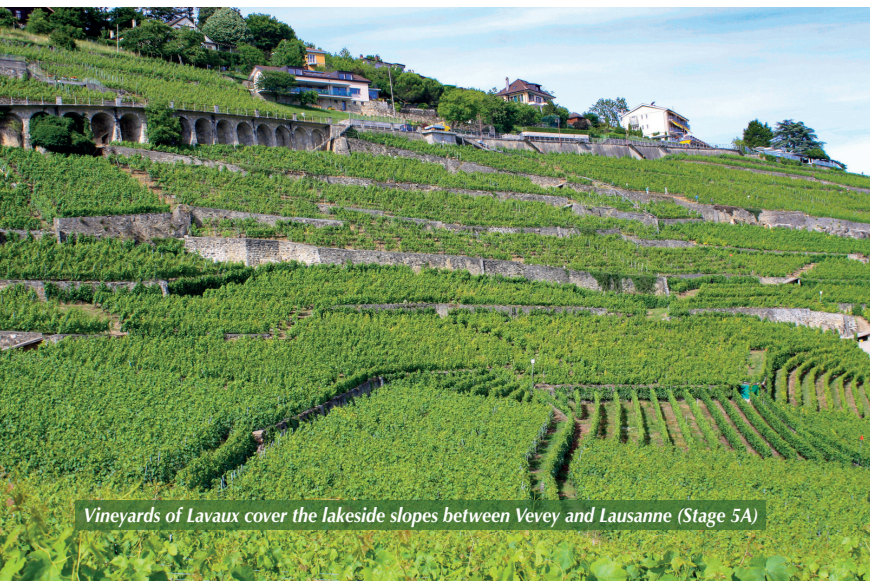
Vineyards of Lavaux cover the lakeside slopes between Vevey and Lausanne (Stage 5A)

had withdrawn their legions from the region.

Early Swiss history

After the Romans departed, two tribes occupied the area: the Burgundians in the west and Alemanni in the east. This division lives on 1600 years later in the division between the French and German speaking parts of Switzerland. The Burgundian territory south of Lake Geneva passed through a number of hands before becoming part of Savoy in 1003. North of the lake, the territory became divided between a number of city states, all part of the Holy Roman Empire. The Alemanni territory became part of Berne, also within the Holy Roman Empire. Expansionist Berne joined the Swiss Federation in 1353 and gradually absorbed all the city states (except Geneva), leaving Berne and Savoy facing each other across the lake. Most of the fortifications in western Switzerland are either Bernese or Savoyard and reflect regular tensions between these countries. Both were feudal states with a large number of peasants ruled over by noble elites.

Napoleonic era

This division ended when French revolutionary forces invaded Savoy (1792) and Napoléon invaded Geneva and Berne (1798), bringing the whole region temporarily under French control. Napoléon re-established a Swiss Confederation in 1803, separating Valais from Savoy and breaking up

Berne into smaller cantons including Vaud. The feudal structure was abolished and the cantons in this confederation were set up with governments based on democratic principles. After Napoléon's fall (1815), the Congress of Vienna gave Savoy to the kingdom of Sardinia, a nation that already controlled neighbouring Piedmont in northern Italy. This congress also recognised Swiss neutrality.

Nineteenth-century Switzerland

For most of the 19th century, Switzerland remained one of Europe's poorest countries, relying upon agriculture with very little industry or natural resources. The coming of railways that enabled rich visitors from northern Europe to visit the Alps and the attraction of clean air and medical facilities for those with consumption and bronchitis started to lift the Swiss economy. The development of hydroelectric generation gave Switzerland plentiful cheap energy and spurred the growth of engineering businesses. Swiss banks in Zürich and Geneva, with a policy of secrecy and a reputation for trust, attracted funds from foreign investors who wished to avail themselves of these benefits.

Modern-day prosperity

Although neutral and not involved in the fighting, Switzerland suffered badly during the First World War when foreign visitors were unable to reach the country and markets for its engineering products dried up. Post-war

recovery was led by the banking sector. Political and economic turmoil in Russia and Germany boosted Swiss bank receipts. Swiss neutrality made it the obvious location for multinational bodies such as the League of Nations and the International Red Cross. The Swiss economic miracle has continued since the Second World War with industries such as watch making, precision engineering and electrical generation becoming world leaders. Modern-day Switzerland has the highest nominal capital per head in the world and the second highest life expectancy. Transport systems by rail and road are world leaders and the country has an aura of order and cleanliness. The Swiss are justifiably proud of what they have achieved. European Union member countries surround Switzerland but it is not a

member. The Swiss have, however, signed the Schengen accord, creating open borders with their neighbours, and are participants in the European Health Insurance Card system, allowing free emergency medical treatment to European visitors.

The neutrality conundrum

Switzerland has a policy of armed neutrality, with one of the highest levels of military expenditure per head in Europe. All Swiss men undertake military service with approximately 20 weeks' training upon reaching the age of 18, followed by annual exercises until 35. Conscripts keep their weapons and uniforms at home and on Saturday mornings armed men are often seen taking the train to annual camp. Prior to 1995 it was Swiss policy to sit out a nuclear war

Château de Chillon was a Savoyard castle captured by the Bernese (Stage 5A)

PROLOGUE

Andermatt or Oberwald to Furkapass

Start	Realp station (1538m) or Oberwald station (1366m)
Finish	Furkapass, Belvédère (2275m)
Distance	15km (Realp), 14km (Oberwald)
Ascent	891m (Realp), 909m (Oberwald)
Descent	154m (Realp), 0m (Oberwald)
Waymarking	Rhone route R1

The nearest stations to the Rhone source are Realp, east of the Furkapass, and Oberwald, west of it. There is nothing to choose between them as from Realp it is a 15km ride with nearly 900m of ascent, while from Oberwald it is a 14km ride with a similar ascent. If you ascend from Oberwald, you will be retracing this route for the first 14km of Stage 1. If you are cycling the route between mid June and mid October you can avoid the climb by using a cycle-carrying PostBus service which crosses the pass en route between Andermatt and Oberwald, alighting at Furka Belvédère. If the pass is closed by snow (which can happen at any time of year), you will have to start your journey to the Mediterranean from Oberwald station. Trains run all year between Realp and Oberwald through the Furka base tunnel.

From Realp station

From **Realp** station (1538m) (accommodation, refreshments, station), go straight ahead away from the station along Bahnhofstrasse. After 75m, turn L onto main road (Furkastrasse, route 19) and continue out of village, starting to climb immediately. ◄ Pass station and workshops of Furka–Oberwald steam cogwheel railway L and start ascending Furkapass steeply round series of nine hairpin bends. Pass Galenstock (5.5km, 2000m) and continue climbing across bare hillside above treeline past Tiefenbach. After two more hairpins pass Furkablick to reach car park and viewpoint at **Furkapass** summit

Furkastrasse is a main road with no cycle lane.
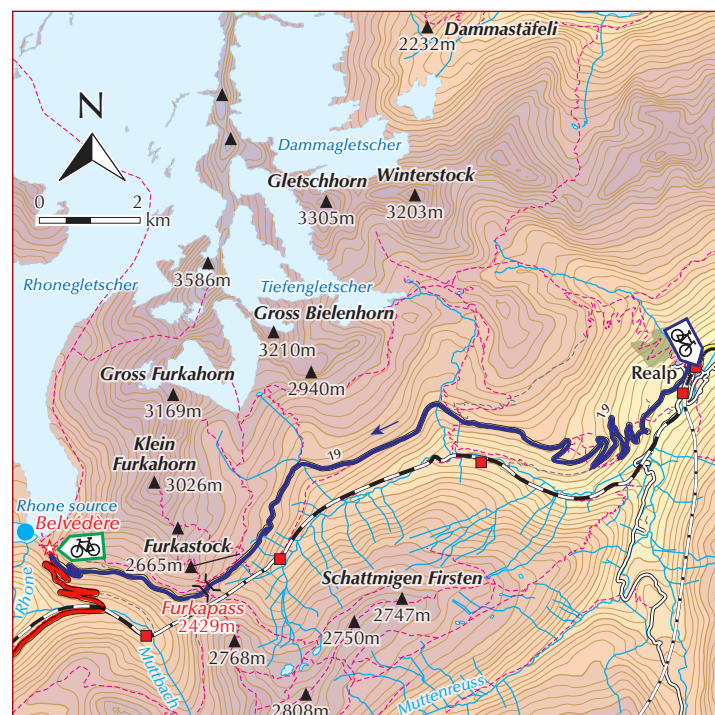
(12km, 2429m). ▶ Road now starts descending through another series of hairpin bends and reaches **Furka Belvédère** complex on apex of third bend (15km, 2275m) (refreshments).

From Oberwald station

From the main entrance to **Oberwald** station (1366m), turn R to join main road (Furkastrasse, route 19). Follow this through Oberwald village (accommodation, refreshments, tourist office, cycle shop, station) and start ascending through woodland round four hairpin bends, passing St Niklaus chapel on first bend and Rhonequelle hotel (accommodation, refreshments) on fourth. Pass

At Furkapass summit you cross the watershed between rivers flowing via the Rhine to the North Sea and the Rhone flowing south to the Mediterranean.

through short tunnel and round four more bends to reach **Gletsch** (6.5km, 1762m) (accommodation, refreshments, tourist office, station). Pass station and bear R past junction with Grimselpass road. ◀ Continue ascending through forest round four more hairpins and after emerging above treeline reach final set of bends with **Furka Belvédère** complex on apex of sixth bend (14km, 2275m) (refreshments).

Gletsch station is served by Furka–Oberwald cogwheel steam trains that operate only in summer.

The **Rhone source** is a small lake below the head of the glacier, which can be seen beyond the Belvédère viewpoint. A footpath leads 400m from the Belvédère viewpoint across glacially scoured bare rock to the outflow from this lake.

The **Rhone glacier** is a 7km tongue of ice running down the south side of Dammastock. The ice-cap on top of this mountain also feeds glaciers running north towards the Sustenpass and east towards Göschenen. Like all glaciers in the Alps it is steadily retreating. Pictures from the 1870s show the glacier reaching all the way down the valley to Gletsch. Since then it has retreated 1.4km to its current outflow below the Furka Belvédère. An ice grotto for visitors and tunnels for scientific research have been cut into the ice wall and are renewed annually. White insulating blankets have been placed over the end of the glacier above the ice grotto in an attempt to slow icemelt. They seem to be effective as the ice is clearly thicker at this point.

The Rhone source is fed by a glacier running down from Dammastock

- 10–14 days (890km) ride through Switzerland and France
- Swiss Alps, deep gorges, wide vineyard lined valleys
- Visiting Geneva, Lyon, Valence, Avignon and Arles

This guide describes a waymarked cycle route from the source of the river Rhone high in the Alps at the foot of the Rhone glacier, through France and Switzerland to the Camargue delta where it reaches the Mediterranean.

In Switzerland the route follows the river through the deep glacial valleys of Goms, Valais and Vaud to reach Lake Geneva. It then passes through a deep gorge between the Savoy Alps and Jura mountains to reach Lyon, the gastronomic capital of France. From Lyon it follows a fault line south between the Alps and Massif Central, through a series of Roman and medieval towns and cities including Avignon and Arles.

- best between April and October. Furkapass can only be cycled when snow free, usually from mid-May

- suitable for hybrid or touring cycles
- mainly on dedicated cycle tracks
- information about facilities for cyclists along the route