

# Cycle Touring With a Nine-Month-Old

*Nick Wallis*



*James in the trailer.*

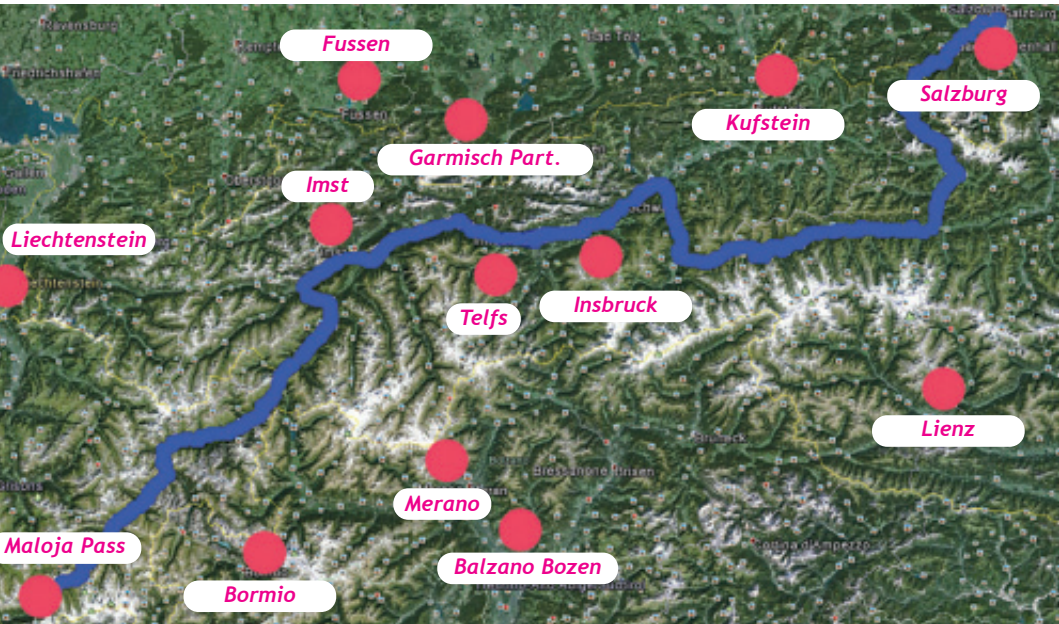
*Photo Nick Wallis*

The arrival of our first son, James, in November 2011 bought with it the expected lifestyle adjustments and parental challenges. Laura and I, as enthusiastic outdoor folk, were keen to try to still do as much as possible in the outdoors, whilst accepting that heading off for a weekend's cragging together just wasn't going to happen for a while (Update: December 2015, it still hasn't happened). We both loved being parents but one of the things we both missed was the feeling of heading off exploring and having a wee adventure.

We pondered how and where we could still have an adventure as a young family. We'd spent a month in the Alps when he was about four months old, which was great, but the long car journey was definitely not one of the highlights. This got us thinking about making the travel an integral part of the trip, rather than the holiday starting when we reached our destination. The holiday should start as soon as you step out of the front door; right? Public transport was obviously the way, but we were keen to avoid flying for environmental reasons (neither of us has boarded a plane for nearly ten years). After some research we worked out that it was possible to get almost anywhere in Europe really easily on the extensive train network. We both enjoyed cycling, and we soon realised that we could combine a cycling trip using trains to get us somewhere interesting to have the mini family adventure that we sought. Game on!

More planning followed, and we got hold of some European maps showing cycle routes. There really is a huge difference between provision for cyclists in the UK and the rest of Europe; just go to Google maps and click on 'cycle' to see the difference. Europe lights up like a Christmas tree when you do this; there are literally cycle routes everywhere. We really wanted to be in the mountains, but were keen to avoid a Tour de France style sufferfest over huge cols day after day; even small climbs would feel challenging, we thought. We also wanted to avoid cycling on roads as much as possible for obvious reasons; fortunately Europe has lots of cycle routes which are either completely traffic free, or on minor roads with very light traffic. We settled on Austria; neither of us had been before, it looked nice and it had a couple of interesting looking cycle routes that looked to fit the bill perfectly. The 'Innradweg' cycle route follows the Inn river from close to its source on the Maloja Pass in Switzerland near St Moritz, soon crosses into Austria and then through Innsbruck and out to Passau in Germany. The last section from Innsbruck to Passau didn't look as interesting to us, so we decided to link it to another cycle route called the 'Tauernradweg' which we could join just after Innsbruck and follow to a logical end point at Salzburg. This also gave easy access to the train network for getting back home. Linking the two routes looked to involve a bit of 'freestyling' over a pass, but we figured we'd find a way. How hard could it be?

We inherited a Burley bike trailer from a good friend who had done lots of similar trips with a young family who had now outgrown the trailer. We had a few short trips in the UK with this when James was about six months old. These worked well as we simply strapped him in using his normal car seat. With hindsight, we could have done this earlier; as soon as they have good head control, you'd be OK I think. The problem was, we couldn't really afford to take the car seat on the planned European trip, as it was pretty heavy, bulky, and would get in the way on the non-cycling sections. So we had a dry run without it around Ladybower reservoir near home in the Peak District. This was not entirely successful, as every time James fell asleep he would slump sideways into an uncomfortable looking position. We tried propping him up with jackets, Thermarests, anything, but couldn't get it to work. The solution turned out to be pretty simple: Burley sells a 'seat insert'



*The route and major towns in the area.*

for the trailer which is really just a soft padded, lightweight child seat. It worked brilliantly, and propped James upright during his frequent naps. For bikes, we used our hybrid-style touring bikes with front suspension which was very welcome on the bumpy track sections of the route, of which there are quite a few on the early part of the Innradweg. The trailer can bounce around a fair bit on rough ground, so to make James's ride as comfortable as possible I found the widest tyres that would fit the trailers rims (these turned out to be Schwalbe 'Big Apple') and let as much air out of them as I dared; this all makes for a good workout for me! I don't remember hearing James complain, so it must have been OK.

For the rest of our equipment, we basically took as little as possible. A lightweight (approx. 300g) sleeping bag and Thermarest each (which resulted in a pretty cold first night on the Maloja pass at around 1,800m, but fine after that); a spacious but light-ish tent with a large porch for cooking; a gas stove and a couple of pans. Be warned, we had problems with compatibility of gas canisters in Austria with our MSR gas stove, and I am still not sure why. We ended up buying long, thin canisters from builders merchants which I think are meant for soldering torches. I notice recently that MSR now have a combined gas/petrol stove which would be perfect for this kind of trip I think. For James, we took a couple of small, light books, a teddy or two and a circa 30-year-old wind-up music box, which turned out to be indispensable and I think was heard in every valley from Switzerland to Salzburg! Everything we had for the four-week trip fitted into the trailer itself plus two Ortlieb standard panniers.



*The bikes.*

*Photo Nick Wallis*

Planning the travel was quite daunting at first, but actually turned out to be really straightforward. The plan was to cycle from the house down to the train station in Sheffield (it took a while to work out a trailer-friendly route for doing that; in some ways this was the most difficult section!). Then a train to Hull, followed by a surprisingly nice cycle up the estuary to the ferry terminal. We took the overnight ferry from Hull to Rotterdam, where we decided to spend a couple of days with friends in Amsterdam (highly recommended). Nearby Utrecht is a major hub for European train travel, and from there you can catch overnight sleeper trains (called ‘City Nightline’) to lots of destinations. We caught one to Basel in Switzerland, and then the stunning UNSECO-rated railway from there via Thusis and on to St Moritz. This last section is really quite something, as it winds its way through helical tunnels and over viaducts as it climbs over 1,000m in altitude. From St Moritz, it would be a short 15km ride to the start of the cycle route proper on the Maloja pass. Overall, we loved the train travel, much preferring it to being in a car with young children.





*The Innradweg.*

*Photo Laura Wallis*

In terms of the cycle routes themselves, we thought they were both excellent. The Innradweg is predominantly downhill, but with enough uphill and ‘false flat’ along the way to get you out of puff and some moderately rough ground too (I estimate there was over 3,000m of uphill on the whole route). We really liked Innsbruck and stopped two nights there, although you do cycle close to the motorway for a while in that busy valley. This was one of the reasons we decided to leave the Innradweg shortly after Innsbruck, instead heading south down the Zillertal then east over the Gerlos pass to Krimml and the start of the Tauernradweg. Getting over the pass was hard work (we split it over two days, or you could easily bus this section) but really worth it as we found the Haute Tauern really beautiful, unspoilt and quiet.

I won’t bore readers further with a blow-by-blow account of the trip, suffice to say it all went really well and we thoroughly enjoyed it. It felt slightly hard work at first, but we soon got used to it. Having said that, we took one book each for reading but hardly turned a page, so we must have been tired each night! For those interested in statistics, the full cycle journey from St Moritz to Salzburg took a total of 17 days, including one ‘rest’ day. This was a total of about 580km (the longest day was 55km, the shortest just 21km).



*Laura and James above Innsbruck.*

*Photo Nick Wallis*

We loved the simplicity and the lack of daily decision-making required. When you don't have that much stuff with you, and therefore very few options in the first place, life suddenly becomes beautifully simple. The only real decision we had to make each day was if we were going to cycle, and if so, how far. Children, even small ones, really don't need very much. For us, less really was more. So, leave the car at home, hop on the bikes and get out there!

### **TIPS**

- You must have a reservation on the ferry and train for your bikes; I found by far the easiest way to do this was to book by telephone rather than Internet. For the trains, telephoning [bahn.com](http://bahn.com) (!) worked really well. The website [www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com) does have useful information on train routes.

- Getting on and off the trains with bikes, luggage and a child is the trickiest bit, especially accessing the platform with lifts and escalators etc. It's a big advantage if you are able to move as one with everything you have with you, rather than having to shuttle back and forth. If you can't do this, then you've probably got too much stuff!



Helpful signposting.

Photo Nick Wallis





A service station.

Photo Nick Wallis



- Ikea bags are great for chucking everything into when you have to collapse the trailer to put it on the train.

- Having a lightweight backpack-style baby carrier is the easiest way to get little un's on and off trains whilst keeping them safe. They also double up for going for walks etc.

- It's not always obvious where to put bikes on a train. Ask the railway staff beforehand; they will often be able to tell you the right bit of the platform to stand on, also if there is a guard's van you can put the bikes in. Most of the time, we didn't have to collapse the trailer and could wheel it straight on.

- Nappies are bulky, and almost impossible to buy in small quantities. Leave lots of space for them or just bungee them to the top of the trailer. We set off from the UK with just enough to get us to Switzerland, and then paid a fortune for a re-supply in St Moritz!

- Switzerland is expensive! It was a big relief to make it into Austria after three or four days.

- The cycle paths in Europe are very well laid out, and signposted. If it gets difficult, and you are having to cross major roads, or go up kerbs, then you are almost certainly missing something! There will often be an underpass, bridge or lift somewhere.

- We didn't bother booking any campsites, as they were plentiful and always had lots of space. This might be different if you went in peak season though.

- It can get very hot in the trailer in direct sunlight, even when you are moving. We deliberately avoided routes with lots of south-facing miles.

- The 'Bikeline' cycle guidebooks are excellent but probably unnecessary, as they are expensive and heavy, and the routes are well signposted.

- Having some spare quick-release straps, bungees and stuffsacs always seemed to come in handy.

- Good quality tyres and inner tubes are worth investing in. We used Schwalbe throughout, and didn't have a single puncture.

- A handlebar bag is useful for accessing frequently-used items and keeping valuables, such as sun cream, cameras, wallets and passports.

- Our Apfelstrudel tasting survey was somewhat inconclusive; we might have to return to collect more data.