



The Iron Curtain Trail

Background information

I.1 History

The so called “Iron Curtain” divided Europe for almost 40 years, from the Barents Sea at the border between Russia, Norway and Finland all the way to the Bosphorus at the border between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. It was a political, ideological and physical barrier.

In 2004, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) launched the Green Belt initiative aiming to motivate its partners to initiate and coordinate projects along the former Iron Curtain, which has unintentionally contributed to the preservation of important ecosystems and valuable habitats. The vision of the initiative is that the Green Belt from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea can become the backbone of an ecological network that is a global symbol for trans-boundary co-operation in nature conservation and sustainable development – and tourism can definitely play an important role in this process.

I.2 The idea of the Iron Curtain Trail

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, several cycling tourism projects were developed along this former borderline. Most of them were developed in Germany, Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic, a few also in the Baltic Sea Region and the Balkans. However, all of them were based on a rather small-scale regional approach. Now, the idea of a cycling trail connecting a series of national and cross-boundary protected areas along the former Iron Curtain was developed and is lobbied for. It is proposed to develop a continuous cycling trail, passing through many countries including 14 EU Member States.

Cycling tourism is well in line with the policy objective to develop and market tourism products with low environmental impact and a low carbon footprint, which create authentic experiences and contribute to local income and economic added value.

I.3 The route of the “Iron Curtain Trail”¹

The trail begins at the Barents Sea and follows the Norwegian-Russian border to the Finnish-Russian border to the Baltic Sea before heading along the coastline of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Kaliningrad, Poland and the former German Democratic Republic (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

¹ Cramer, Michael: Iron Curtain Trail, April 2009

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.

For more information on the planned route and stages of the Iron Curtain Trail see: http://www.ironcurtaintrail.eu/en/die_etappen/index.html

I.4 Challenges for the Iron Curtain Trail

Historic culture and nature are the two strong themes, which form the potential of the Iron Curtain Trail. Further to this, the Iron Curtain Trail has also an economic potential, fact which was confirmed by the findings of a study on the "EuroVelo Cycle Route Network"², which estimates that about 850.000 holiday trips, more than 3 million daytrips and € 355 million in direct revenues could be generated per year by the Iron Curtain Trail as part of the EuroVelo routes. However, the successful implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail requires overcoming the following weaknesses (W) and threats (T):³

- The northern and southern sections are remote from populations (W)
- Demand for the trail will be very unevenly distributed over the length of the route, with 75% of all tourists generated by the sections through Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic representing just 33% of the total route length (W)
- There is uneven development of tourism provision along the route (such as accommodation) (W)
- There is no current framework to manage the development of the project (W)

² EP, Policy Department B: Structural and cohesion Policies: The European Cycle Route Network EuroVelo, May 2009

³ idem

- There are many competing sustainable tourism projects across Europe (W)
- Lack of cross border train travel opportunities (W)
- The lack of coordination between projects along the route (T)
- Lack of resources or differential resources: the financial investments in relation to route development will be relatively small-scale (T)
- Minimal commitment from tourism authorities in the regions and at national level (T)
- Encouragement of fly-cycle in the peripheral sections of the route (T)

Bearing this in mind, it is important to start tackling the major challenges and issues:

- The impression that, with only cycling infrastructure (the trail) and bikes being provided, tourism will develop successfully 'on its own' should be avoided by all means. Examples of successful cycling destinations (e.g. Veloland Schweiz) show that a combination of cycling-friendly accommodation infrastructure (e.g. accommodation with bike maintenance facilities and no additional fees for one-night stays), marketing and information (e.g. maps of cycling routes, adequate sign posting, etc.) and integration of bikes into the public transport system (means of public transport enabling the transport of bicycles, special offers and fares etc.) is needed in order for cycling tourism to develop successfully.
- In order to create a "Unique selling proposition" (USP), one has to focus on the uniqueness of the region, both in terms of natural and cultural assets and contemporary history. The Iron Curtain Trail is one natural attraction in the regions and should stimulate the stakeholders to develop additional tourist attractions (e.g. the German activity 'Art along the Green Belt' or the thematic route 'Historical borders' in the German Harz). Cross-border networks created for the development, implementation and management of the trail are an important pre-condition to support the continuous process of sustainable development. This project should facilitate the development of a mechanism that enables regions along the trail to gain from the potential economic benefits and to link other regional activities to the Iron Curtain Trail.
- Cooperation with public transport providers and the development of additional systems, such as private shuttles and rental services, seem to be necessary as train connections and busses providing bicycle transport to and within some areas along the Iron Curtain Trail are rather rare.
- Moreover, bearing in mind the fact that most of South-East European countries are but far from being famous cycling destinations or having a 'cycling culture', the project should also build on awareness raising for decision makers at local, regional and national level.
- A final challenge is the route of the trail itself. Although the vast majority of cyclists would rather use a small section of the trail than cycling the whole distance of 6.800km, a continuous trail should be sign-posted – and maintained later on.

It is therefore of utmost importance for the successful implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail to find parties willing to get involved in its implementation and management in a coordinated way. Therefore one of the recommendations of the above-mentioned study⁴ is to establish the route as part of the EuroVelo network, which would accelerate the process of route development and provide stronger branding.

I.5 EuroVelo – The European cycle route network⁵

EuroVelo is a project of the European Cyclists' Federation (ECF) in cooperation with the national EuroVelo coordination centres to develop a network of high-quality cycling routes linking all countries in Europe. It can be used by long-distance cycle tourists, as well as by local people making daily journeys.

EuroVelo:

- promotes economically, environmentally and socially sustainable travel,
- improves the quality of EuroVelo routes in all participating European countries,
- promotes the uniform signing of EuroVelo routes in accordance with published standards,
- provides Europe-wide information on EuroVelo routes and national cycle routes,
- supports the development of national coordination centres for EuroVelo routes and national routes,
- fosters exchange of experience and best practice between European states and regions, stimulating high quality cycle strategies and infrastructure.

The EuroVelo network currently comprises 12 routes and it was agreed to include the "Iron Curtain Trail" as the 13th EuroVelo route. It is aimed at substantially completing the EuroVelo network by 2020, in line with the EuroVelo implementation plan supervised by the ECF. EuroVelo routes fulfil the following criteria:

- based on existing or future national or regional routes of the involved countries
- at least two countries are involved
- route length at least 1.000km
- easy to communicate, internationally recognisable identity and name (marketing potential)
- implementation plans in place (project plan, business plan, partners)
- signing in accordance with the regulations of the respective nations and/or regions, continuous and in both directions
- signage supplemented by EuroVelo route information panels, in accordance with the recommendations of the UNECE and the ECF signing manual.

⁴ EP, Policy Department B: Structural and cohesion Policies: The European Cycle Route Network EuroVelo, May 2009

⁵ European Cyclists' Federation: EuroVelo – the European cycle route network, April 2009; www.ecf.com

I.6 Objectives of the Awareness-raising Workshops

The European Commission is organising three regional, awareness-raising workshops in order to:

- Highlight the increasing importance of cycling tourism, its benefits and regional economic impacts and stress the importance of developing the Iron Curtain Trail as a EuroVelo route.
- Present European best practices of cycling tourism from other EuroVelo routes and model implementations of parts of the Iron Curtain Trail.
- Explore the interest of countries and regions alongside the former Iron Curtain in implementing such a cycling trail and the way forward by identifying feasible/concrete initiatives on how the Commission could assist its implementation in the years 2010 and 2011.
- Promote networking of countries and regions along the former Iron Curtain towards the establishment of a future trans-national cycling route, the "Iron Curtain Trail".

The main aim of these events is to build awareness for the importance of implementing the Iron Curtain Trail. The workshops should also be a starting point for networking between regions and destinations interested in working together in order to implement the cycling trail.