

STREETS



Thirty years ago the German city of Freiburg had a growing traffic problem. Today it is a city built for cycling. Steve Melia was amazed

Imagine a city designed for the bicycle, where cyclists have priority and you can ride between an historic centre and stunning mountain views in minutes.

Freiburg in south western Germany is such a city. It stretches from the slopes of the Black Forest towards the valley of the Rhine, near the French and Swiss borders. Many Germans consider it the ideal place to live: over the past 20 years they have swollen its population by a fifth to 213,000.

It wasn't always like this. Before the 1970s some Freiburgers remember their city as a conservative place with a growing traffic problem. Then the Federal Government proposed a nuclear power plant nearby. Public opposition united the city and gave birth to Germany's green movement. Freiburg is the only major German city with a Green mayor. The environment and quality of life are top priorities, particularly when it comes to transport.

Coming from Britain you may experience some culture shock when you start riding here. It can be difficult to believe, as you

cross major junctions on the new red cycle lanes, that cars wanting to turn in front of you really will give way. And though the combination of quiet roads, cycle lanes and separate paths can be found in many British cities, the difference here is that routes in every direction, in and out, across and around the city are direct and continuous. Cycle lanes that give way to side roads or end when you most need them are as rare here as they are common back home. Needless to say, wherever you go, most times of the day and night, you will see people of all types, ages and sizes cycling. Drivers are considerate because they nearly all cycle themselves.

EXPLORING BY BIKE

A few years ago the biggest transport problem facing the city council was cycle parking at the main railway station. The solution, a giant circular structure known as the Mobile, opened in 1999 with spaces for 1,000 bikes, a repair workshop, café and offices. Parking costs just 50 cents.

This is a good place to start a cycling

tour of Freiburg. The ADFC, the German equivalent of CTC, has an office here, selling maps and giving tourist advice. It is also home to Freiburg Aktiv, who hire bikes and run guided cycling tours, urban and rural.

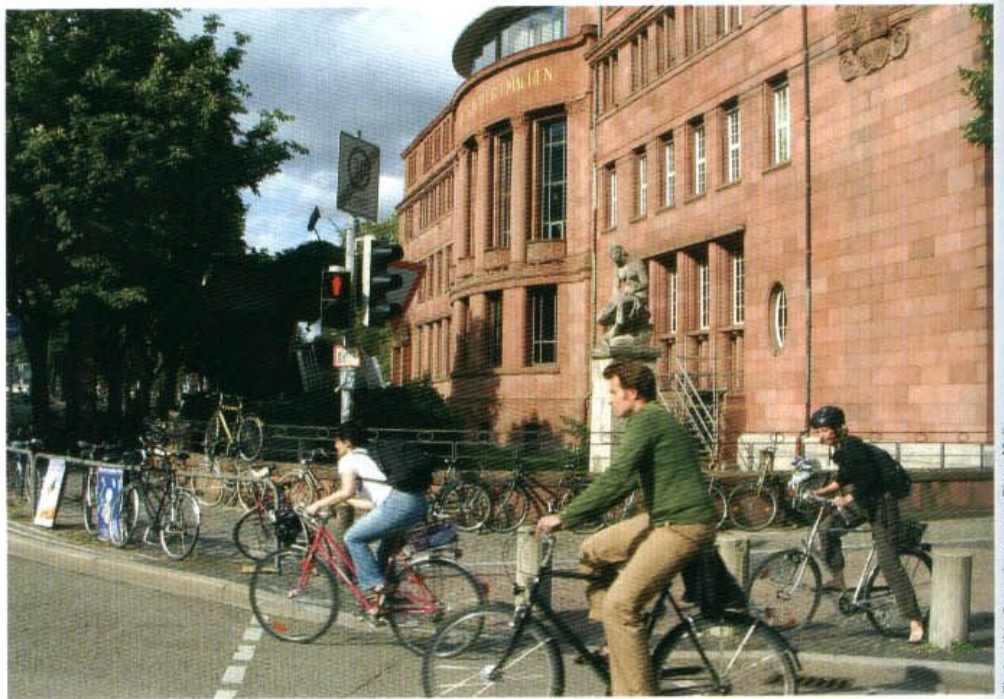
The Wiwili Bridge, which crosses the railway from the Mobile, carries 10,000 bikes a day to and from the Altstadt, the historic city centre. From the 1970s it was progressively pedestrianised. Most of its roads are open to cycling, although there are break points and some squares where you are supposed to park, or get off and wheel. This is one rule amongst many that the locals don't always observe.

You can be fined, but the police don't seem to bother too much. During the day when these streets are full of pedestrians and market stalls it is difficult to ride anyway. Bicycle theft doesn't seem much of a problem here – bicycle racks are everywhere and no one seems to worry about leaving decent bikes locked to them.

With its meticulously preserved buildings, the Altstadt appears to have survived the centuries undamaged, but the truth is more brutal. For reasons which remain obscure, since there were no significant military targets, just half an hour of Allied bombing in 1944 destroyed the city centre, killing 3,000 people. A photograph in the Wetzingerhaus museum shows the aftermath. Some exteriors survived to form the basis of rebuilding. Others had to be reconstructed from photographs and memory. If you look carefully, you can see small signs of modernity left by the post-war builders on otherwise faithful reproductions.

PRIORITY TO CYCLISTS

Whichever direction you enter or leave the Altstadt, separate lanes and traffic signals allow you to cross the busy inner ringroads without having to fight your way through traffic. Immediately to the south, the River Dreisam traverses the city from east to north west, and a cycle route follows its entire length. To the east the city narrows into a corridor, no more than a mile



Photos this & previous page: Steve Meila

wide, between the mountains of the Black Forest. It's difficult to believe in places that you are still within a mile or two of the city centre. The suburban streets on the slopes feel almost Alpine.

Leading back towards the centre is one of Freiburg's recent innovations: a *Fahrradstrasse*, a road with priority for cyclists and access only, at low speeds, for motor vehicles. Freiburg's motorists (unlike some of the cyclists) do seem to respect such rules.

Freiburg's cycle network connects seamlessly to the west with a rural network using mainly *Landschaftswirtrassen*, agricultural roads used by the occasional tractor and many bicycles. Most are asphalted; all are rideable on a touring bike. Touring cyclists will be pleased to note that this is German wine country.

Some vineyards still grow within the city, particularly along the road south to Vauban. The new quarter of Vauban, built on a former French army base, is another local innovation. An experiment in low-energy and car-free living, it attracts town planners and urban designers from all around the world. Home to nearly 5,000 people, it is fairly compact – you can ride through it in five minutes – but it is worth taking some time to explore its

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traffic-free side roads, where children play on unicycles and every conceivable combination of trailers and child seats are used to carry children and shopping. Three quarters of the working population here cycles to work.

So are there any down sides to cycling in Freiburg? The ADFC thinks there are. Paths shared with pedestrians cause predictable conflicts, and where a cycle lane or path is provided, unlike in the UK you can be prosecuted for riding on the main carriageway – a principle that they, like CTC, don't like. This is not a good place for racing cyclists or diehard opponents of separate facilities, but for anyone else a visit to Freiburg gives a refreshing taste of what life could be like in a city made for cycling.

FACT FILE: Freiburg

GETTING THERE: By rail, the quickest route from Waterloo using Eurostar goes via Brussels and Cologne, and takes just under 9 hours. See www.railkey.com. By air, the nearest airport – Euroairport Basel/Mulhouse/Freiburg is 40 miles away. Easyjet flies there from Stansted, Luton and Liverpool. See www.easyjet.com **TOURIST INFORMATION:** www.freiburg.de, tel. 00 49 761 388 1880. **ALGEMEINER DEUTSCHE FAHRRAD CLUB** German equivalent of CTC: www.adfc-bw.de (in German), tel: (limited English) 00 49 761 2928 0012, email: freiburg@adfc-bw.de **FREIBURG AKTIV** Cycle tours and hire: www.freiburg-aktiv.de, tel: 00 49 761 202 3426, info@freiburg-aktiv.de