

# The Princess Ride (versus ye olde hiking trail)



**An ostensibly fun project idea inspired by literature: Take a hiking trail you know fairly intimately and re-route it for fellow bikepackers. You would bypass the impossible bits to eliminate pushing and carrying, and also attempt to ensure that good single track gets approached from the right direction.**

A trail I might personally have in mind is the [Rheinsteig](#) in its initial stages here near Bonn (Germany) - hoping other people would contribute other passages of the full route. The literary prototype is William Goldman's [Princess Bride](#), which I read with laughing delight back in the 1980's. The book purports to be the abridgement of an earlier work and is subtitled *The 'good parts' version* - so sorry for the pun in the headline, but it's appropriate, don't you think?

It's a pipe dream, of course, because the scheme would probably corrupt bi-directionality and certainly create signpost confusion. The Swiss know how to do these things properly: The Jura Bike trail I rode a few weeks ago has a road-bike companion route close by and a more loosely related hiking counterpart, too. All three are well and distinctly signposted to make GPS navigation virtually redundant. But it appears that even the Swiss haven't solved the problem of directional optimisation yet - so it's still the same itinerary from both starting points. A colour-code regime and a lot of hard work by dozens of volunteers would be necessary to address that issue in the physical world. The maintenance of two accompanying GPS tracks would be a far more trivial challenge.

Fundamentally, though: GPS navigation is a stressful stop-and-go process that seriously sucks in comparison with signposting. That's one reason I love the official long-distance hiking trails so much. They are signposted and they work well, albeit it with a few caveats like the need to push or carry for some of the time. And with the exception of those points, they are mentally relaxing. When I last spent a weekend on the Rheinsteig in late June, there was the usual fairly easy symbiosis of hikers, the odd biker, local dog walkers - and one couple of irredeemably stuck optimists on horseback. We all seemed to be following an intuitive choreography of fairness: I was always ready to give way to the walkers on the single track, though they would often also stand aside for me instead of interrupting my flow. Admittedly, that equilibrium may be fragile. It could shatter as tourist companies cart bus loads of day-trippers to the popular trails, and as the electric bike craze puts under-trained people and heavier metal in places they might otherwise never have reached. If there's a serious public debate, we bikers stand to lose it and will get lobbied off these itineraries. But that isn't happening quite yet.

We could avert the threat entirely if other countries followed the Swiss model with a dedicated long-distance trail network for bikers. But then I suddenly wonder: Do we really want that? Drawing a mountain-bike route involves a projected average rider, and while I was quite happy with the specific, fairly robust projection on the Jura Bike trail, my experiences of (shorter) set MTB trails in Germany and Austria temper my enthusiasm for such projects. When tourist bureaus get involved, the tendency is to presuppose a *very* average biker and dilute things a lot - especially on the downhill stretches. It's the responsible thing to do, I admit, and politically understandable too. Badly injured visitors or worse are any local council's darkest nightmare (notably in the Alps with their popular reputation for incalculable peril).

To be honest, I would also miss the *company* of hikers if we were segregated. It's worth taking the meat with all the gristle (the footwork that comes with steep hiking paths) for that reason alone. You can slow down and push for a chat with hikers, whereas it's often uncomfortable and inconvenient to ride alongside another biker you have met by chance - we usually either lack the puff to converse much or the physical equality to pedal abreast. Besides, who is genuinely immune to some incredulous admiration? "What? The *entire* distance by *bike*?" A lot of hikers treat us a bit special, whereas fellow bikers often pointedly fail to impress each other. Here in Germany, at least, that's a piece of on-trail culture that can rather inhibit free exchange. Hikers are frequently easier to talk to.

And while it's the riding, the views and the camping that make a trail sensually memorable, it's the (talkative) people who storify it - contributing structure to the movie your mind will retain. The guy with the red face and the towel around his neck will remain with me forever, because I stopped off for lunch after chatting to him, watched him plod on as I lit my stove and later picked up various items of gear he had absent-mindedly lost en route... a paper-chase of kit (including the towel) all of which I restored to him further down the track. And the main reason I remember the cloudy weather on my last Rheinsteig overnigher in June is the elderly woman hiker with whom I discussed the threat of rain, and who then told me about her own road cycling tours with her best friend 50 years ago; the length of Germany with no gears and only a handlebar basket for luggage. Imagining her with the long blond plaits and a folksy cardigan of the era was easy and touching, but uncomfortable too. At my age, the *temps perdu* sensation has started pick up poignancy.

Largely stripped of such episodes and baked to a recipe, The Princess Ride would be just that: The *Princess Ride*. Tamed here, tweaked for amusement there, cherry picked, low on collateral surprises and clandestinely artificial. The purpose of a mountain bike is simply to go anywhere - in one fashion or another, carried or pushed if need be, uncomplaining. But where they already exist, customised itineraries often obliterate that magic, treating our bikes as our limitation rather than as enablers of adventure. If you're a skier, think of them as good groomed pistes. They don't always look like it. But that's what they are - in spirit. Or to word it somewhat bluntly: Put a mountain bike on a trail especially mapped for it, and what you essentially no longer have is... a vehicle. You might still have a superlative leisure toy in a fun place. But that's not quite the same thing.