FRIENDS FOR FIFTY YEARS

They have been best friends for half a century.

Long-time Davis resident Jack Karolewski, Joe Masonick of Elgin, IL and Rick McKay of Naperville, IL met as undergraduates in 1969 at Northern Illinois University. All three later became teachers. When Jack moved with his wife to Davis in 1988, the three men were determined to maintain their enduring friendship. So each year, without their wives and children, they embarked on an annual adventure one to two weeks long. In September, 2019, they decided to bicycle 200 miles on the Danube River Trail from Passau, Germany to Vienna, Austria.

As Jack explained, “This is the most popular bike trail in Europe. It is entirely paved and flat, going slightly downhill with the winds primarily at one’s back. Both the north and south banks have a trail. You can switch over at various stages by either quick, inexpensive ferry or cross a bridge, depending on which towns you want to stop in or which sights you want to see.”

The three buddies biked roughly 30 miles a day for six days. At a leisurely pace of ten miles per hour, they were only in the saddle about three hours a day. “We enjoyed picturesque small towns, castles, churches, parks, monasteries, and abbeys. Yet many stretches were peacefully out in nature. You can stop and rest whenever and wherever you want. We were also blessed with ideal weather – no rain, with temperatures comfortably in the mid-70’s to mid-50’s -- so the journey was a real treat,” Jack added.

The trio saw mostly German and Austrian seniors biking either as couples or in small groups, as well as young couples from many other European countries, using the well-marked trail during the weekdays. On the weekends, families with children joined the other bikers traveling either upriver or downriver. Although there must have been other Americans on the trail, they never encountered any fellow citizens.

“We chose a company called MacsAdventure out of Boulder, CO as our trip outfitters, although there are many other similar companies to choose from.” Jack reported. “They in turn utilized one of the largest bike trip outfitters in Austria, called Rad+Reisen. It was they who provided the detailed maps, bicycles (brand new), helmets, emergency contact information, tire repair kits (though we never suffered a flat), side saddle bag, handlebar pouch, etc. They expertly transport your large luggage to the next town where you overnight. Everything was very well organized. The local Austrian people are friendly and helpful and most speak English well. Our lodgings were outstanding, and each provided a huge buffet breakfast. Lunch and dinner are on your own, although most lodgings had an attached restaurant. And the Austrian food was consistently satisfying, fresh and excellent.”

Jack went on. “In some ways, this experience was similar to the medieval pilgrimage hiking route across northern Spain called the Camino de Santiago, which we did in 2005. You have everything you really need with you. You can travel alone or with others. You gradually slow down from the hectic pace of modern life. You breathe deeply as you move ahead, while noticing new sights, smells, and sounds. The Danube trail swings gently and briefly inland for a few portions, so you can enjoy cycling through farmlands with ripening fields of corn, fragrant apple orchards, or pumpkin patches – this being September, with the autumn harvest approaching. It is truly wonderful! We are telling other seniors that this is something they can do without any real strain or difficulty. Just do some riding each day for an hour or two for a few weeks beforehand by way of training. Especially here in Davis – us being a popular bicycling town – this is a natural fit for those looking for a safe, fun, foreign country-based bike trail adventure, especially if you have done some bike touring in CA or elsewhere in the U.S.”

Highlights of the three friends’ trip included the cathedral in Linz, the massive and impressive Benedictine Abbey in Melk, and a sobering visit to the Mauthausen concentration camp memorial and museum, where over 90,000 people were cruelly exterminated by the Nazis during World War Two. “We also saw many river boat cruise ships sailing up and down the Danube,” Jack added. “They would dock and take their passengers into the small towns for vineyard tours and wine tasting, much like we have in Napa Valley.” This was especially true around the fertile Wachau area west of Vienna, where huge grape terraces crowded the gently rolling hillsides above the river.

Despite enjoying some beer and those sinful traditional Austrian pastries and desserts, the men actually pedaled away a few pounds of weight. “A real bonus!” Jack exclaimed, as he and his two best friends already have been looking ahead to their next reunion, soon celebrating their 51st year of friendship.

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

September 22, 2019