

DOING THE EUROPEAN CIRCLE BY CAR

120 DAYS

STARTING/ENDPOINT: IT'S A LOOP, SO ANYWHERE ALONG THE WAY

I have been thinking about this for some time now: So many people I know have embarked on one of the ultimate road trips and drove a big loop around the USA; a good 22,000 km (14,000 miles) or the equivalent of some 1200 hours of driving. And although I am sure they are out there, I do not know of anyone who has done something over here: driving along the perimeters of Europe.



My northernmost point so far: Are, Sweden

Some clarifications: Islands are excluded. That would just be too cumbersome with all those ferry rides, so Iceland, the UK, Ireland, Malta, and Cyprus unfortunately do not appear on this itinerary. I should also aim to hug the coastline as close a possible, otherwise it is not really a circumnavigation. And then there is the age-old dilemma of defining the eastern fringes of Europe. St. Petersburg certainly has the look of a European city. The same applies to some extent to Kiev in Ukraine. But tough entry restrictions in Russia, and the volatile political situation in Ukraine (not to mention Belarus) makes me rather reluctant to include those locations. In the western Balkans, should non-EU countries be included? Without making a political stand, by simply looking at a map, the answer becomes rather straightforward. Travelling only through EU countries means that at some stage I would end up in Dubrovnik on the southern tip of Croatia, where I will be surrounded by non-EU counties, namely Bosnia & Herzegovina and Montenegro. To get to my next EU destination, I would then have to travel all the way back up to Croatia's border with Hungary. That just seems silly. So, for these obvious practical reasons, EU candidates should be on the list.

I got to work on a route planner (on this occasion, I used www.rac.co.uk/routeplanner), and to my amazement ended up with 23,000 km, practically the same distance as a fully-fledged U.S. road trip. I could of course drive the whole thing in one go, doing 1000 km per day, and be done in three weeks, but I leave that ordeal to any aspiring race organisers. But maybe I could do 400 km every other day? That would mean a long morning's drive, with the afternoon and the following day spend in one location, before packing up and driving towards the next destination. I did precisely that when I embarked on my American road trips all those years ago. And on more isolated stretches (such as in

northern Scandinavia), I could do 600 km to 800 km every three days or so. But whichever way I put it, ultimately, the trip would encompass around 110 to 120 days of travel: a whopping 4 month.



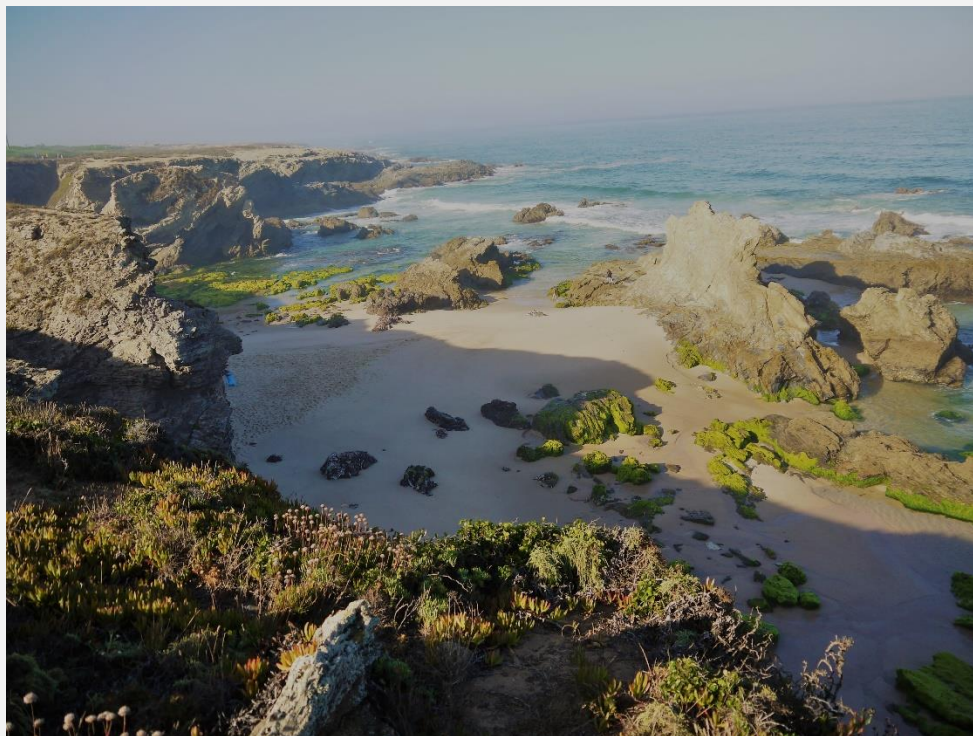
My easternmost point so far: Krakow, Poland

And what should I visit and look out for? It seems pointless to merely clock up the tourist highlights. Guggenheim in Bilbao? Done. Coliseum in Rome? Ditto. Should there be an overall theme to this journey? Maybe this tour should not be about architectural highlights and cultural artefacts? Maybe it should be more about people who hopefully could provide me with a deeper understanding just of how diverse this compact continent of ours is? It very handily would also force me to get out of the comfort zone of the lonely traveller and engage with as many locals as possible. Maybe I could also contact some friends and colleagues, who hopefully would not mind spending the odd hour over a cup of coffee, telling me a little bit more about the place they live in? And lastly, I should of course aim to visit those spots that so far have not been on my travel radar. I have been to many but most certainly not to all European countries, so this is definitely something to look forward to. And the more isolated, the better as I do enjoy travelling off the beaten track. I have read about the Bialowieza Forest in Poland. I heard that Romania harbours the biggest wolf population in Europe, and I never made it to the spot where Norway, Russia and Finland meet.



My southernmost point so far: Tarifa, Spain

Slotting down the distances from the route planner, I realised that the trip can be roughly organised into three sections: There is the northern European part, encompassing the Scandinavian countries of Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, as well as Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. Driving through those states alone totals a good 6,000 km. Then there is the western and southern stretch from France to Spain, Portugal, and Italy (as well as the statelets of Monaco and San Marino). That is a further 8,000 km (up and down Italy alone is around 3,000 km). And lastly, there is the eastern European section to look forward to: some 9,000 km from Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, to Montenegro, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The country count would be 27. That is a surprisingly comprehensive list and apart from the aforementioned islands, the trip would integrate all European countries bar the microstates of Andorra, the Vatican (although I could briskly breeze through in case I am in Rome), and Liechtenstein, as well as Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Moldova. 27 out of 45 countries: This should – at least in my book - count as a truly EPIC European road trip.



My westernmost point so far: somewhere on the Atlantic coast, Portugal

So how about the vehicle? Many moons ago, I travelled across North America in a whale-sized 1976 Plymouth Fury, and camped wherever I could in order to save money. This time too, the journey in large parts would cover remote countryside, so camping once again seems an ideal solution. My obvious thoughts are turning to a campervan. No pitching up during a downpour and a comfortable mattress for my ageing bones, but even a 20-year old banger does not come cheap, and unless I opt for a diesel (which I really do not want to) they swallow up rather a lot of petrol. One day I spotted my neighbour – the proud owner of a Skoda Yeti (Yeti? Really?) removing the car's back seats, before impressively loading an old fridge. If a fridge fits, maybe a mattress for one person and some camping gear would fit too? The car uses widely available VW parts, so should I get stuck with a broken fuel pump somewhere on the Slovakian – Polish border, maybe the continuation of my journey would not be too jeopardised. And once I did some further research, I found plenty of stories on how people have converted small SUVs and MPVs into campervans, including the Vauxhall Zafira, the Peugeot

Tepee (another stupid name), the Fiat Doblo, or the Citroën Berlingo. But Covid times are lean so for now I just have to rely on my rather old Lexus SUV; 16 years and counting. It is comfortable and feels like driving a sofa. I could just fold the back seats down, throw in that mattress and camping stuff, and should be set to go. And the fact that it is a hybrid should keep fuel costs bearable. But at 190,000 km on the clock? I just have to keep my fingers crossed and hope that I do not get stuck somewhere on that Polish-Slovakian border. Now we just have to wait for that horrific virus to subside. I'll keep you posted.

Here are my (very rough) distance calculations (Assuming a counter-clockwise direction):

France (Atlantic coast)	1800 km	8 days
Spain (Atlantic coast)	800 km	4 days
Portugal	800 km	4 days
Spain (Mediterranean coast)	1600 km	8 days
France (Mediterranean coast)	600 km	3 days
Italy	3000 km	15 days
Slovenia/Croatia	900 km	4 days
Montenegro, Albania	700 km	4 days
Bulgaria	500 km	2 days
Romania	1100 km	5 days
Hungary/Slovakia	300km	2 days
Poland	700 km	4 days
Baltic states	1100 km	5 days
Finland	1800 km	9 days
Sweden (or Norway)	1800 km	9 days
Denmark	1000 km	5 days
Germany	500 km	2 days
Netherlands/Belgium	600 km	3 days

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