

Donautal

Donautal or the Danube Valley is a beautiful climbing area in the south west of Germany. This is the very upper reaches of the River Danube, the second longest in Europe rising in the Black Forest before travelling through 10 countries to reach the Black Sea nearly 3000km later. The area we are focussing on lies between the small, attractive village of Beuron and downstream to Sigmaringen, 25 km to the East with its impressive castle (www.sigmaringen.de). The valley of the upper Danube is situated within a national park approximately 100km south of Stuttgart. At this point in its long, international journey to the sea, the Danube is a beautiful, tranquil stream overlooked on both sides by fabulous limestone outcrops. The wider climbing area in this part of southern Germany is known as the Schwäbische Alps and the Donautal is regarded as the highlight of the region.

There are almost 30 different crags along the valley with a handful of others lying close to the town of Albstadt 15 km to the north. Most of the crags provide routes of one or two pitches, with a few a bit longer. The rock is a wonderful, compact limestone; often very pocketed but otherwise smooth. Think of the Right Wing at Malham or the Main Wall at Blue Scar, but with more pockets. The routes are pretty much all bolted, although an occasional wire and thread is utilised on a few (usually directed by the guidebook). The rock is solid and there is just so much of it, facing in all directions, which enables the sun to be soaked-up or avoided as necessary. The climbing here caters for all grades. Right in the village, the very easily accessed Stuhlfels provides many good introductory routes of easy grades. To get the most out of the area it is probably best to be climbing between F5 and F7c (UIAA 5 to 9). There are plenty of easier routes, some of which tend to be a bit polished and there are a few routes that get UIAA 10/10- (F8a+/8b). The rock typically lends itself to walls that are either vertical or just on the slabby-side of vertical. Any steeper ground tends to be provided by roofs rather than overhanging walls. In general, most of the routes we climbed were in the range UIAA 7- to 8+ and would best be described as *delicately strenuous* and *fingery* rather than *brutally thuggish*.

Our favourite area was Die Hausener Zinnen, an area of crags which overlooks the campsite on the south side of the river. This is a collection of four crags sat next to each other along a ridge like giant lower teeth projecting out of tree covered gum. Each crag is slightly different with either one or two pitches on the most perfect, smooth limestone to be found outside Yorkshire.

Thanks to the layout of the crags up and down the valley, the walk-ins are very easy, indeed they are a delight as they generally follow the river or wander through the sun-dappled, mature beech forest. No walk-in is longer than 20 mins. In fact, the forest and its trails provide an enjoyable

diversion themselves, either for a pleasant stroll, a more energetic run or on a mountain bike. A visit in autumn must be stunning with the colour of the leaves setting the valley on fire.

All the routes are very clearly shown on well laid out topos in the current guide: Donautal, published by Panico Alpeinverlag, ISBN 973-3-95611-126-6. It is all in German but thanks to the clear maps and crag diagrams, is very easy to follow. The current version of the guide is the 14th edition, which gives some indication of how often it is updated and reprinted. The routes are all given UIAA grades

Situated next to the river in the village of Hausen im Tal is the fabulous, welcoming Wagenburg Campsite. This is ideally placed in the heart of the valley to provide the perfect base. The site is well-run, friendly and often busy with many nationalities, although very few Brits. It has a very helpful website (www.camping-wagenburg.de) with some useful links to all sorts of information – including links to some excellent local climbing websites. The campsite has plenty of space, but probably worth booking. There are excellent showers and toilets, plus washing-up and laundry facilities. There is also a café/bar plus a small shop for essential supplies. There is a well-placed cafe and bakery across the road and other small shops for basic provisions just round the corner. All other requirements will demand you make the easy, 25-minute drive/cycle to the Supermarket in Sigmaringen. There is also a large outdoor swimming complex along the road from the supermarket in the town (<https://www.stadtwerke-sigmaringen.de/de/Privatkunden/Baeder/Freibad/>) , although the river-swimming by the campsite will be sufficient for most. Many people pass through the area while cycle-touring along the remarkable Danube cycle route. Every day we would see individuals, teams or most impressive of all, families with young children, all carrying their own share of the load in their panniers. The Donautal region is a perfect venue for anyone wanting to combine climbing and cycling. The Germans, like most others in Europe have a respect for cyclists rarely seen on the roads of Britain. There is also an impressive network of cycle-tracks and smooth-surfaced, quiet roads. Road-bike heaven!

Getting to the area by road is very straightforward, with a few options. We got the ferry to Rotterdam followed by an easy 7-hour drive via Luxembourg (for cheap fuel) and the Pfalz region for some sandstone climbing on the way. The Donautal would also make for an excellent stopping-off point on the way to or from the Alps, particularly the Swiss Alps. Similarly, it is only a few hours east of the Vosges region of France. Alternatively, if you are looking for greater consistency you could combine this area with a trip to its more famous limestone neighbour, the Frankenjura, which lies three and a half hours to the north east, just beyond the city of Nuremburg.

This was a great discovery for us, having never heard of the area before. I look forward to returning as possible as we barely scratched the surface during our 10-day visit.

Recommendations

Stuhlfels – best for easy routes with many options within the easier grades. It's in the sun all day, overlooks the village and has a big cross on top for that summit experience. Best routes: *Normalweg* (2, 3, 3, 3+); *Irisweg* (4, 4)

Dachstein – also on the north side of the valley, this crag gets the best of the evening sunshine. It has a higher feel to it as it overlooks a gorge. Best route: *Direkte Dachsteinkante* (4+, 7-, 7, 4), which goes straight over the large roof, halfway up the wall.

Hausener Zinnen – best climbing in the valley. These crags are on the south side of the valley giving shade during the heat of the day or lovely evening sunshine.

Erste Zinne – *Bläddringer* (7+) fingery climbing up steep crack and groove.

Zweite Zinne – best buttress with some sustained climbing on perfect, pocketed walls. Best of the bunch: *Indian Summer* (8-, 7), *Watzmann* (7, 6-) and *Grosser Wahnsinn* (8-, 8-)

Dritte Zinne – another big buttress with long pitches. *Staffellauf* (7-) is rightly popular with magnificent rock, whilst at the lower end, *Direkteinstieg Eichkatzelkamin* (5) is a great adventure. This direct version avoids the first couple of pitches which traverse across the buttress on the right and is just a touch harder.

Westliche Zinne – home to two of the best routes in the valley: *Genesis* (8) with big pockets and long runouts; and, my favourite, *Kleiner Wahnsinn* (8), superb, fingery pockets with a crux near the top.

Crag	Route Name	Grade (UIAA)
Stuhlfels	Many easy options	Grades 3-5
Dachstein	Direkte Dachsteinkante	4+, 7-, 7, (4)
Erste Zinne	Bläddringer	7+
Zweite Zinne	Indian Summer	8-, 7
	Grösser Wahnsinn	8-, 8-
	Watzmann	7, 6-
Dritte Zinne	Staffellauf	7-
	Schweinwalzer	8-, 7+
	Direkteinstieg Eichkatzelkamin	5
Westliche Zinne	Genesis	8

	Tillmankante	7+
	Kleiner Wahnsinn	8
Löchlesfels	Zopflos	7+