

# The Iron Curtain Trail: Experiencing the History of Europe's Division

For almost half a century, Europe was divided into East and West by the "Iron Curtain", a border stretching from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea. The Iron Curtain Trail invites people to retrace and experience the former division of the continent on a 6,800 km cycle track along the length of the former border, combining European culture, history and sustainable tourism.

The Iron Curtain Trail thereby contributes in a lively and very practical way to the creation of a genuine European identity. In 2005, following the initiative of Green member Michael Cramer, the European Parliament recognized the "Iron Curtain Trail" as a model project for sustainable tourism and called upon the Member States for support.

## History of the Trail

Not only was Berlin divided, so was all of Germany, for decades. It was therefore necessary to preserve the memory of this along the 1,400 km former border. For that reason the national caucuses of the SPD and the Greens proposed in 2004 to transform the former "death strip" along the German border into a "living space". According to the proposal it would be developed for "soft" tourism", and be a part of a European Green Belt along the former "Iron Curtain". The Bundestag voted for this unanimously in December 2004.



But not only Berlin, not only Germany, Europe was divided for decades. The Iron Curtain ran from the Barents Sea on the Norwegian-Russian border to the Black Sea. Today it no longer separates us.

Today it is a symbol for a common and total European experience in a reunited Europe. And for that reason, the European Parliament voted with a large majority for a proposal by the author to create the Iron Curtain Trail in its report on "New Perspectives and Challenges for a sustainable European Tourism".

It is a component of a European collective memory, with which a European identity can be formed, something frequently called for. Using the Berlin and German experiences as a model, a bicycle and wandering path has been developed, all along the trace of the former Iron Curtain, and this will help us find the traces of the common history of our continent.

### **The Green Belt**

It's an irony of history: The former "death strip" between East and West Germany has become a unique biotope thanks to its decade-long isolation during the Cold War. Today, this unique natural memorial of Europe's decision is protected and named the "Green Belt". It has also become a part of the Iron Curtain Trail.



Jointly with the German Association for the Environment and Protection of Nature (BUND), Klaus Buchin was one of the first to discover the valuable natural treasures along the former border trace and able to get them protected. They achieved that the "Green Belt" was discovered as a biotope, secured by the Federal states and unanimously accepted by the Bundestag in 2004.

The "Green Belt", now 6,800 km long, from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea, is now under the protection of Mikhail Gorbachev, former President of the Soviet Union and today President of the Green Cross International (GCI). With that, the significance of the "Green Belt" for the protection of the natural environment and its value as a symbol of unification between East and West is now recognized internationally.

The "Green Belt" consists of 150 natural parks, 150 flora-and-fauna areas, three biosphere reservations Schaalsee, Elbaue and the Rhoen and the National Park of the Harz Mountains. It starts at the Baltic and goes along the Czech border. It passes countless rivers, streams, and lakes and takes you through the higher parts of the Harz Mountains and through the forests of Thuringia. You pass many monuments and borderland museums and also several of the remaining observation towers.

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