

Druskininkai to Lublin

written by Marcus | 23 October, 2014



Languages have never been my specialist subject. Somehow I managed to get a B at GCSE French and tried to brush up on some of what I learned at school with a French module during my degree but it seems to go in one ear and out l'autre. Not that French would help much on this trip anyway as we only spent one day in France. But as an English speaker it has been incredibly easy to travel through the countries we've been to so far as almost everyone we have met speaks very good English or at worst enough to understand what we are trying to do/buy/eat. Poland has proved to be a bit more challenging though and trying to speak Polish is far from easy with more z's and c's in each word than you can shake a szctick at. But sign language and a smile seems to go a long way so it's been good to start practising this for later in the trip when

things are sure to get a lot harder.



Poland this way

14th to 21st October 2014

From Druskininkai it's not far up to the border crossing into Poland and the enormous customs checkpoint lies empty alongside the main road now that both Lithuania and Poland are within the EU Schengen region so we ride through without stopping. Crossing the border means we gain an hour as we go back a time zone but we've decided to try and stick to Lithuanian time as it makes better use of the daylight. Into our first Polish town of Sejny it all looks much more commercial than the Baltic states as there are huge shop signs everywhere and when we stop at a supermarket the choice on offer seems enormous, even though it's just a Biedronka which is a kind of Polish version of Lidl.



Fishing at dusk

Next morning we stop for a quick biscuit break and some policemen wander over for a chat about our trip then suddenly ask to see our passports. This is the first time we've had to produce them during the entire trip so far so we're glad that they are still where we think they should be. They tell us there are one, maybe two lynx in these woods so we keep an eye out but they must be hiding today. The policemen are soon distracted when a Lithuanian camper van pulls in towing a trailer with a generator running that seems to be powering a large fridge in the van.



Beware of the Lynx!

After lunch in Augustow we're reunited with the Via Baltica for 30km and it's now laden with a lot more trucks, in fact

several times more trucks than cars. There's enough of a hard shoulder to stay to one side but at one roundabout things get a bit too cramped for our liking when a huge artic tries to squeeze past. Polish drivers are by far the worst yet so I need to be much more aware of what's going on, but unfortunately my rear view mirror was lost somewhere a few days ago. The road surfaces are also in a poor state with some stretches having deep trenches cut into the tarmac by the heavy lorries so a choice has to be made to either ride the narrow ridge to the right of the trench or stay in the trench, both require a lot of concentration!



Trucks on the Via Baltica

There's a thunderstorm overnight which comes very close to the tent but by morning it's calmed down again and stopped raining. We'd left our Alpkite top tube bags on the bike and they'd taken a soaking which we later discovered had affected our Portapow USB mains plug (which works again once it's had a

chance to dry out). The morning is very misty which makes the rural and quiet roads we're now on very atmospheric. There are free range chickens, free range dogs and free range cattle roaming freely in many of the villages. Old men in flat caps stop and stare and we see one chap herding his cows from the saddle of an old single speed bike.



The calm after the storm



Misty Morning

This is a resolutely Catholic country and there are hundreds of shrines alongside the road, roughly every km or so but sometimes more. Some houses have their own shrines in their gardens. Pictures and statues of Pope John Paul II are on display fairly regularly too.



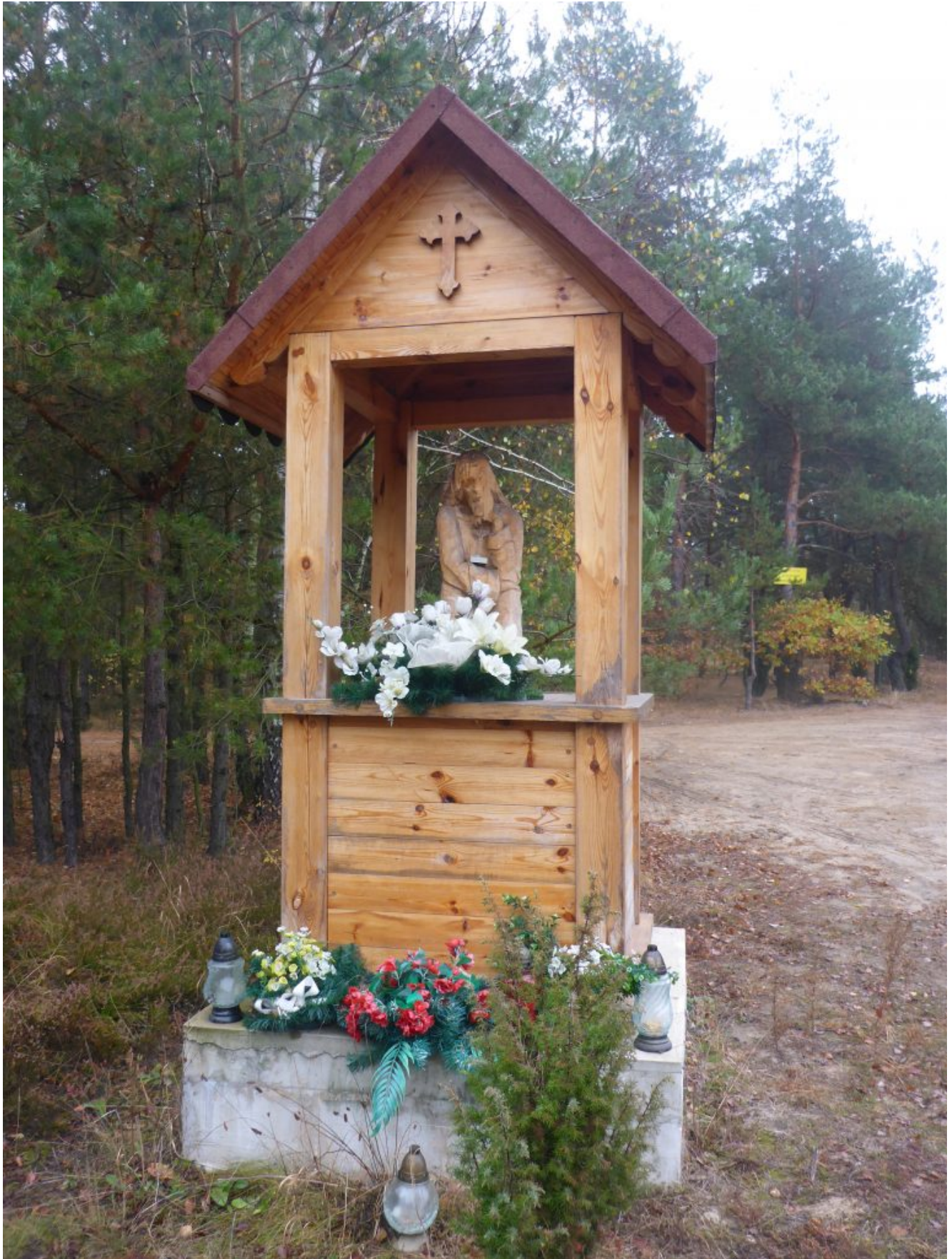
Roadside Shrine



Shrine on you crazy diamond



Shrine after shrine



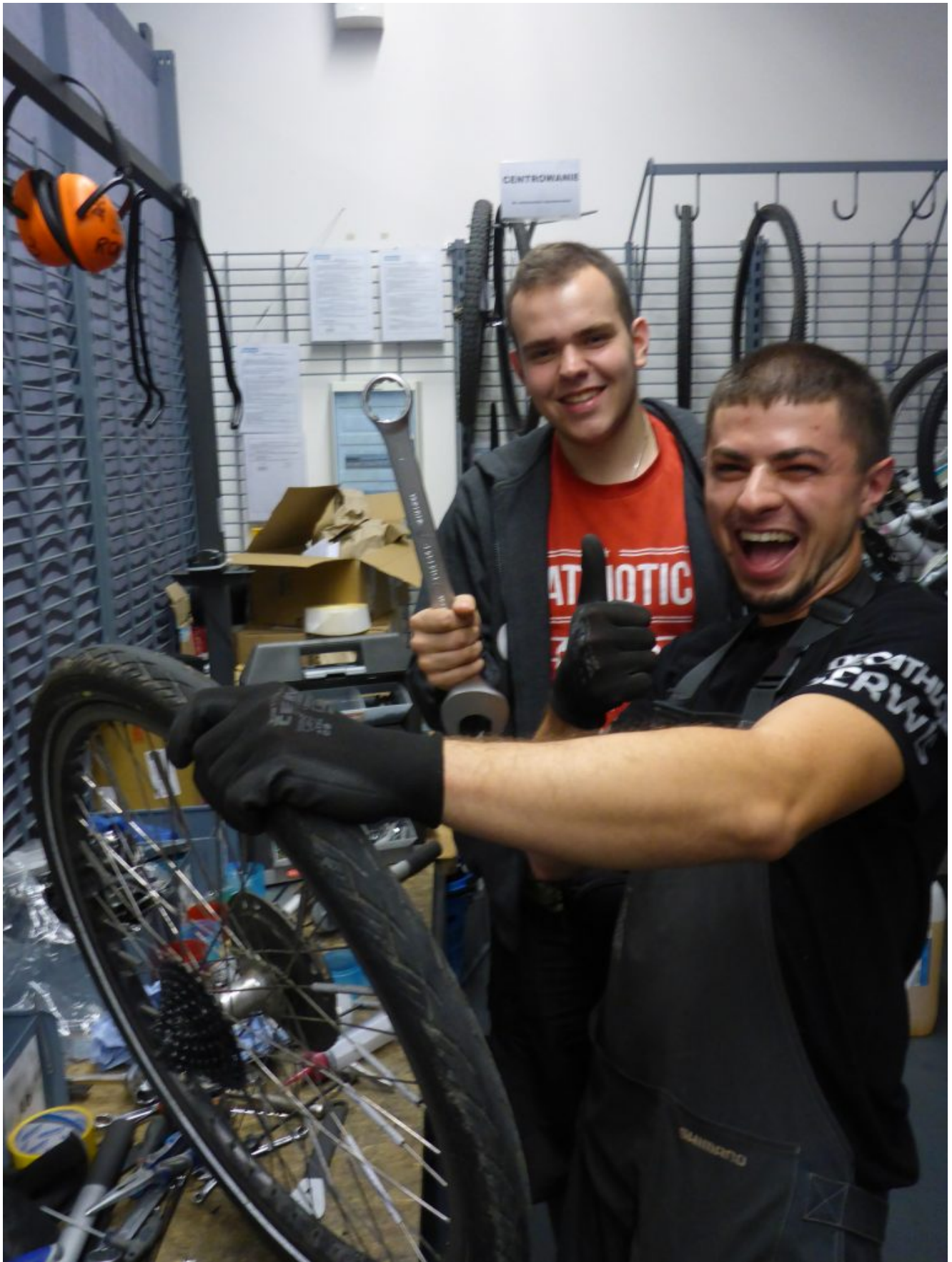
If I could turn back shrine



Leaning shrine of Poland

Things get busier as we approach the city of Bialystok and on the way we start to see some familiar brands such as Makro,

Tesco (they don't like them here either) and Decathlon. It's impossible to ride past a branch of Decathlon though as they come loaded with everything you need for camping, cycling, walking or any other sports you care to mention. They're out of overshoes in my size and Kirsty can't find any new tights that she likes but I decide to see if they can fix the broken spoke on our back wheel. Straight away Albert the mechanic sets to work getting the wheel off, produces an enormous 45mm spanner to get the drum brake off, hands the cassette to Mateus to give it a good clean, fits a new spoke, trues the wheel and then puts it all back together again, during which time I tell him a bit about our trip. When it's all done I ask him how much I owe him and he says it's on the house as he likes crazy people. We can't thank him enough but while we are eating lunch on a table just outside the shop Albert and Mateus pop out and hand us 2 inner tubes and a bottle of chain lube again without charging us. Our gratitude has to be ramped up another level or two but they seem genuinely pleased to be helping us out.



Albert and Mateus with their trusty 45mm spanner



We all love Decathlon

We have two smaller acts of kindness the next day when in a tiny village store we realise we're about 1 zloty short (about 18p) but the shopkeeper lets us have the food regardless – much to our relief as we were worried we'd have to put the huge bag of doughnuts back. Then at another town we're desperate for the loo and need to fill up on water but have no change for the toilet attendant, but she lets us in anyway. We come up against the language problem when she tries to ask us what we're doing, but we show her our map of the world with our route marked on and point to the bike and she seems to understand. Maybe.



We've seen more ice cream shops in Poland than any other country so far



We've also seen more florist shops in Poland than any other country so far

It takes us 4 days from crossing the border to get to Warsaw and on our final night before riding into the city we get held

up at gunpoint. In a small village just past Lochow two small boys are having a mock battle and when they see us they turn their weapons on us. We decide to camp behind the community centre and get watched carefully by the boys as we set up the tent and begin to make supper. Using the Google Translate app on my phone we establish they are either 6 or 8 and their names are unpronounceable but they may have family in the UK (one of them has a union jack t-shirt on). We get to join in the battle as they have four toy guns and a plastic knife between them. The porch of the tent makes a great machine gun nest when the vent at the front is opened.



Stick em up!

It's 70km into Warsaw the next day so we have plenty of time to enjoy the warm sunshine before we are due to meet our

hosts, Marek and Kasia at 4:00. While stopped at a McDonald's to borrow some Wi-Fi and a toilet we get chatting to Paul who says he is a professional bike racer and he invites me to join him at a race the next day, even offering a spare bike. It's all very tempting but the thought of charging after a peloton travelling at 40 km/hr sounds too much like hard work as opposed to a leisurely stroll round the city, so I politely decline.



Spilt grain, the road was covered in it.

In Kaunas we had met someone who had ridden from Lithuania to Serbia that summer and had warned us that the road into Warsaw was horrendous. On the map we can see seven major roads converging to cross a bridge, and it makes spaghetti junction look neat and tidy. The Garmin is trying to send us on a 10km detour to avoid it, but when we get there we find a cycle path that winds its way under, over and round the whole lot. We even get to ride behind a huge double-glazed wall that shuts

out most of the traffic noise. It's a very twisty route so I can understand why the Garmin didn't want to try and make sense of it, but it makes it very easy for us to get to the city and includes some nice parkland sections for good measure too.



Crossing the bridge towards Warsaw



Pumpkin festival

We arrive at Marek and Kasia's lovely flat in a large residential area about 10km from the city centre and soon learn that the whole family is bike mad and enjoy lots of touring and long distance riding. Their son in law Stefan was hoping to ride the 1200km Paris – Brest – Paris event next year but it's very difficult to find qualifying events in Poland so he may have to wait until the next one in 2019. We may well join him for that one.



Marek and Kasia

Marek and Kasia's flat conveniently sits a few hundred metres from the last stop on the M1 Metro line, which is actually

Warsaw's only Metro line so it's an easy ride into the city the next day. It's a lovely clear sunny day so we join a free walking tour led by Gaweł who tells us all about Warsaw's troubled history. Apparently it's not the most picturesque Polish city (we've been repeatedly told that Krakow holds this title), but it is one of the most interesting. Before the Nazis fled from the approaching Russian Red Army during the 2nd World War they destroyed most of the city, razing 85% of it to the ground. However when you walk around it today you can see a medieval castle, cathedrals, 15th century houses and cobbled streets... or so it seems. These are all actually exact replicas of the original buildings and were built after the war ended. It's hugely impressive and makes for a fascinating visit. At the end of the tour Gaweł takes us into a bar and educates us on the etiquette behind drinking vodka before handing round some free samples which certainly helps when he then asks for tips. We have two huge platefuls of traditional pierogi dumplings for lunch then have a few shopping errands to do. The modern part of Warsaw is much like any other with shopping centres, restaurants and high rise office blocks, but in the middle of it all is the enormous Palace of Science and Culture which was a gift from Stalin. Well he called it a gift but the Polish people had to pay for it. And build it themselves.



Castle Square, Warsaw. All built after 1950



Warsaw



Warsaw castle, rebuilt with the exact details of the original Gothic arches behind the 15th century windows



Warsaw



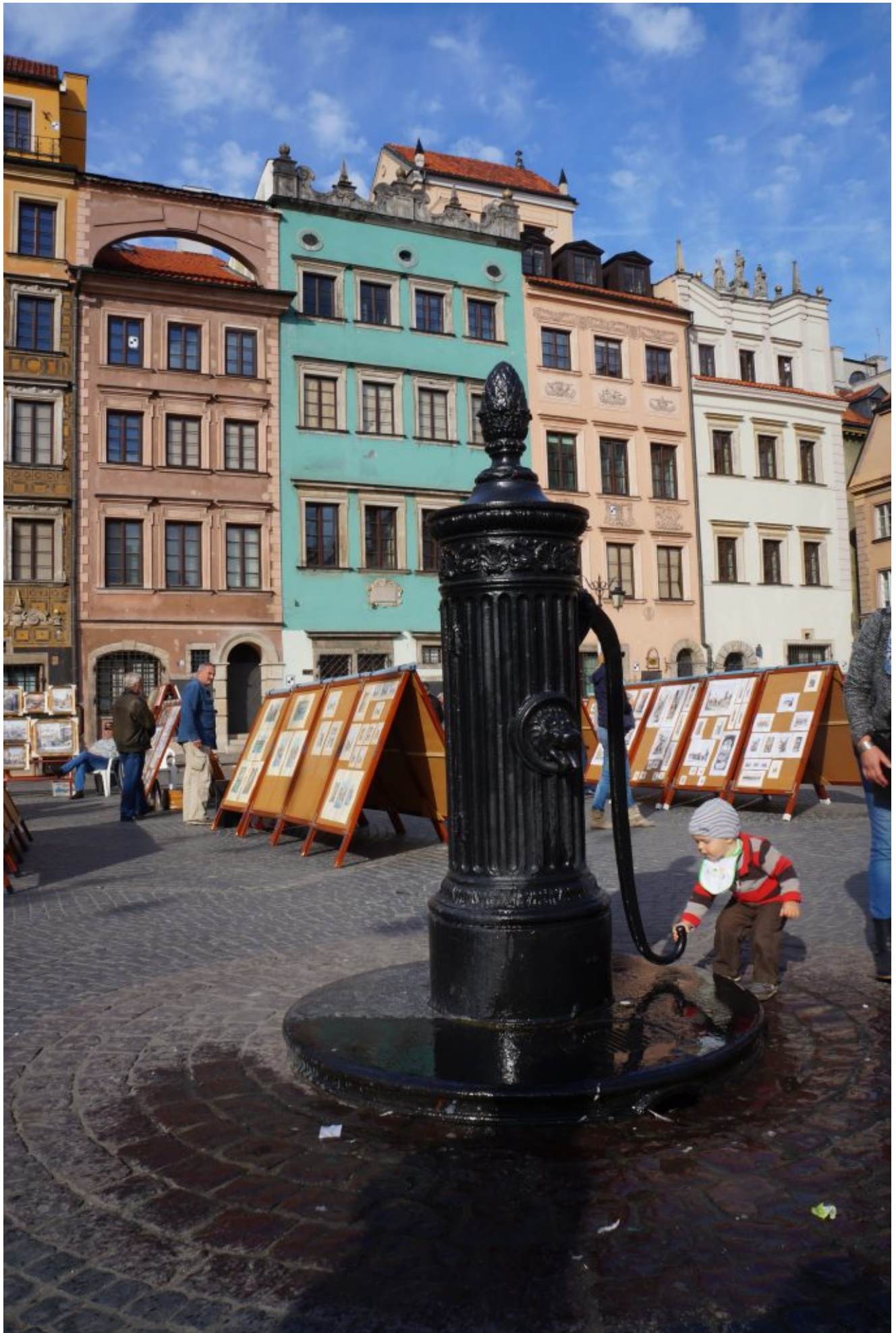
Warsaw



Gawel showing a picture of what the building that now stands behind him looked like after the war



Warsaw Mermaid



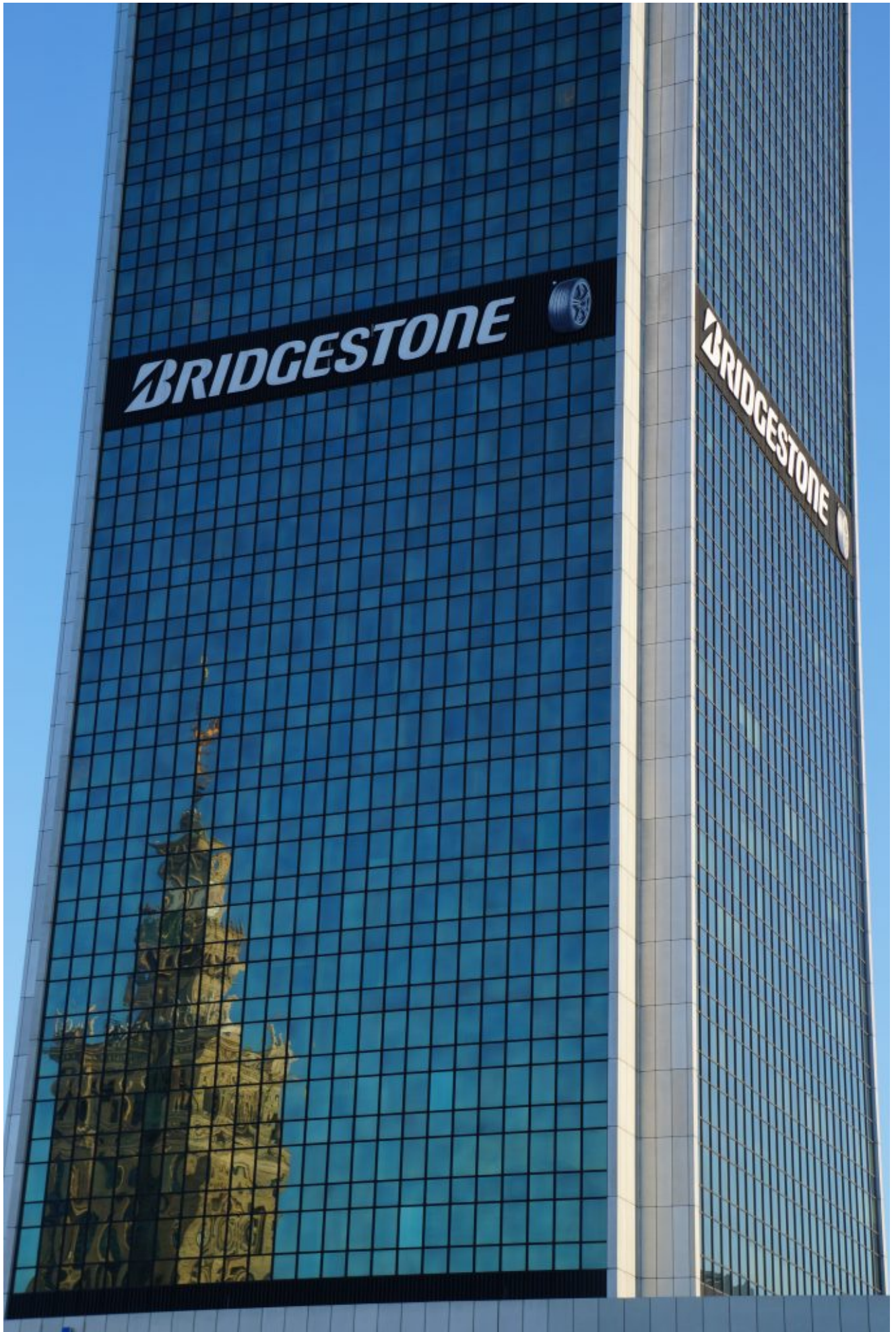
Warsaw main square



Modern Warsaw to the left, communist Warsaw to the right



The Palace of Science and Culture



Warsaw

We had hoped to pick up two parcels that were being sent to Marek's flat. One was a replacement Plug for the dynamo hub as the one we had bought in Amsterdam was proving unreliable. Felix at Toute Terrain was more than happy to send a new one under warranty so had shipped one from Germany. The other parcel was a replacement section of our Click Stand which we needed after our bike fell on the stand on a beach in Germany and bent it. Tom at Click Stand was happy to send one to us all the way from the States, but it had taken until now to get hold of him as he had been away on his own tour. However neither parcel had arrived so we were faced with the decision to stay and wait indefinitely or keep moving and ask Marek to post them on to us. The risk being they could be chasing us around the world with us always a step ahead.



A fragment from the original Warsaw



Warsaw resident

We decide to not to wait and Marek leads us out of the city on a great cycle path that will one day be part of a huge route from north to south of the country due to open fully in 3-5 years. We say goodbye to Marek at a small ferry crossing and continue onward alongside the other side of the river for two days, now heading towards Lublin. We're now in amongst apple orchards and trailers laden with fruit trundle past. There's also plenty of muck being spread on the fields so Kirsty can't help but ask if the smell is anything to do with me.



Ferry outside Warsaw. We had to ask the ferryman to stop fishing for a few minutes and drive us across



Apple picking



Our sandwiches are getting bigger

The morning before arriving in Lublin we feel a couple of spots of rain at the same time as seeing a sign to a 'Rowery Muzeum'. Yes it's another bicycle museum, so we decide to take refuge. It all looks to be closed but then all of a sudden the museum owner appears. He gestures for us to sit outside a large shed then proceeds to give a potted history of the bicycle followed by the most amazing parade of largely home-built bikes we've yet seen. It seems he loves to experiment with steel tubes and a welder, so has built all sorts of odd recumbents, folding bikes, articulated bikes, scooters and a mini penny farthing. But unlike most museums we're encouraged to have a go with varying levels of success as most of them are largely unrideable. It's our favourite bicycle museum so far and he puts one of our cards in pride of place in a picture frame on the wall of the museum.



Home made Penny Farthing



Unusual (and terrifying) cargo bike



Home made recumbent

The road into Lublin is relatively hilly which comes as a shock as most of Poland had been very flat. It's a big city of half a million people but 1/3 of them are students at five different universities which must make the weekends in town quite lively. We're staying with Warm Showers host Michal who is an injured physio with two broken wrists so can't currently practice. He sustained the injury while trying to ride down a long flight of steps but fell 3m and was lucky not to be hurt more badly. He gives us a tour round the old town, this time the buildings are genuinely old, but a lot of them are empty awaiting a rich enough investor to bring them back to life. We reluctantly end up having dinner in an Irish pub as we had left it too late to eat anywhere else. I guess we're only one letter away from being in Dublin so it's just about acceptable. Afterwards we get to practice some of the vodka drinking etiquette we learned in Warsaw with some of Michal's friends. The standard shot size is 50cl and they keep coming thick and fast in various flavours so we already know it's

going to be another slow start the next day.



Gateway to Lublin



Lublin



Lublin old town



Vodkas getting lined up

It's late morning before we finally make it out of the flat and back onto the bike and like my head, the sky is very cloudy. It's still fairly warm though and we count ourselves lucky that we weren't there this time 3 years ago when they had half a metre of snow in October. We have to head to the train station to meet a train. Predictably it turns out that both our parcels arrived in Warsaw just after we left, but Marek has had a cunning plan. The Polish railway system allows you to send parcels via the train by handing it to the conductor at one station then the recipient can collect it at another station. So the 13:08 train from Warsaw rolls into Lublin station and in carriage number 13 the conductor hands me the parcel that Marek had given him 2 hours before in Warsaw. It's a brilliant system and has saved us a lot of trouble trying to coordinate sending the packages on to another address. With the combined help of Marek, Felix, Tom and the Polish railway system we have our parts and we are

very, very grateful to all concerned for making it happen.



Michal and Marcus



Parcel post by train

After a bit more recuperation time in Lublin, during which I snooze in the waiting room then fit the new parts while Kirsty has a look round the city centre in the daylight, we're ready and safe to cycle again. We're now heading south east towards our next border crossing that this time will take us out of the European Union and into a country with not only a difficult language but also a difficult alphabet. That's if Ukraine will let us in of course.



Cowering Cherub, Lublin



Lublin Cathedral



Lublin old town



Lublin old town



Lublin old town



Lublin old town

Riga to Druskininkai

written by Marcus | 23 October, 2014



One of the great things about travelling by bike for a long period of time is that things are always slowly changing all around you. The most obvious things are the features of the landscape, from flatlands to hills to coasts to forests. But the changing of the seasons is a bit more subtle and gradual. For the last couple of weeks the colours of the trees have been getting more and more varied with yellows, oranges and reds making an appearance in contrast to the walls of green that we were seeing in Sweden and Finland. It was just the odd one or two trees to begin with but now the roadside has become filled up with colour. It's also been getting a lot cooler in the evenings so it seems autumn has well and truly arrived in the Baltics.



Autumn leaves

2nd to 13th October 2014

We leave Ruta and Gint's house in Riga with a belly full of toast coated with Latvian honey, a real luxury as we can't normally make toast in the morning. Gints has given us a good route to take us out on a railway path to leave the city then he has suggested a few nice towns to visit that will eventually lead us over to the east coast of Latvia. We pass through Jurmala which is where the rich Latvians live and it looks like they have more money than sense as there are some enormous houses with what might be called 'bold architecture' but I think even Kevin McCloud would be challenged to call them attractive.



Autumn leaves

We ride through the Kemeru National Park into Tukums and encounter our first bit of genuine road rage since the UK when a truck drives past slowly on a hill with its horn blaring.



Road near Tukums



With the evenings being colder it's nice to be able to get a fire going, so we're pleased to find a nice spot next to a lake that has a large pile of logs and a picnic table. The marshmallows come out and are toasted to perfection.



Marshmallow toasting

Our Thermarest double quilt has been fantastic so far. It's half the weight of carrying two sleeping bags, just as warm and most importantly takes up half as much space. But now it's getting colder on its own it's not quite enough, so we've moved to stage two of the sleeping system which is to use the impressive sounding Sea to Summit Thermalite Reactor' sleeping bag liners underneath the quilt. The combination is toasty at the moment so we hope it should keep us comfortable for a few more weeks even if the mercury continues to drop.



Burning stick sparkler

We've also moved from muesli to porridge as the breakfast of choice to start each day warm and full. I know a few porridge lovers and there is always some debate as to what the best topping should be. They sell a kind of sweet curd here in a range of flavours and I'd like to claim that this makes for the best porridge ever created. If you can find some of this stuff then I urge you to stir it with the oats as it's really very good. Porridge on a camping stove usually ends up burnt but we have been using a pot cosy that Kirsty constructed which makes the job a lot more successful. You get the porridge heated till it's just boiling then shove it in the insulated cosy and a couple of minutes later it's done to perfection. It works well for pasta too and has the added benefit of saving fuel. We'd like to thank LVIS members Warren and Esther for this tip after reading about it on their excellent blog: <http://estherwarren.wordpress.com/>. They've just returned home after 3.5 years of riding through some of

the best cycling destinations in the world.



Porridge in the pot cosy. With curd.



The area we're in now is much more rural and appears to be a bit poorer as the villages are basic and most of the buildings could do with some repair work. Next day we stop at a supermarket for second breakfast and the bill for two coffees and two pastries is less than half a Finnish coffee. In the queue I spot a lady with purple hair, another lady with an full blown moustache and a huge man buying 3 bottles of whisky. Much the same as you'd see on any given day in Asda Bedminster (an interesting part of Bristol) really.



No idea what this was about but it was very well made.

We stop for lunch in Renda and learn that the church was partially demolished during the filming of Robin Hood's Arrows. There's no explanation as to how it happened, or why the Russians were making a film about Robin Hood but it sounds intriguing. By the afternoon we've reached Kuldiga with plenty of traditional buildings and cobbled streets but like a lot of Latvia it's not in the best shape. They know it's of historical importance and clearly want to encourage tourists, but can't seem to quite get enough funds to present it in all its potential glory. However the most famous bits do look good which are the longest brick built bridge in Europe and the widest waterfall in Europe (110m). On the former we watch a wedding party assemble and release balloons into the air.



Kuldiga



Kuldīga



Balloon release, Kuldiga



Kuldiga

As well as being recommended to us by Gints, Kuldiga was on our route as we had arranged to stay at the home of Ugis. In fact we're not staying in his home but are offered a little wooden cabin not far from the river Venta. Accompanied by Hugo the dog, he brings us apples, coffee, a kettle and a barrowful of logs for the stove and leaves us to it. It's a lovely cosy little place, made even more cosy when I get the stove fired up and pile on some logs. Before long it's actually quite hot in there. Now Kirsty and I operate at different temperatures which we had learnt a while ago when she was shivering at night, fully clothed and I was still sleeping in my underwear. So in the cabin she is happily sat in her fleece while I'm peeling off layers and I end up stripped to the waist and sweating while cooking supper. Being a wood panelled room it's almost exactly like being in a sauna! The river was just a bit too far away to go for a dip afterwards though.



Our cabin/sauna for the night

After Kuldiga we make it back to the seaside and to the town of Pāvilosta. Just off the beach lies the largest boulder in the whole of the Baltic. It's only stands 3.5m high so this claim seems surprising. Just behind the beach is a large wooden pyramid structure you can climb up for views of... well not a lot really. You can't see much of the beach as there are trees in the way, you can't see the boulder and there's not much behind it either. A small sign says that it was part funded by the EU so I hope the people back in Brussels realise how their money seems to have been wasted.



The Big Boulder, Pavilosta



Sunrise, Pavilosta

The boulder serves as good a place as any for us to say goodbye to the Baltic for one last time. It's been on our right hand side through six different countries now and we've learnt that it's not very salty (good for swimming), has a very shallow tidal range so always looks like it's at high tide and is littered with amber (we trawled lots of beaches but found none). So we continue inland down to Grobina then turn west and face the combined effect of a stiff headwind and a road in desperate need of some EU funding. If only they hadn't spent their money on that pointless pyramid (OK it did have a point on the top). It's a long day but we make it across the border into Lithuania and are greeted as we ride into the town of Skuodas by several barking dogs in various gardens. After stocking up with food, withdrawing some Litas from the bank and getting hounded out of town by several more barking dogs we're back into the wind and stop at the first available clump of trees with enough shelter to conceal the

tent.



A wonderful slice of EU funded road



A typical Lithuanian welcome

It's a restless night as we'd pitched at the wrong angle against the wind so the tent flapped quite a bit. It's also

turned very cold, too cold even for the Thermalite Reactor sleeping bag liners to keep us warm so we had to resort to stage 3 of the sleep system, wearing more clothes and in Kirsty's case a down jacket. In the morning the Garmin claims it's 3 degrees in the tent so it could have dipped below zero overnight. Sometimes things change more rapidly it seems. The wind is much stronger and blowing from exactly the direction we are heading.



Tractor drafting

It's tough going and the morning is spent crouched over the bars with grimaces frozen on our faces trying to make progress into the 30kph wind. At the town of Zidikai we are ready for second breakfast and especially a hot drink, but this is the kind of town that doesn't normally get visitors. There appear to be two shops but neither of them feel the need to put up a sign, the only clue is that people are going in with empty bags and coming out with full ones. We enter the first one and

instantly dismiss it on account of the poor cake selection. The second one is much better so we pick a large, fruit filled circle of dough and ask if there is anywhere that could sell us a coffee. The shop keeper shakes his head but then holds up his hand as if to say 'hold on one moment' before disappearing out the back. He returns with a carrier bag and beckons for us to follow him. He doesn't speak a word of English and our Lithuanian is limited to "Ačiū" which is also our favourite word so far for thank you. It's pronounced like a sneeze and the reply of "Prašom" probably means 'you're welcome' but it could well be 'bless you'.



The appropriately named Venta

We follow the man while pushing the bike and the few people we see stop and stare at his strange entourage. We think he's leading us to his home but then he turns into a school and takes us into the canteen where he asks the dinner ladies to make us two coffees. They're more than happy to oblige and ask if we'd like lunch too? It's still quite early but from what we can see being eaten by some of the school children it looks

delicious so we say yes please. One of the children helps translate for the dinner lady and asks if we'd like steak? We say yes and get served two delicious plates of chicken with vegetables and follow it up with jam sponge all washed down with fresh coffee. It's school dinner prices too so we leave 16 Litr lighter (about 4 pounds) and a couple of kg heavier.



School dinner at Zidkai

The rest of the day is spent back in the wind tunnel passing through rundown towns and villages. In each one there are dogs

behind fences barking at us. In the fields there are lots of goats and cows but the farmers seem to favour tying the animals to a post rather than putting a fence around them. It means they get their own patch of grass to nibble but not much chance to socialise.



Tethered cow

At the end of the day we're more than ready to set up camp. We find a nice little clearing in a small copse that offers everything we need: shelter from the wind, level ground and even the sound of barking dogs is drowned out by the passing traffic and the occasional train.

It's a similar story the next day but noticeably warmer and perhaps a slightly stronger head wind. Progress is so slow that drafting behind a tractor is marginally faster. When we stop for some kind of meat filled pastry it's amusing watching

every single person who passes the bike stop and take a closer look. The curiosity in us and the tandem has definitely stepped up in Lithuania but that could also be because we are the only cyclists without a high viz waistcoat which appears to be mandatory. We've not been stopped by the police so Kirsty's red jacket must be a suitable alternative.



Even the trees on the road signs were bending in the wind

There aren't many roads to choose from unless we wanted to brave the rough gravel roads so after lunch we take on the A11 which has road works. We get channelled into a contraflow with not a huge amount of space between us and the traffic, but the drivers are amazingly considerate so it's bearable apart from the fact that the wind is still holding our average speed down to about 15kph. The one small mercy is that by being on a tandem it's easier than if we were on two solo bikes as it's more aerodynamic but it's still a big object to push into the gale.

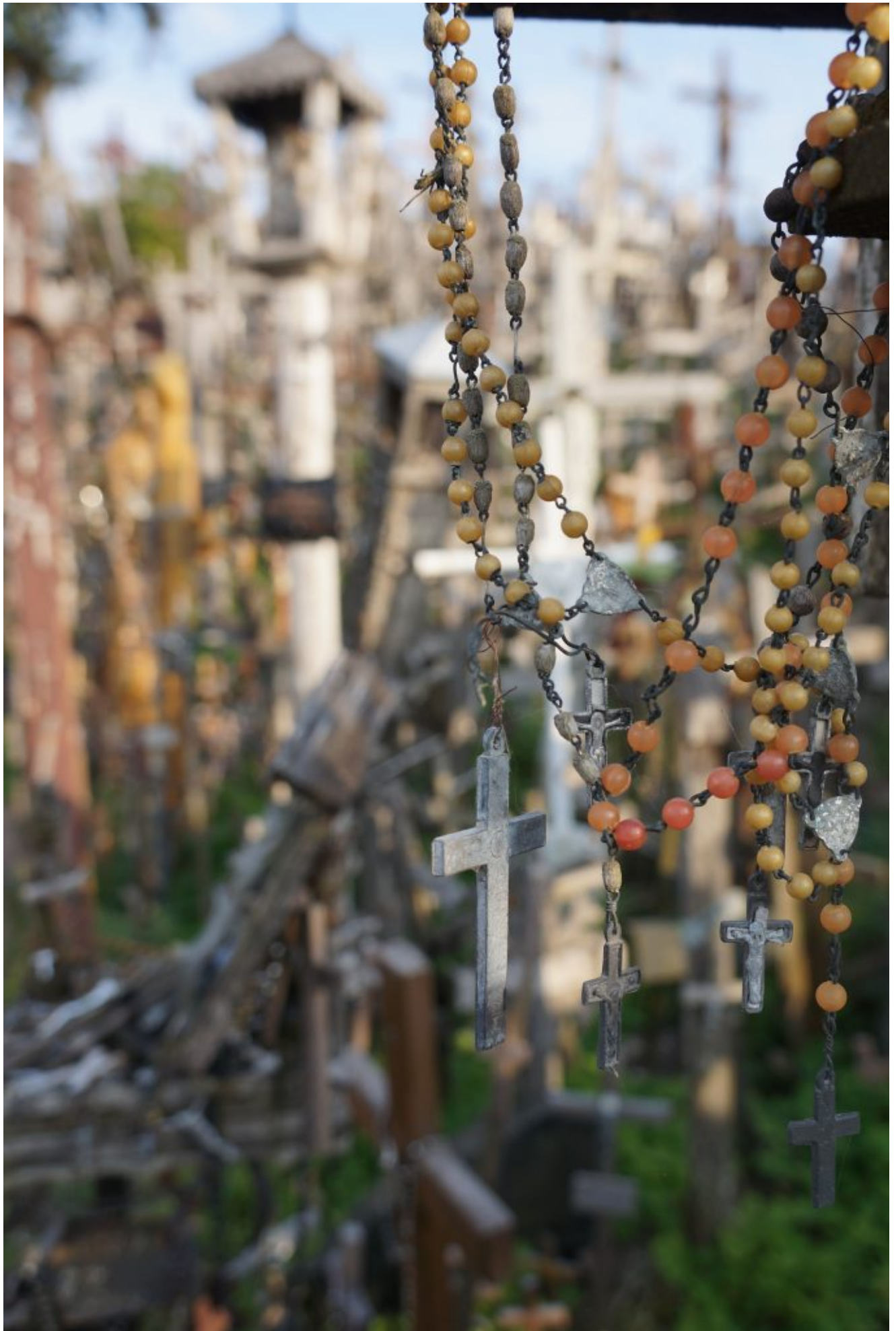


Another windy morning

Our destination that day is The Hill of Crosses and to get there we end up turning north for a few km and past a sign pointing out that Riga was only 136km away. We'd taken a bit more of a scenic route.

The Hill of Crosses was originally a place where people came to leave crosses of remembrance in the early 1800s. It has grown in popularity and significance and despite the best efforts of the Russians to dismantle it, there are now around 400,000 crosses of all sizes, colours and designs on the site. As well as being a religious site it also holds significance as a symbol of Lithuania's independence so people come to visit from all around the country and indeed the world to place their own cross. We arrive at the same time as a coach load of Japanese tourists and another of school children so there isn't much chance to sit quietly and take in the unique spectacle but it's very interesting wondering around and

reading some of the messages and the places where each cross has come from.



Hill of crosses



Hill of crosses



Hill of crosses



Hill of crosses



Hill of crosses

It's getting late so we opt to eat out at a pizza restaurant in Šiauliai. After two 30cm pizzas we're asked if we want anything else so the answer is yes, another 30cm pizza please. Then ice cream. We find a park on the outskirts of town to pitch the tent and the neighbours are nice and quiet as it's the city cemetery.

While eating breakfast with a dog stood next to the tent barking at us, we decide to see what Siauliai has to offer for the morning as the wind is supposed to die down in the afternoon. It has a bicycle museum and a chocolate factory which both sound like they should be worth a visit. The bicycle museum isn't as impressive as the one we saw in Saulkrasti and the chocolate factory would have left Augustus Gloop disappointed but both have some interesting exhibits and give some insight into life during the Soviet occupation for bicycle manufacturers and chocolate makers. When we eventually start riding in the afternoon it's still breezy but by now we're hardened to it so just crack on.



Šiauliai



Soviet architecture

After a night in some woods with the odd rain shower and the sound of dogs barking in the distance, the day starts much

brighter and warmer. We stop at a market in Akademija which is also the home of the national agricultural college. I have a chat with an old man in overalls who has been inspecting the bike and he explains that he enjoys cycling too, and it's becoming a lot more popular since the Russians moved out. Another, younger man overhears our conversation and asks about our trip. He represents a different generation so has a bluetooth headset in his ear, an IT degree in his back pocket, his own business and is looking forward to a holiday in Portsmouth next week. After passing through Kedainiai that evening we camp in a park in the village of Labunava and some inquisitive children come over to see what we're up to. After working out we speak English as we only respond when they say hello they gather round while I explain what we are doing. I ask if they like living in Lithuania and they say no but I expect most teenagers in small towns around the world would say they same about their own countries. These are the next generation who were born after the Soviet occupation so their lives will be very different to the two men we had met earlier that day. We've seen a huge number of signs for EU funded projects from new toilets to big redevelopment schemes and next year Lithuania joins the Euro so it's certainly a country trying to make big changes.



Autumn camping



Every village in Lithuania has one of these intricate carved signs

We ride into Kaunas the next day along one of the best roads

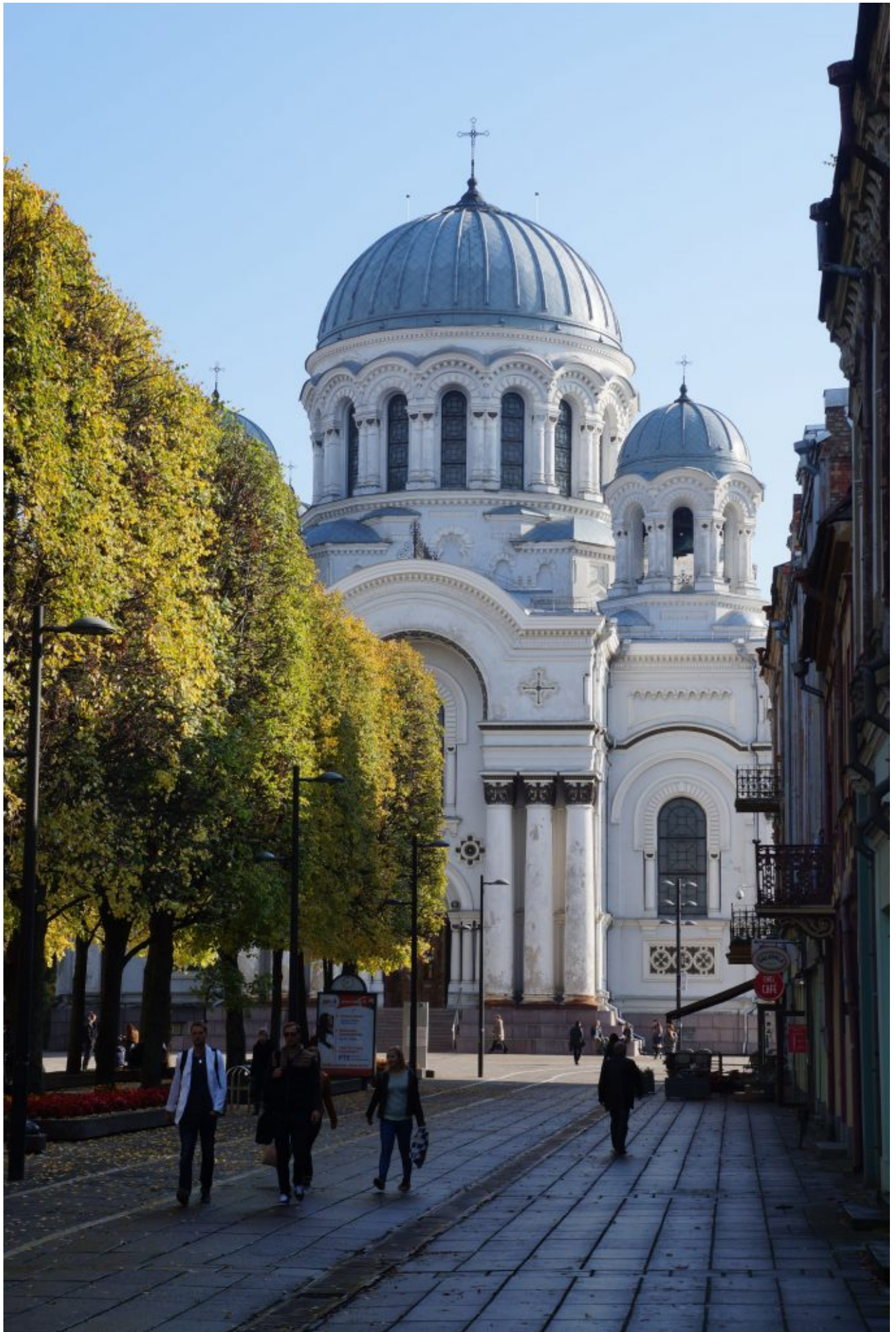
we've found so far in Lithuania, alongside the river with very little traffic and lots of Autumn colours. Although smaller than the capital city, Vilnius, Kaunas still has plenty to see including the now familiar Lithuanian combination of old wooden buildings in need of a lick of paint alongside modern shops alongside derelict towers. Kaunas lays claim to have the only museum dedicated to devil sculptures in the world and we have good reason to believe this is true as it's quite a specialist subject.



Devil Museum, Kaunas



Kaunas



Kaunas



Kaunas



Kaunas

Our hosts that evening are Paulius and Vaida and they are letting us stay in their flat that sits high in a Soviet apartment block. After a bite to eat Paulius suggests we walk into town. It's already past our normal bed time but we're happy to see what a night in a Lithuanian city is like. After meeting up with Vaida and a few of their friends for a drink there is talk of going to some kind of party so we pile into a car and drive out to the outskirts of the city. The only clue that anything is going on is the number of parked cars on the verge, but we spot a small path lit by candles and follow it into the dark woods. After a short while we drop down into a natural bowl and in front of us is the entrance to a bunker with the sounds of a huge bassline pouring out and large group of people gathered round a fire. Kaunas has several bunker networks built by the Russian Tsars while it was a fortified town and most of them are blocked up or have been turned into museums. Somehow someone has found this one and dragged a ton of sound system into it, set up a laser show and invited an exclusive guest list to come along for the party. It's a very effective venue too as being buried in the ground the sound is completely deadened until you are right on top of the entrance so although it's incredibly loud inside no-one in the vicinity would know it was happening.



Romantis, who had walked and hitched from Spain to Lithuania



Paulius

We have a good dance and reach for the lasers enjoying a very unique Friday night out though Paulius is keen to point out

this is not how he would normally spend his weekend either.



Bunker rave

Getting to bed about 3 hours before we would normally get up means we don't get going until lunchtime the next day so after thanking Paulius and Vaida we leave with a bag of apples from Paulius' parents' garden, most of which we have to give away to a grateful lady at a bus stop as they don't fit in the panniers. It's warmed right up to 22 degrees for the last few days and no-one can believe how sunny it is given the time of year. Our friends at the Met Office have been working their magic yet again.



Kaunas Canyon



Paulius has suggested we head down to Druskininkai en route to the Polish border as on the way is a place called Grutas Parkas. If you ever wondered where all the huge old Soviet statues of Lenin and Stalin and all their henchmen went after the collapse of the Soviet Union, well in Lithuania's case they went to Grutas Parkas. These huge icons would have been put up on streets throughout the Baltics as a reminder of who was in charge, so understandably they were hastily removed again when they gained independence. But a mushroom millionaire asked if he could collect them all up and put them on display in his park so the Lithuanian government gave them to him. It's a bizarre place, made to feel like a prison camp and with the ultimate rogues gallery nestled amongst the trees watching us walk past.



Lenin



Rogues Gallery



Lenin



Stalin and Marcus



Grutas Parkas

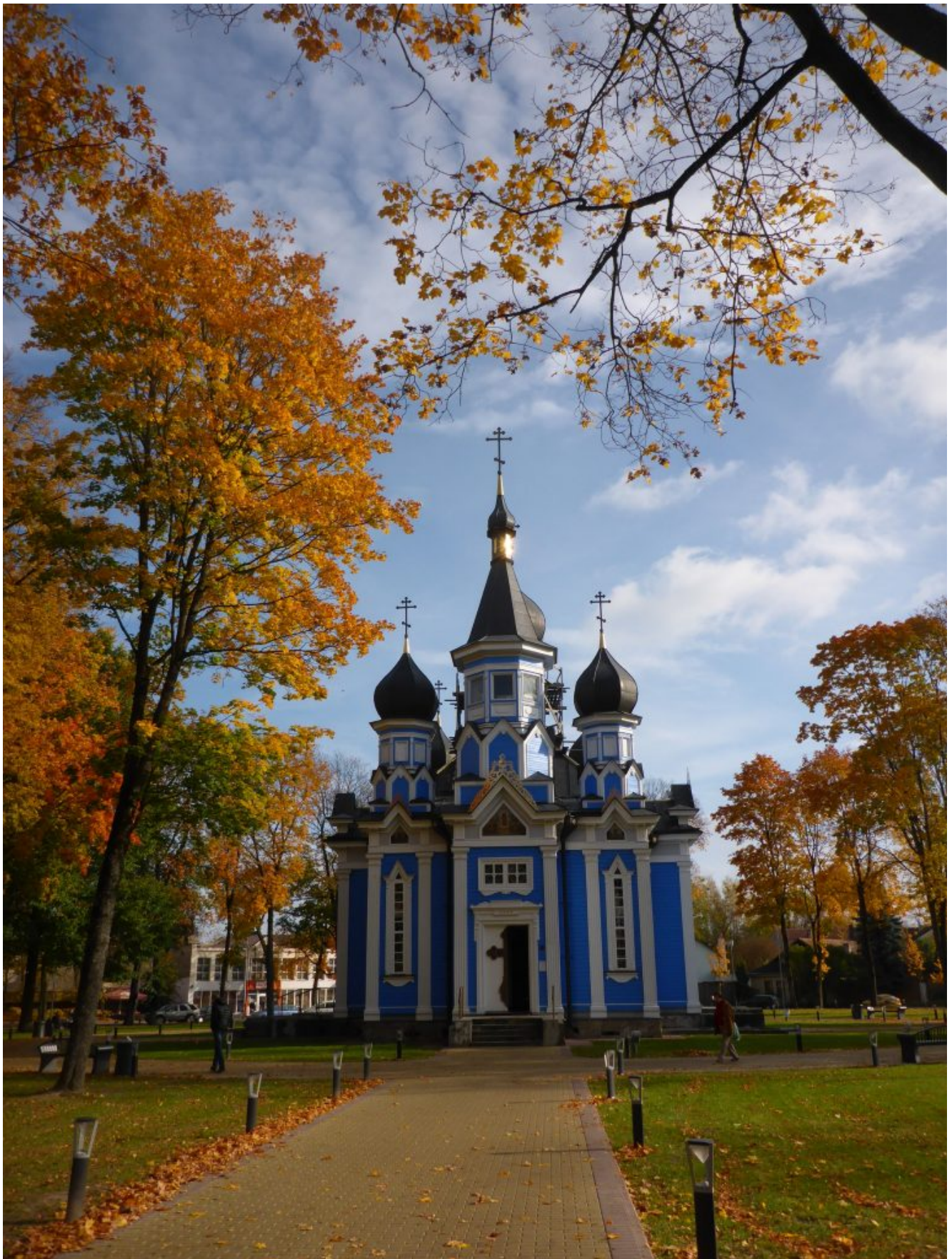
When we make our great escape we don't get far, not because we can't jump the wire on the bike but because our rear tyre appears to have exploded. This is strange as the bike had been fine when we parked it behind the security guard's office but there is a large split near to the rim and the tyre casing has torn from the bead. It's beyond reasonable repair for riding even with a tyre boot but I manage to get a new tube in with a bit of air so we can at least push it. We later read of the exact same thing happening to someone else in the same place 7 years ago, but to this day we'll never know what actually happened.



Exploded tyre

It's too late to walk to the next town so we find some food and somewhere to camp and make the 10km trek the next day. In Druskininkai we find that not much opens on a Monday, least of all the only bike shop in town. A DIY store tells us they have packed up their bike spares as the summer season is over so we appear to be stuck. As a last resort I send a message to a Couch Surfing host, Saulius and ask if he is able to help. Shortly after I get a call from him to say he's on the case but we need to sit tight for a couple of hours. Druskininkai is a popular spa town with dozens of hotels offering treatments using the local mineral water, mud and with saunas, steam rooms and the option to be beaten with a larch branch. We were stood next to the Aqua Park so decide to head in there while we wait to see what Saulius comes up with. The water slides are great fun and we come away with only a few minor bruises and scrapes. Kirsty doesn't seem to be too concussed either. To calm things down a bit we also head to the bath

complex and get to enjoy not one but five different saunas of increasing temperature and decreasing bearability. We come away cleaner than we've felt in 8 weeks.



Druskininkai



Aqua Park

Saulius has come up trumps as well and meets us at a bike hire shop where we are offered three different tyres. I pick the best of the lot and the shopkeeper even fits it for us but in the process we find we have a broken spoke. In fact a lot of the spokes on the rear wheel are loose but the drum brake is on too tight to be able to replace the broken one so we have to tighten it all up and hope that it'll be OK until we find a better-equipped shop. With 48 spokes on each wheel we can afford to lose one and the wheel isn't even out of true.

But Saulius doesn't leave us there as he has offered to let us to stay with him. On the way back to his house we stop for a couple of local beers and meet his wife Vita then get treated to a wonderful feast of squid, meat, cheese and traditional black bread. To finish off, and to finish us off, Saulius produces a bottle of moonshine. He can't tell us who made it

or where it was made but making this stuff is something of a tradition in these parts. It's not that bad and certainly better than the Riga Black Balsam but we know that the next day is going to be another slow start. We return the favour by teaching him the Roxanne drinking game as he is a big fan of The Police.

Saulius and Vita were fantastic hosts and we'd had a great time in Druskininkai, all thanks to a torn tyre without which we would have ridden straight past and been on our way to Poland.



Veisiejai



Leaving Druskininkai

From Druskininkai we're sent on our way with a belly full of porridge (with butter – try this too) and are heading for the border. Not the border of Belarus as the visa procedure is expensive and complicated, or of Kaliningrad as the Russians don't make it easy either, but the short stretch in between that will take us into Poland and on to Warsaw. Poland is warm at this time of year I hear.



The only Lithuanian dogs that didn't bark

Helsinki to Riga

written by Marcus | 23 October, 2014



So we are now entering the Baltic States, familiar (albeit with hazy memories) to many Brits as being the place for several stag do's 10 or so years ago, drawn to the cheap beer and the promise of being able to shoot a machine gun in a KGB bunker. Hopefully there will be more to this part of the world though, as getting to explore the next few countries is part of the reason why we took such a big detour up through Scandinavia rather than making a bee-line for Istanbul.



Tallinn

23rd September to 1st October 2014

It's chilly getting off the ferry from Helsinki but thankfully

it's only a short ride to the home of Tiit and Signe who are our hosts in Tallinn. We're invited to make ourselves at home in a room that comes complete with a rowing machine and it's as much as I can do to hold Kirsty back from cranking out a quick 5k. Over dinner Tiit tells about his round the world sailing adventures that he embarked on just after getting married (leaving Signe at home for two years!). He's making up for it now by riding round the world with her on their fold up tandem, two weeks at a time. A couple of times a year they take on a section of the route then at the end find somewhere to store the bike and fly home. They can then fly back, pick up the bike and continue the journey. They enjoyed the Crimea last August but would hesitate to recommend going there just now.



Tallinn

We stay in Tallinn for two nights, only the second time we've stayed put in one place for more than a night during the trip so far, as this gives us a bit more time to explore the city. First the bike needs some TLC as a front pannier rack bolt snapped during the mountain biking in Nuuksio and the rack was being held together with a few trusty zip ties (never leave home without them). With the help of two bike shops, one to drill out the old bolt and re-tap the thread and another to provide the bolt and spacers it's all rock solid again. The other task is to visit the RMK, Estonia's state run forestry company. Tiit has told us that they provide free camping areas at various forests throughout the country so we call in and pick up some very useful maps. I'd forgotten my brother's business cards but put in good word while I'm there in case they need some forest management consultancy.



Tallinn

The old town of Tallinn is very picturesque with medieval cobbled streets, plenty of spires, steeples and a castle so we

spend an enjoyable morning taking a walk round and trying to dodge rain showers. There's a moment of panic at the Ukrainian Church when the door clicks shut behind us and we seem to be locked in. But a bit of brute force and a few hail Marys (in Ukrainian) later and I manage to release us back onto the street.



Tallinn old city walls



Tallinn

After a lunch of dumplings sold to us at a price based on the weight of the plate (now our favourite way to buy lunch) we

head over to the Sea Plane Harbour, another tip from Tiit. This is a great museum inside a huge concrete hangar housing lots of naval craft, ice yachts, mines and planes and we get to climb inside a Barrow-in-Furness built submarine which is not for the claustrophobic.



On board the Lembit submarine



Officer and able seaman

Estonia seems cheap compared to Finland, (but then so does buying gold), but gone are the days of 1 euro pints. However we do manage to get a very nice three course dinner for two with wine for 30 euros which is great value.

Leaving Tallinn is the usual battle with city traffic for half an hour or so. There are some cycle paths but they have forgotten to drop the kerbs at each junction so it's more comfortable to stay on the road. Once clear of the city we then have to battle a head wind on a bland main road. The road then rises gently to make it a little harder. Then someone decides it's a good idea to remove all of the tarmac for 10km. Suffice to say we are ready for our lunch stop when we finally get to Keila. Having somewhere to stay for the last three nights has been very well timed as all three nights were cold and wet, but now things have dried out and warmed up for us. Kirsty asks if I'd prefer a warm head wind or a freezing cold tail wind. Give me the tail wind and some extra clothing any day.



Estonian countryside

We had various options for the next few days: either head straight down across the country or head to the West coast and then onto the two islands, Hiiumaa and Saaremaa that sit next to the Estonian mainland or else head west and follow the coast of the mainland down to the Latvian border. The island option is very popular with cyclists but Tiit suggests it's not so good at this time of year so we opt for route number 3. Following the Baltic Sea has served us well so far.

The landscape feels quite British with small forests and large arable fields. We pass a few villages with an odd mix of wooden houses and soviet era apartment blocks. There are a lot more buildings in a state of disrepair than we've seen so far and very occasionally we get passed (very slowly) by the classic symbol of soviet technology, the Lada. But on the whole Estonia feels just as European as many of the other countries we've been to so far. It may be our first country

where Lidl hasn't made itself known, but I'm sure that can't be long coming. In the meantime the supermarkets are stocked with mostly familiar foods, just served slightly differently. For instance you can buy your dairy products (milk, yogurt, mayonnaise etc.) in plastic bags which sounds like a recipe for disaster if we had tried to squeeze it into our panniers. Thankfully pasta is also sold in bags as we'd got tired of having a pannier maraca created by the boxed pasta sold in Sweden and Finland.



Lada

For the 1st night after Tallinn we stay at a free RMK campsite in Nova and find a covered eating area, fireplace, well

stocked wood pile and basic loo. It sits between the sea and a lake that up until 100 years ago was also part of the sea so is effectively brand new. We also have the place to ourselves.



Nova camp site

From Nova we head out along a coast road that is signposted as Eurovelo route 10. The Eurovelo system is a great idea in theory as it aims to provide several long distance routes across Europe from top to bottom, all the way across and around various seas and scenic areas. The trouble is that in practice it only exists online and signs on the ground are few and far between at best. Estonia, however, is leading the way and has made a point of signing the routes that pass through it as best it can. So a little ring of stars with a 10 points us onto a road that quickly degrades to a bumpy unsurfaced track. We make allowances for this hoping that it should provide a nice view of the coastline but we stay in the woods with trees between us and the sea. 12km later we emerge back

onto tarmac and make more rapid progress down to Haapsalu and decide to be more wary of the Eurovelo route. Haapsalu used to be a popular resort with the Russian Tsars who enjoyed the rejuvenating effects of the famous mud baths. We keep clean and instead stop for lunch and watch the local fishermen hooking dozens of fish out of the sea. Maybe they were all just stuck in the mud?



Fisherman at Haapsalu with the little polar bear

There is a shortage of RMK sites on this section of coast so we wild camp next to a derelict building on the edge of the

Matseltu National Park after clearing the area under the tent of frogs. This park is a huge service station for migrating birds but most of them will have passed through by now so we are only woken up by a few geese who must be straggling and the swans who seem to leave it a bit later before heading south.

We make our way down to Parnu via a main road with the wind now behind us and blowing strongly. I'm a lot happier. But the road seems to miss any of the villages along the way so is a bit like riding on a bypass. It's sunny and warm so Parnu lives up to it's title of being the 'Summer Capital of Estonia'.



Parnu beach

After another wild camp by the beach we turn onto the A1 and pass a sign asking us to thank the EU for refurbishing this section of road. And we do thank them wholeheartedly as it's

now a beautifully smooth stretch of brand new black asphalt. It's also our first encounter with the Via Baltica which is the main route between Helsinki and Budapest so we have to share the fresh tarmac with quite a few large trucks. Being a Sunday there aren't too many and almost all of them are courteous enough to give us a wide birth so it's hardly the M25. After a while we get to turn onto a smaller road running parallel with the A1 and we finally find some real Estonia and get to ride through several villages and small towns as we approach the Latvian border. In one town we follow a sign to the shop and find a building that looks nothing like a shop and looks nothing like being open. But peering through the door we find it's both and the shop keeper is proud to demonstrate his English by explaining what all the things he is selling are: "This is cheese, this is ham..." which we thank him for.

Our final night in Estonia is spent at the RMK site Krapil. It's huge with dozens of plots, fire places and tables as apparently up to 40,000 people visit this area each year. Again we have the place to ourselves.

It's a short walk to the nearest village of Treimani so we go for a stroll and are met at the village shop by a large and friendly dog who proceeds to show us the sights including the little wooden church with traditional Estonian net curtains and a garden containing bizarre, giant wooden figures. The dog leads us back to the shop where we say good bye and head to the tent to cook supper. The stove goes on then goes off. My estimation that we had one more day's worth of fuel is one day out, so we retreat to the roaring fire I've built to ponder how to heat up our pasta. It's probably a few km to the nearest petrol station and it'll probably be shut. We could have a cold supper of muesli and bread. Of course the answer is right in front of us and so we have a slightly smoked flavour pasta cooked nicely on the fire. We finish the evening practicing the fine art of marshmallow roasting as Kirsty had

spotted a pack of Haribo's finest earlier that day.





Camp fire cooking

Crossing into Latvia is our first land border since Germany and we're pleased that this time there are flags and signs so we know it's actually happening. We enjoyed Estonia but a return trip is definitely needed perhaps with either route option 1 or option 2 as we think we'd see a bit more on the islands or down the middle of the country compared to the coast.



Country number 10

We're back on the A1 again and it's a bit busier than the day before but the hard shoulder is also a bit wider for us to ride in. There are also a few oddities to keep us entertained along the way including some giant chairs, a tree entirely painted orange and a tankard the size of a house. Those crazy Latvians. The truck drivers must keep themselves well stocked up with food as we find ourselves on a 20km stretch through a forest without a single shop or cafe and lunchtime has been and gone. To keep ourselves fuelled we have to gorge on biscuits and chocolate until we eventually find a cafe who serves us hot soup and a beetroot based broth called borscht.



Giant chair on the A1 in Latvia



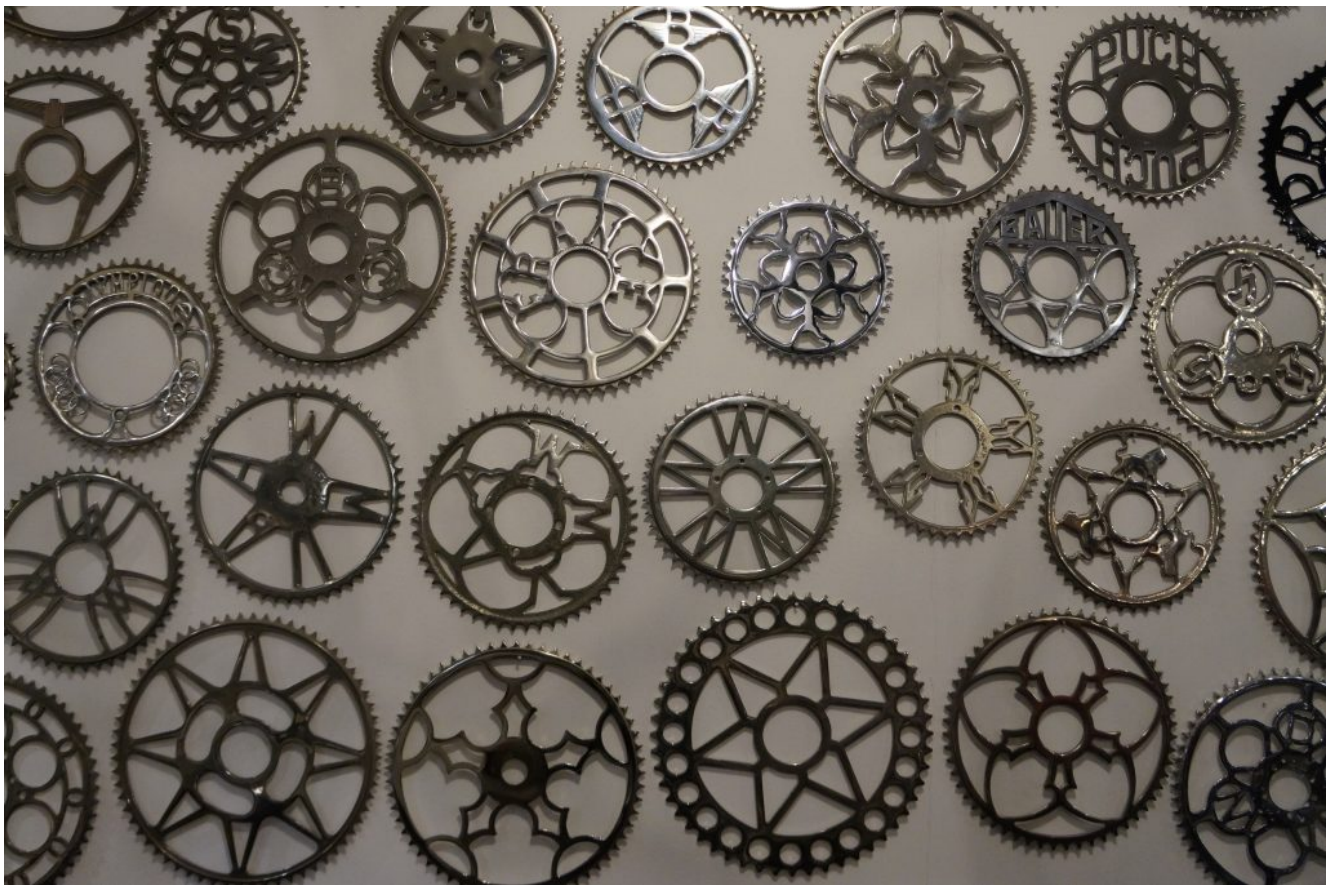
Orange tree on the A1 Latvia



Big tankard, tiny Marcus

That evening we make it to the town of Saulkrasti and stop at the tourist information for maps. Here we get a few good tips

for Riga, somewhere to camp for the night and also a recommendation to visit the local bicycle museum which is just down the road. This turns out to be an amazing collection of bikes in someone's shed behind a house containing several prop shaft driven Latvian bikes, a penny farthing with rope instead of tyres and hundreds of accessories and items of memorabilia. The chap who owns it all has spent 37 years collecting all the bikes and lovingly restoring them and to be fair he's done a fantastic job of it.



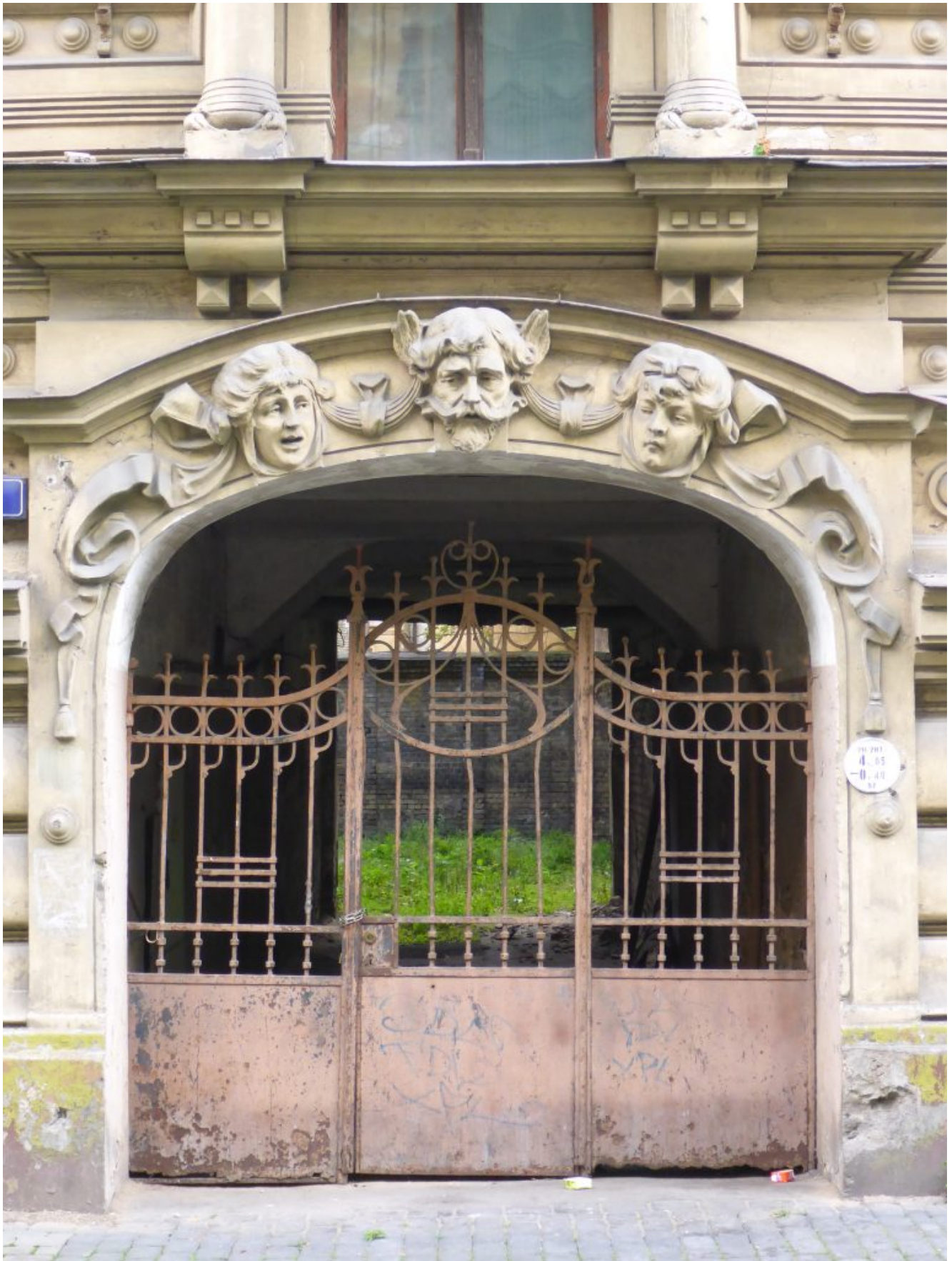


It's a short spin into Riga the next day and we have time to

investigate the Art Nouveau quarter with its elaborately decorated building facades. In fact a third of Riga is built in the Art Nouveau style so we see plenty more of it throughout the city.







While eating lunch in one of the many expansive parks we are interviewed by some students who ask us what typifies Latvia for us? Our answers are limited to what we've seen so far:

Beaches, forests, wooden houses, borscht. They are happy with all of these apart from borscht as apparently that's actually Czech. If they were to ask me now I'd add baking (Latvian biscuits and cakes are the finest we've had so far), knitting and folk dancing.



Freedom monument, Riga. Flanked by two further monuments to freedom and democracy: a McDonalds and a Costa Coffee.





Riga's finest dancing busker

Our hosts in Riga are Ruta and Gints both of whom enjoy short cycle tours and have a couple of spare rooms so are happy for people to stay who are riding through. Gints delights in serving us some 'Latvian National Drink': Black Balsam. When I first moved to Bristol my flatmate Rus had an 'Undrinkable drinks cabinet' and this surely deserves a place there. As well as Black Balsam, Riga has lots to offer and we're shown a lot of it on a free walking tour led by Philip. He takes us off the usual routes to give us a better feel for what the city is really like and some of its varied history. We are taken to central market, once the biggest covered market in Europe where anything and everything can be bought at bargain prices. Apparently it's popular with pick pockets too which was a bit concerning as the day before we'd left our bike locked up in a corner. When we got back to it everything was still in place but a passer by had told us we were lucky as by all rights our panniers should have been stripped off and sold for alcohol within minutes. We'd had further luck as the bike had also been parked below a popular pigeon roosting spot and they had left a few lucky droppings in strategic places including my saddle. Our thoughts on this are that the tandem is so big, cumbersome and unusual that it's not actually an obvious target for thieves but maybe in future we should be a little more cautious.

Central market is also a great place for lunch and we buy a selection of dishes in a cafe priced up by weight. For dessert we go for some cake and when I ask for a portion of some delicious looking apple sponge I'm told I can only buy the whole slab so I'm 'forced' to pay 1 euro for it, and 'forced' to eat the whole thing.





Central Market, Riga



Central Market, Riga



My cake's bigger than your cake

We have a look round the Occupation of Latvia museum but had been warned that it's not easy viewing. The Baltic States have

had a very rough history with the Nazis and the Soviets fighting over them like two dogs with a bone, some of the details are truly shocking so we're almost glad to be kicked out before we've finished looking round because they've decided to close an hour early.



The Blackheads House, Riga



The Blackheads house

After watching sunset from the top of the National Science Academy building (a tip from another Warm Showers contact, Marika) we end up in the Folkklubb ALA which is hugely entertaining and popular with both tourists and locals who go there for good hearty food, live music and lively dancing. But you need to know the moves so we stay on the sidelines. It's been one of our favourite cities so far and well worth a visit.



National Science Academy, Riga



Riga at Sunset



Sunset over Riga



Dusk in Riga

From Riga our route is now taking us into the western Kurzeme region of the country following guidance from Gints that should get us onto some good roads to show us rural Latvia. Then it's down into the third Baltic state, Lithuania. So far we haven't seen a single UK stag do.



Black Balsam