

# The Peloponnese

written by Marcus | 29 December, 2014



While travelling through Eastern Europe we've brushed up on a lot of our knowledge of modern history so have a much better idea of how all these countries have changed shape over the past decades. I'm not sure I'd be any more capable of remembering the date lines that Mr Symonds used to try and get us to learn back in junior school but in rough terms we've got a fair idea what has happened. Now we're in Greece it's time to think back to my Classics and Latin lessons with Mr Hooper as we've started to see some familiar names like Mycenea, Sparta and Argos cropping up on the map that until now only existed in my ancient history books.



### Friendly grasshopper

Back on the mainland after the ferry from Kefalonia and straight away we start to see brown signs on almost every road to indicate an ancient some-thing-other or a very important historical place-you-must-see. The country is full of artefacts, bits of column, statues, carvings, temples at every turn so it would take a while to stop and look at every single one. We've decided to pick Olympia to visit as fans of the modern interpretation of the Olympic Games it will be great to see where it all began 2,500 years ago.

On our way we stop at Lidl for supplies in Pyrgos. Make no mistake it's not Tesco that is taking over Europe it's the Germans as the big yellow and blue signs have been one of the few constants in almost all the countries we've been to so far. They're also a meeting place for anyone shopping on a budget so it's no surprise to find another couple of cycle tourists just coming out. Irma and Or have ridden from Spain

on bikes and with kit they've acquired for free and are travelling with barely any cash and aiming for Or's home country of Israel. What's more remarkable is that they also have another companion in the form of Bemba the dog who rides in an improvised trailer. Apparently the Alps had been particularly difficult for them through Bemba does get out and walk on the hills. Like everyone else they're heading across the Peloponnese then onto Crete but hope to hitch a lift on a fishing boat to save on the cost of the ferry. This sounds optimistic but if they've got this far then they must have confidence in their blagging abilities.



Or, Irma and Bemba

An hour after Pyrgos we pass a sign telling us it's 2km to Olympia, followed 100m later by another saying it's now 1km. The distances on Greek road signs seem to be measured with an accuracy of +/- 5km so after 2km it's no surprise that we're still riding up a hill with no sign of Olympia. What is

surprising is that the bike has started bouncing gently up and down at the back. This could be either a dodgy, undulating road surface or there's a problem with the wheel. It turns out to be the wheel as the tyre wall has torn and caused a bulge that could burst at any second. It's the cheap tyre that we bought as a temporary fix way back in Lithuania so to be fair it's done remarkably well to get this far but now it's beyond repair and we have to walk the remaining 2km into Olympia. It's not a big town but when we ask if there's anywhere to buy bike tyres we're directed down the road 'about 500m'. 1km later we're still walking and ask for directions at a petrol station where we're told there's a shop in another 1km. 1km later we flag down a cyclist who might have a better idea and he tells us the nearest place for bike parts is Pyrgos, now 18km away.



Dead tyre

It would be a tedious walk with the bike and we wouldn't get

there before the shops shut so I leave Kirsty to hide behind a church and get the tent set up and stick out my thumb for a lift. No joy after half an hour so I ask a nearby hotel to call a cab and in under an hour I'm back at the tent with a brand new tyre ready to fit. Adding in the taxi fare it's the most expensive cheap tyre I've had to buy but with it being a Monday most shops were shut so I had to get whatever was available there and then. Luckily the taxi driver had had a heavy right foot, knew where all the bike shops were and even lent me the cash to pay for the tyre until we passed a cash machine on the way back to Olympia. Another case of what could have been a major disaster in another location was just a bit of an inconvenience here.



The church has a tap alongside that could well be dispensing holy water so the next morning we fill up our bottles and hope it brings better luck. The site of Ancient Olympia is fascinating and we get the chance to race in the very first

Olympic stadium (Kirsty wins). There's no sign or mention of the velodrome though, or the sponsors enclosures or even the room that would have served as the volunteer's canteen but I expect these are all yet to be uncovered.



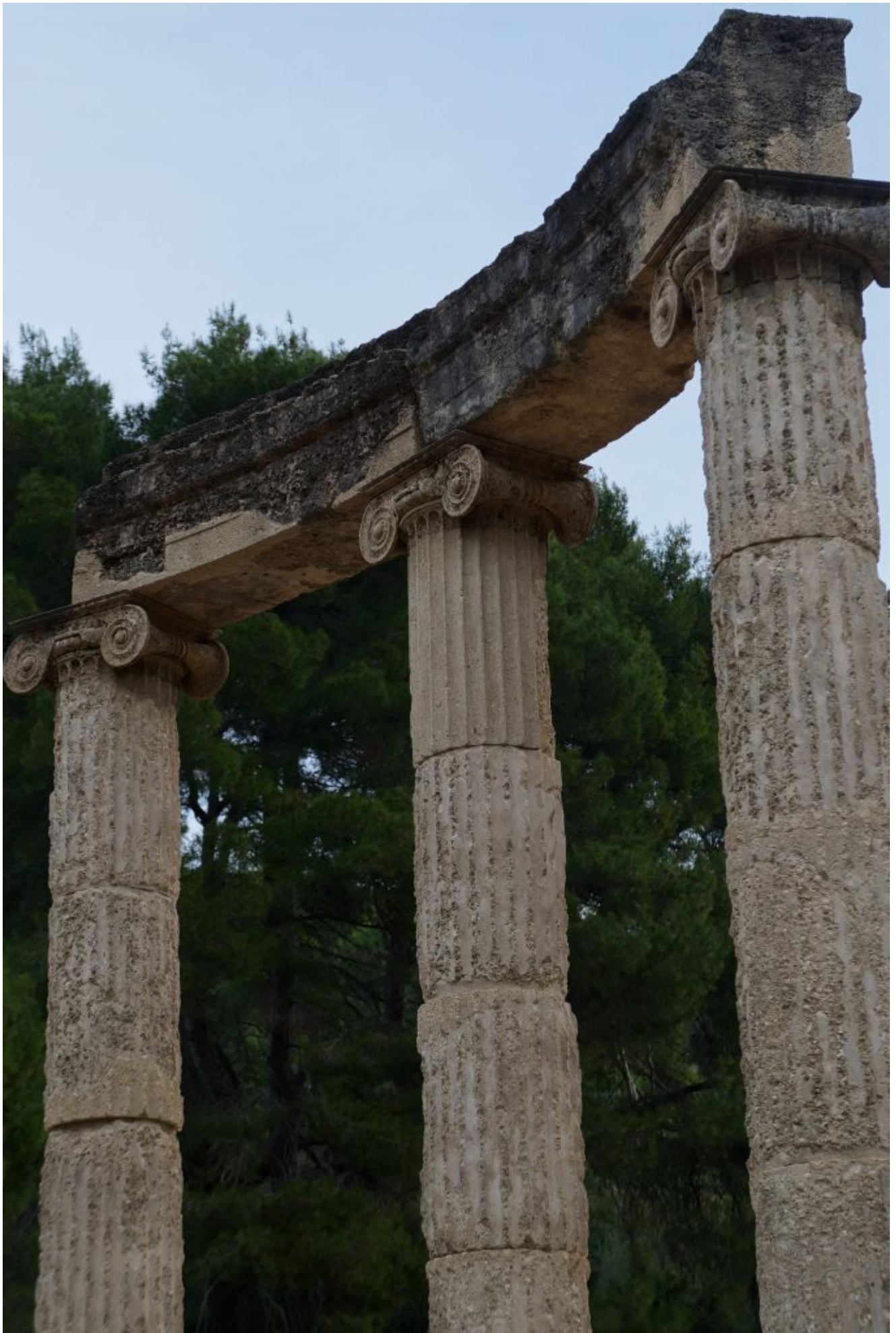
The original Olympic Stadium



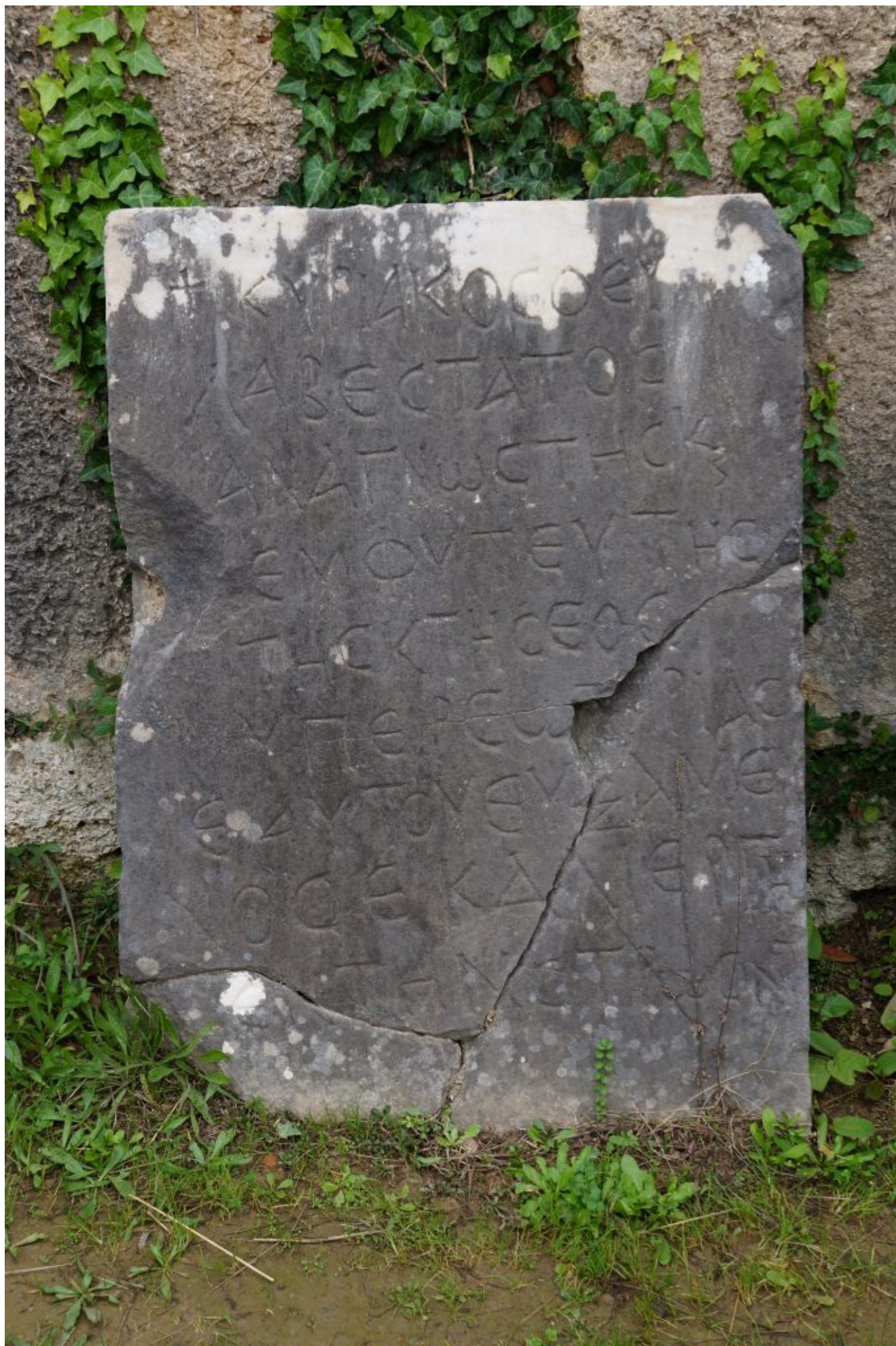
On your marks!



Ancient Olympia



Ancient Olympia



ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΟΕΥ  
ΧΑΒΕΤΑΤΟΕ  
ΑΝΑΤΝΩΕΤΗΚ  
ΕΜΟΝ-ΕΥ-ΗΟ  
ΤΗΚ-ΗΟΕΟ  
ΥΤΕΡΕΟ-ΗΟ  
ΕΥ-ΟΕΥ-ΗΟ  
ΥΟΕΚ-ΗΟ  
ΕΥ-ΗΟ

## Ancient Olympia



Museum of Olympia



Still some digging to be done



Museum of Olympia



Museum of Olympia

After lunch we bump into Irma, Or and Bemba who have taken a day to cover the 20km from Pyrgos so have a slightly more

sedate travelling pace than us.

Not far out of Olympia we set up camp in an orange orchard and gorge on freshly picked fruit. We're also becoming addicted to fresh sheeps yoghurt and greek honey with the honey inevitably being used on our porridge each morning too. But we must have made the gods angry as the rumble of thunder overnight and heavy rain indicate that Zeus is unhappy. He allows some respite with enough time to pack the tent in the morning before the rain starts again and carries on all day.



Angry gods, angry sea

We keep moving to keep warm and head back to the coast and follow it for 40km before turning inland again and into some rolling hills. It would have been very picturesque if it wasn't masked in grey clouds and yet more rain.



Sheltering at a church for lunch

Just before we stop to set up camp in an olive grove the rain stops and the sun comes out so we get to see the wonderful evening light on the mountains at last.



## Palm avenue

There's more of the wet stuff in the night but again it stops just long enough for us to get packed up in the morning and dash to the nearest petrol station with a convenient cafe attached. The sky looks very ominous and as we're due to climb quite high that day we decide to wait for the impending storm to pass before setting off again.

It proves a sensible decision as there's plenty of thunder and lightning accompanied by heavy rain for the next 2 hours and it would have been no fun being on the side of a mountain in those conditions. Unfortunately we've run out of cash and like a lot of places in Greece the cafe doesn't take cards so we have to sit in the corner and hope they won't mind. But the staff eventually feel sorry enough for us to bring us some tea on the house which is just what we need.

The storm passes and blue sky follows so we crack on with the

climb. It's steady for most of the way before we drop down to the town of Megalopolis. Not as impressive as it's name might suggest but a convenient spot for lunch and we watch some workers busy with a cherry picker hanging Christmas lights. This is the week before Christmas so they clearly don't like to get into the Christmas spirit quite as early as in the UK round here.





After the storm

There's more climbing after lunch and then we drop onto a plateau at just over 700m above sea level to find our highest camp spot to date.

In the morning the tent flap swings open like a frozen door. There's been a heavy frost and as the tent is sopping wet from the previous nights it was very cold inside and out. The condensation that drips from the ceiling, a common problem with Hilleberg tents, did little to help.



Frozen camp site



Frosty saddles



As any physicist will tell you, for every 100m of height gain the temperature drops by 0.5 – 1 degree so while it was a pleasant temperature lower down, up here it sank below zero

overnight. Thankfully as soon as the sun peeps over the mountains things warm up and dry off quickly. We've also got another climb to haul ourselves up which gets the blood pumping to all extremities.

Once over the top we get a great view of dense clouds sat just below us then we zoom down into them on our way to Tripolis, lunch stop then out the other side and inevitably more mountain roads.

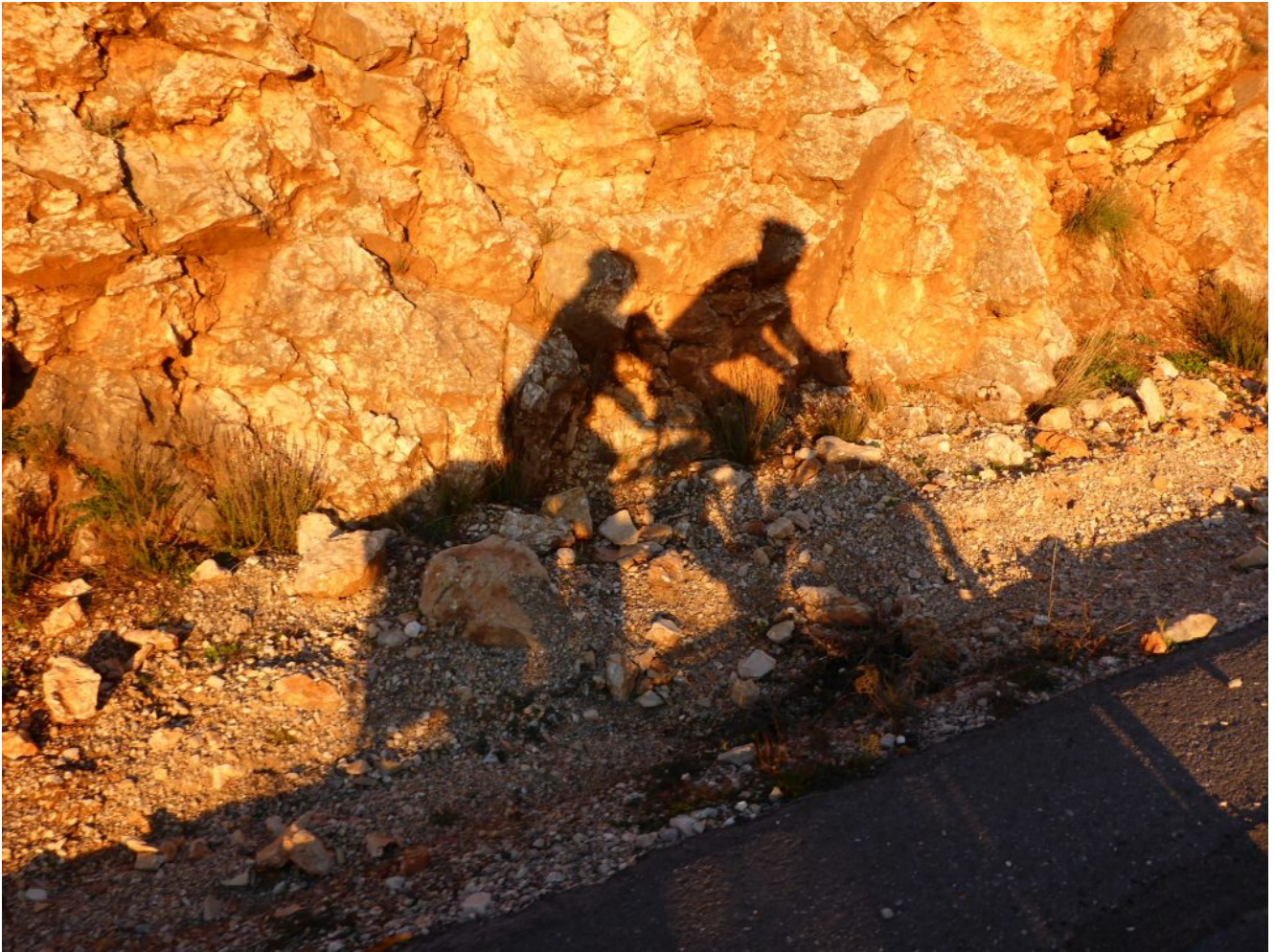


Above the clouds



Riding back into the hills





This time the huge rock cliff faces are being lit by the setting sun and we get treated to some amazing colours on all sides of the steep valley.



Sunset in the mountains





The road tops out at 800m and we're keen to lose as much altitude as possible this time before pitching the tent. It's a lovely swooping road at a shallow gradient with long corners allowing the brakes to stay off and the speed to pick up. At 50kph I often wonder what would happen if we punctured and the answer is that the back of the bike starts to squirm, it's hard to steer and all the brakes need to be applied to bring us to a controlled stop to avoid disappearing over the edge of the mountain. The brand new but cheap rear tyre has less puncture protection and has just proved it's not really designed for this sort of hardship. We're still over 500m above sea level but are conveniently next to a nice flat patch of grass so as the light is fading fast we decide to pitch up there and then fix the tyre in the morning.

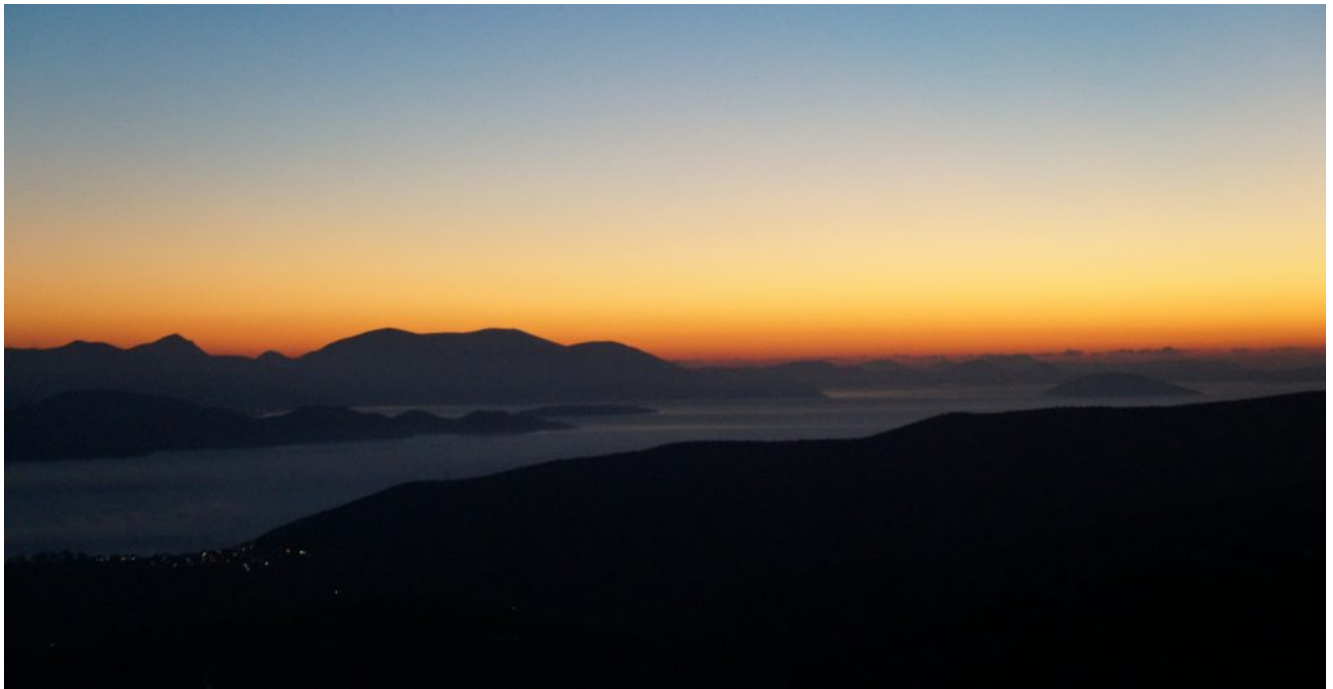
There are a few rocks lying around so it's entirely possible this is the site of some kind of ancient monument. I pick up what could well be the remains of a valuable artefact and use

it to knock in the pegs.



View of Argos from the tent

It's a much warmer evening than the previous night and in the morning while fixing the tyre I get to enjoy a glorious sunrise over the bay of Argos below. Annoyingly an important bolt that holds the cable for the drag brake goes missing amongst the stones, gorse bushes and goat droppings and despite a lengthy search it stays hidden.



Sunrise over the bay of Argos



Campsite near Argos at dawn



### Puncture repair with a view

With only the rim brakes to rely on, the descent is taken carefully which is fortunate as we pick up another puncture part way down, this time thanks to a rogue shard of glass. The front tyre has been fine which shows that Schwalbe Marathons are worth the extra cost.

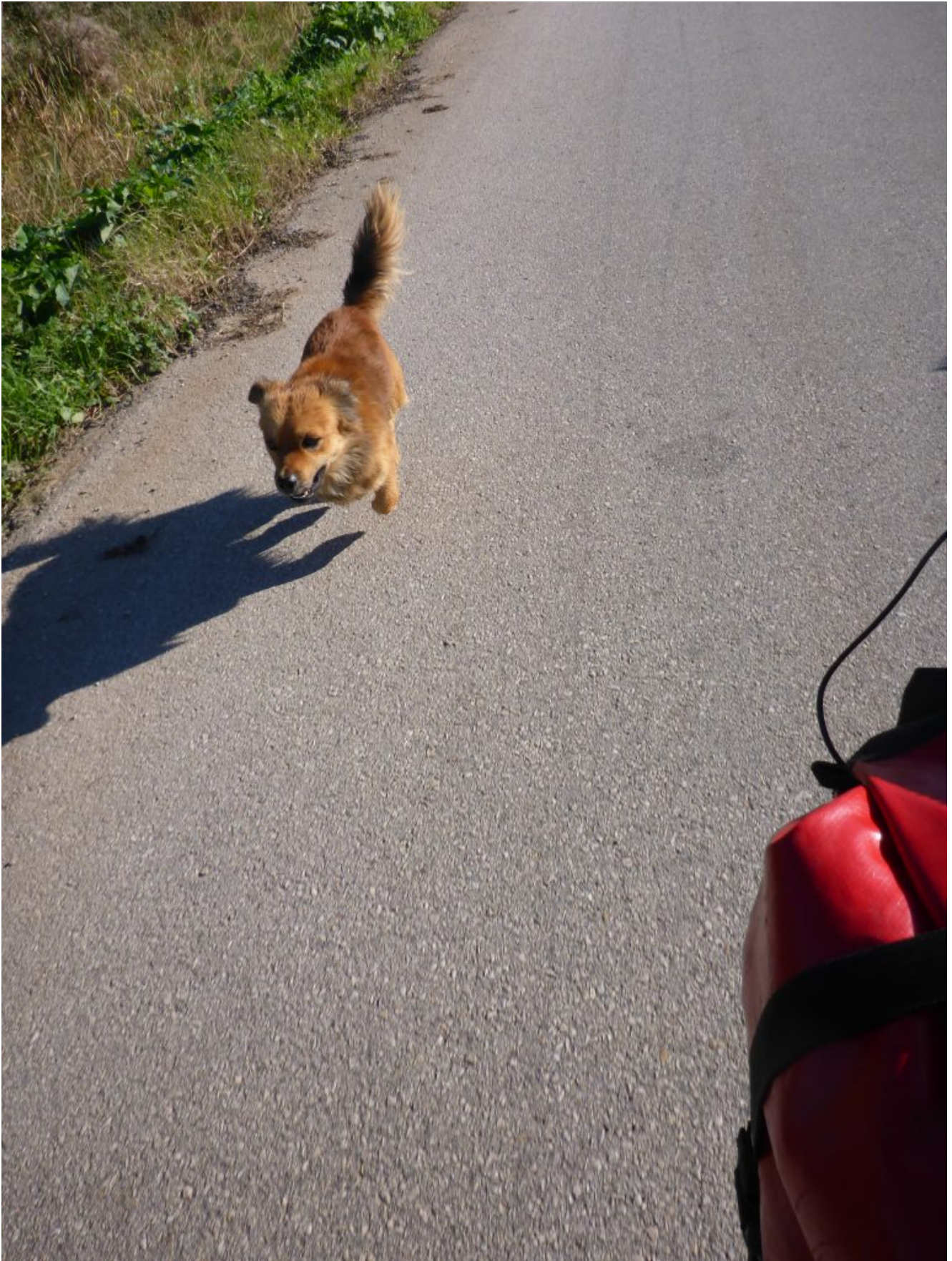


### Roadside Shrine

It gets fixed and this time we make it down to the sea and on to Argos to find a bike shop. The bolt we need for the drum brake is not a common bike part so my expectations of finding a replacement are low but 5 minutes after stopping at the very first shop we find the owner has dug out exactly what we need, fitted it and sent us on our way. You really can buy anything in Argos!



Heron in the bay of Argos



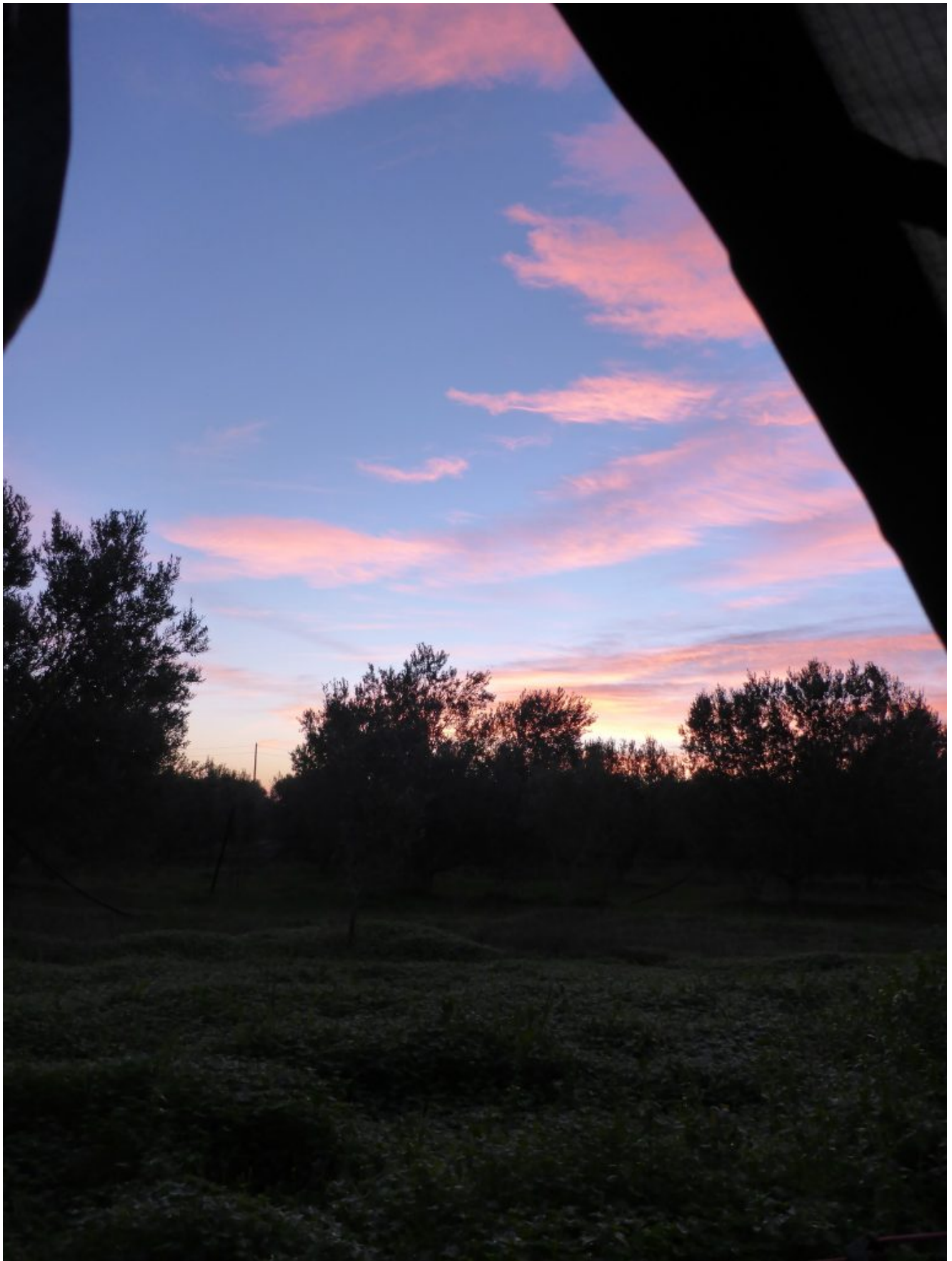
Chasing dog



After another short climb we're nearly out of the mountains and have a lovely long descent to stop at an olive grove for the night just outside Corinth. On the way down we call in at a petrol station for more fuel for the stove and the owner is very concerned that we are filling a bottle with unleaded and not water. Despite trying to explain that it's for cooking she just doesn't understand so I make a motorbike noise to add to the confusion while she looks for the engine on the bike.



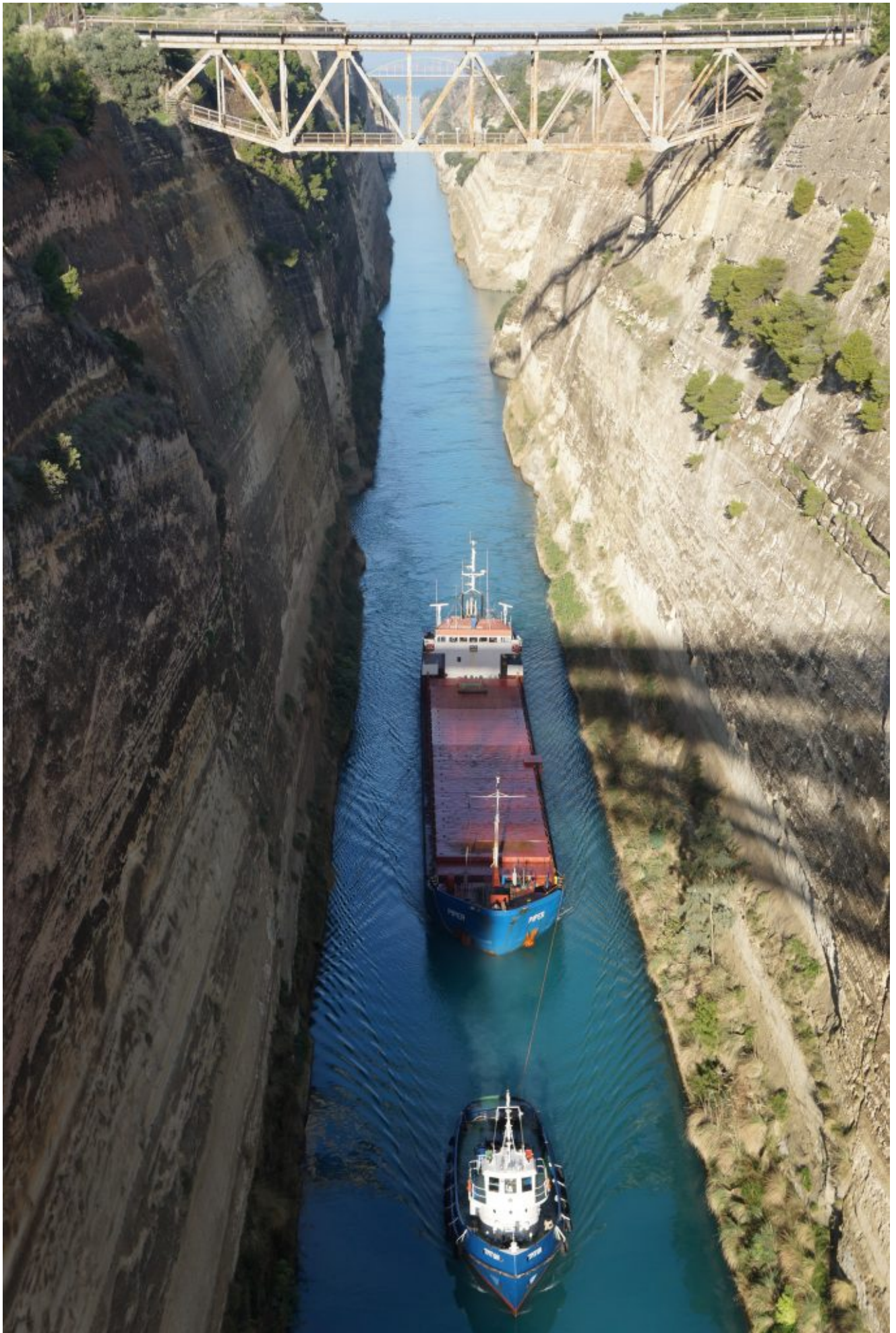
Acrocorinth Castle



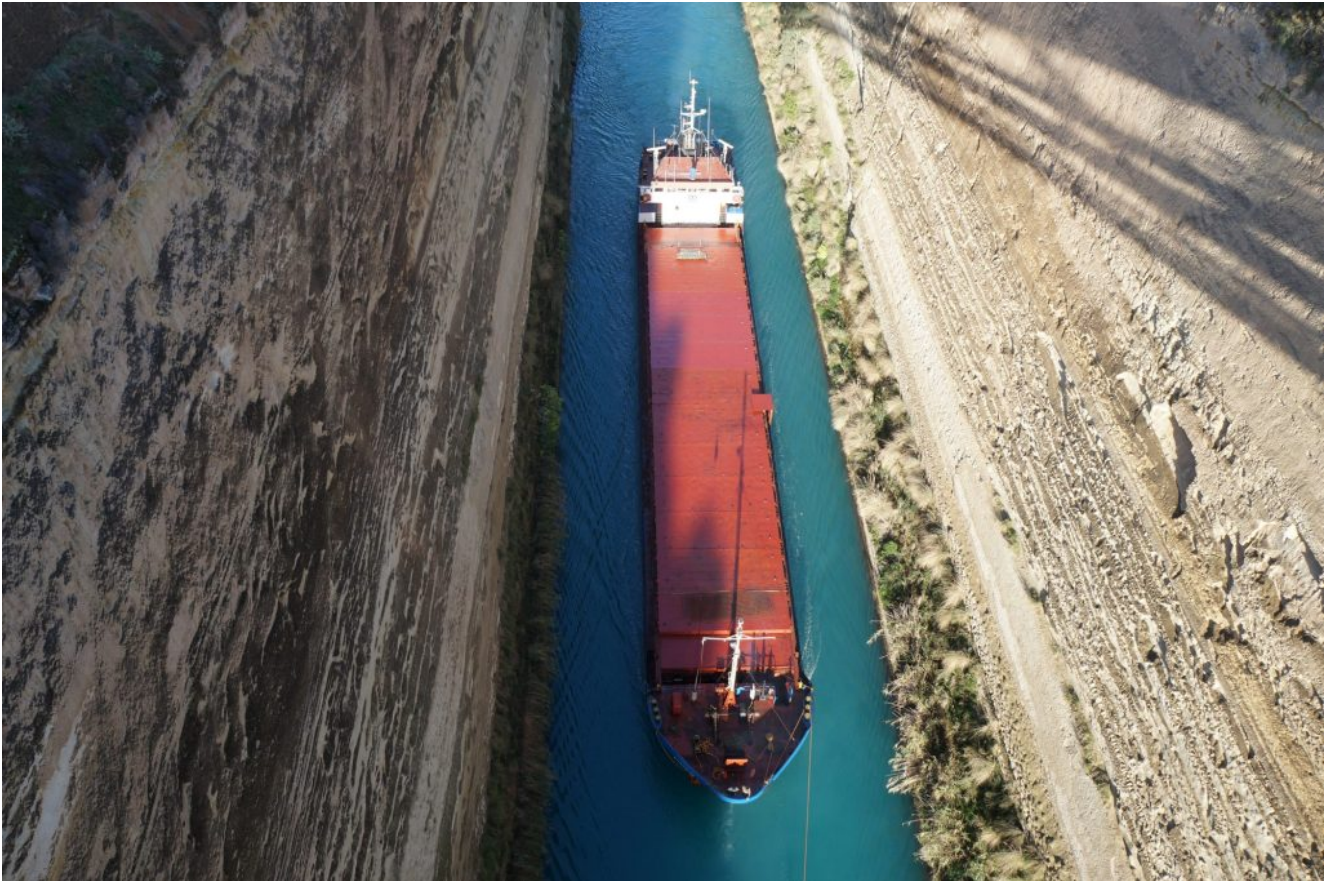
Sunset in the olive grove

The next day we cross the Corinth Canal which is a very impressive piece of engineering. The 6km passage through 90m

of rock was finished in 1893 but what's even more impressive is that the first 700m were dug in the 1st century with emperor Nero collecting the first basket of dirt. It was not completed though as they thought the sea was higher on one side than the other as the tides were at different times.



## Corinth Canal



## Corinth Canal

From Corinth we pass a few huge oil refineries and out in the bay there are several tankers waiting to offload their cargo. Our small road sticks to the coast with the main highway higher up the cliff to our left and we get some great views out towards the Saronic Gulf. It's a Sunday and there are lots of road cyclists out on club rides. Given it's over 20 degrees we're in short sleeves but most of the locals are dressed up in full winter gear, clearly feeling the 'cold'. At one point a small peloton comes past and we manage to latch on to the back for a couple of km but then our road turns right while they carry on straight on so we have to wave goodbye.



Tankers at Corinth



### Catching the Peloton

Our destination is the Port of Piraeus and to avoid the beginnings of the urban sprawl of Athens we decide to hop onto the island of Salamis with a ferry from there taking us stright into Pireaus. We roll down into the first harbour just as the ferry is lifting its ramp but they spot us just in time to lower it and allow us to ride straight on with perfect timing. The tent comes out at lunch time for some much needed drying out in the sunshine then we ride to the other side of the island to catch the next ferry into Piraeus.



Riding towards Piraeus



### Riding towards Piraeus

The final boat trip of the day is the overnight crossing to Crete but we have a couple of hours to kill until the 9pm departure time so we install ourselves in a cafe and dig out the kindles while munching on gyros kebabs and greek salad. While we sit there a man comes in trying to sell us enormous watches, phone chargers and fake Ray Bans which we politely decline. Half an hour later another chap turns up with a similar assortment of tat. By the time the fifth one comes round to bother us we're losing patience so politeness goes out the window.

Eventually it's time to board the ferry for the 10 hour crossing and as expected the boat is busy with lots of people either heading home or heading off on holiday for the Christmas break. We're looking forward to a few easy days on the island too though it's going to be an odd Christmas compared to usual.



No matter how much they dream about it, I doubt they'll be getting a white Christmas here

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# Merry Christmas!

written by Marcus | 29 December, 2014



Wishing everyone a fantastic Christmas, wherever you may be spending it.

Marcus & Kirsty

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## The Ionian Islands

written by Marcus | 29 December, 2014



We were told by Doerte way back in Lübeck that after travelling for four weeks you stop counting the number of weeks. She had learnt this while on a 3 month tour round Europe in a camper van. Apparently we're now into our 4th month on the road but it's only the number of each day in my diary that gives us any idea how long we've been away. It also takes a bit of thinking to work out what day of the week it is. Without the normal structure of five days work and two days rest there's not a lot to differentiate a Monday from a Sunday (7 days of work for us), apart from when we find the shops shut early on a Sunday when we really needed some food. But coming up in December are some important dates which need some planning to be in a suitable place on the right day. First it's Kirsty's birthday, then mine, then of course Christmas day before we hit New Year's Eve. We've decided that for all four we'll be on a different Greek island.



## Sarandë

From Sarandë we catch a hydrofoil over to Corfu. This is exciting as hydrofoils feel a bit like flying on water but also because the tandem doesn't fit fully into the cargo bay and half the bike is hanging over one of the 'wings'. We keep a nervous eye on the view from the window in case a back wheel comes past.



The Flying Dolphin hydrofoil



Tandem on the Hydrofoil (just)

But we all arrive safely at the other end and get deposited onto the dock at Corfu Town (Kerkira) just as a few sprinklings of rain start to fall. Corfu is one of the greenest of the Greek islands and as any Irishman will tell you, you don't get a green island without a bit of rain.

We stop for a coffee and to work out where to stay that night but there seems to be a mistake with the bill. It's six times more than we'd been used to paying for the last few weeks. Granted we get at least six times more than the tiny cups of thick black Turkish coffee we'd been getting since Serbia but even so we're slightly shocked. Isn't Greece supposed to be recovering from near financial ruin? How can people afford these prices? In a country where they don't even have a sewerage system that can handle toilet paper it's surprisingly expensive.



## Corfu Town

But it's the same in the supermarkets and also when we try to find a hotel, it's all several times more expensive than anywhere this side of Helsinki. But the next day is Kirsty's birthday so after some haggling we secure a room, grab some dinner and enjoy avoiding a night under canvas in a thunderstorm as a special birthday treat.



## Corfu Town

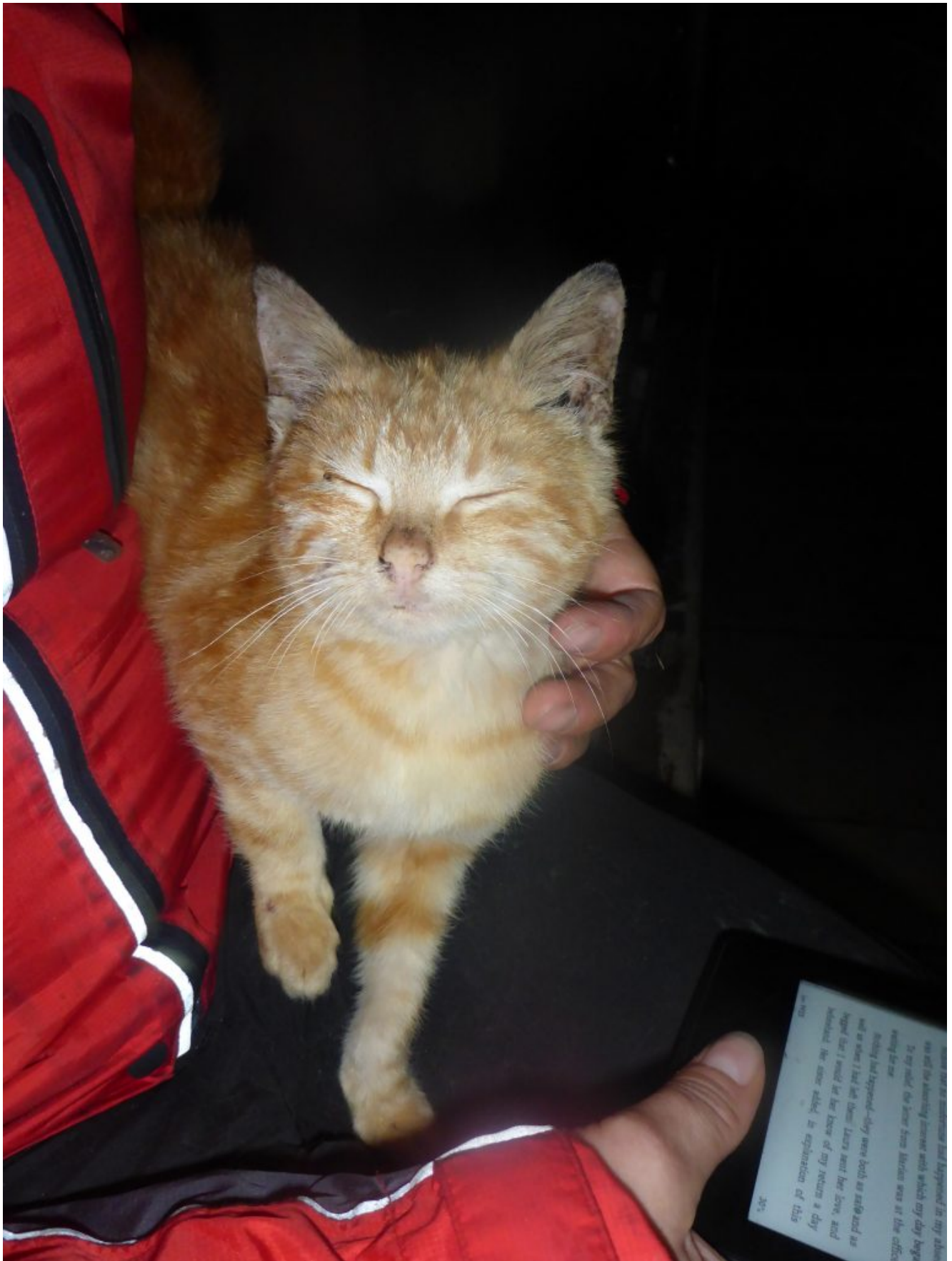
The rain continues the next day but we persevere with looking round the narrow streets of the old part of Corfu Town, which is all very nice even when soggy. It's the kind of day that would be best spent on a sofa with a couple of good films to watch but our Couchsurfing requests were a bit last minute and went unanswered. Instead we hide in McDonalds nursing a coffee and making use of their WiFi for a while.



## Corfu Town

We eventually return to the hotel to collect our kit and ride out north to look for somewhere peaceful to camp. But Corfu is

an island that knows how to make money from its assets and so almost every inch of coastline that's easily accessible seems to be occupied by a hotel, apartments or a bar owned by either Harry or Jimmy. These two seem to have done very well for themselves. Luckily most of these are sat dormant as the island is largely in hibernation at this time of year so we sneak into one of Jimmy's beach bars that has it's own waterside lawn and pitch the tent. The first of my gifts to Kirsty is a jar of Nutella and the second is a small ginger kitten that turns up during our dinner and curls up on her lap. We imaginatively christen him Stavros. All planned of course and he makes the birthday girl very happy.



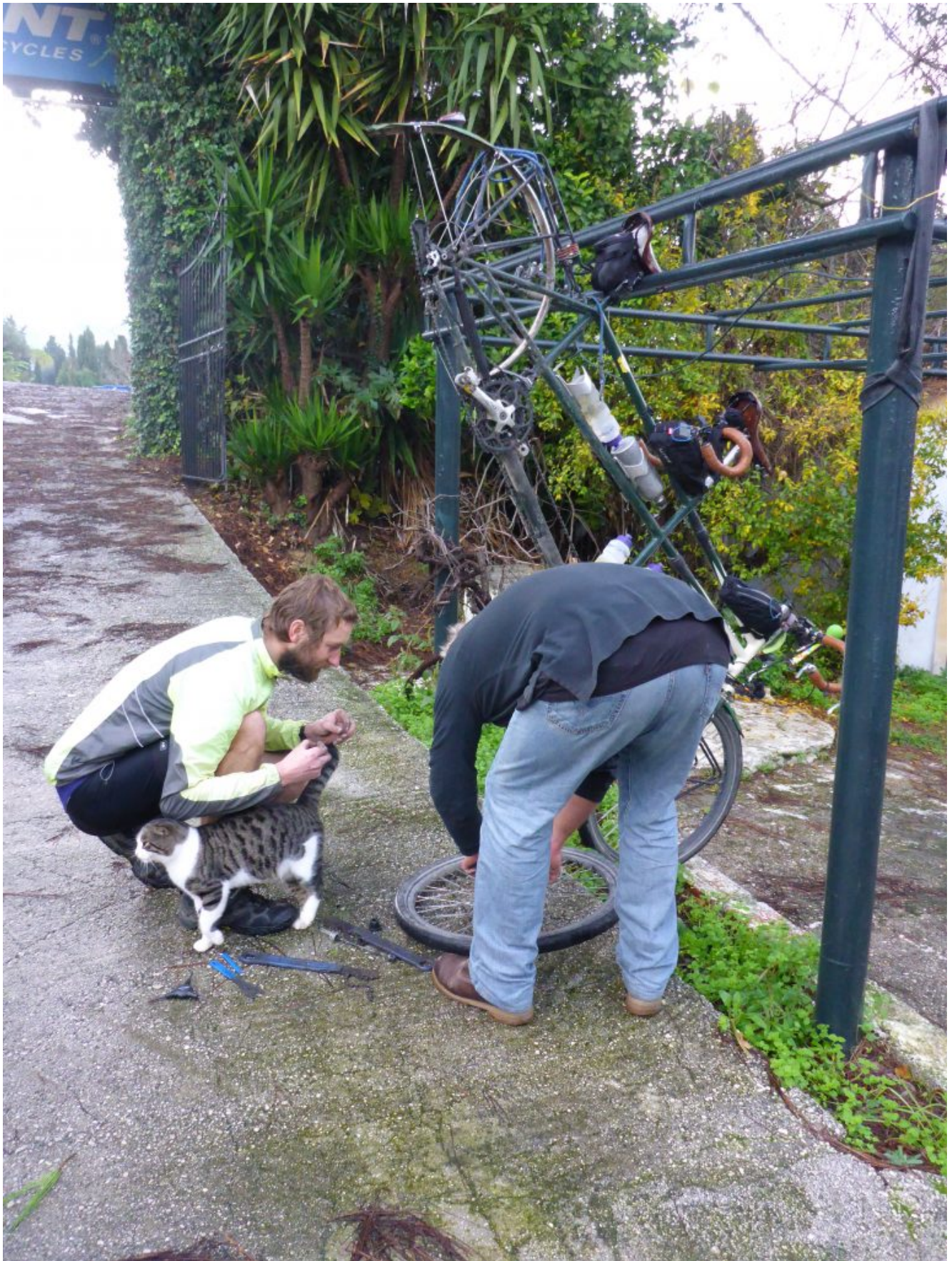
Happy Stavros



Happy Kirsty

It's a mountainous island with the biggest hills sat at the north end which is where we are heading. On the way the rear

hub needs a bit of adjustment again and by sheer luck we turn up at Corfu Mountain Bikes at the same time that the owner has called in to feed the cat. The shop should be closed for the winter but he's happy to let us use a few tools to get it sorted out and even buys us a coffee.



Hub maintenance with help from cat



## Corfu coast road

Back on the road we work our way up and round the coast road that hugs the cliffs. Where there aren't buildings there is dense vegetation and fruit trees are laden with oranges, lemons and mandarins. We're again reminded why everything grows so well when another thunderstorm hits while we shelter under a small canopy next to an artist's studio.



Raining and pouring



The rain has left the ground extremely boggy so a boat would be a better bet rather than a tent that evening. After a bit of searching for somewhere dry we chance upon an old beachside house on the north coast that is at the early stages of being renovated. It's a great spot and a nice solid shelter so we trudge down the muddy track to the front door (no door) set up the bed on the floor (no flooring) and watch the lightning over the mountains in Albania back on the mainland through the windows (no windows).



Beachside accomodation



Beachside accommodation, Roda



## Storms over Albania

The next couple of days mainly involve climbing sharply up from sea level, getting a great view, then plunging down

through ghost-town like beach resorts before winching back up again. The rain and thunder come and go but it's warm enough not to matter too much. We suspect it's much more preferable than being here in the summer when the island must be infested with tourists on scooters as there are dozens of hire centres. The 40 degree heat at that time of year would also make the riding much tougher.





Agios Georgios



Earning a view





Looking down to Palaiokastritsa

In the centre of the island we catch a glimpse of an area that is not devoted to serving tourists with several sheep farms and some orchards, but judging by the state of the houses it looks to be far less profitable than the tourist trade. How these communities afford to buy their groceries is hard to understand.

On our last evening on the island we stop to buy some fruit from a van parked by the side of the road and get our bag of fresh oranges and kiwi fruit bought for us by another friendly punter. We spend the night high on a hill next to Kaisers Throne overlooking the rest of the island with a couple of cats for company.



Sheltering for a soggy sunset



Looking towards north Corfu



## Night time view over Corfu

In the morning a glove thief pays us a visit. He would have got away with it too if he hadn't been caught red-mouthed trying to take the second one out of my helmet which was left on the ground. After an extensive search of the area we can't find the first glove so the thief gets a scolding which of course he won't understand being a Greek dog. There's nothing for it but to put up with wearing my winter gloves for the next few days until we can find a bike shop.



Looking towards South Corfu



## Kaisers Throne

On our way to the ferry port of Lefiniki we call into a local distillery to buy the island's speciality: kumquat liqueur. It's not quite a single malt but should be a nice little throat warmer in the evenings.

It's a 90 minute boat trip back to the mainland and from the deck we can see that the road up ahead doesn't look much flatter with mountains looming along the coast in all directions. The colours are also browns and reds so we it looks like we may have a drier day or two ahead than on the lush, green, rain soaked Corfu. In the evening we get some puppies for company who are being nursed by an enthusiastic mother under a tree in a layby but have run out of Greek names to give them.



Igoumenitsa



### Layby puppies

Despite the size of the mountains when we start heading south the next morning we find the road is much easier than Corfu with gradients in single figures and our speed (mostly) in double figures. We get some great views along the coast and back inland towards the bigger hills and thankfully it's warm and dry day so the jackets stay off but my hands get sweaty.





Our destination that day is Preveza and as we approach the town we spot some perfect camp spots alongside a huge and empty beach but without food and water yet we're not able to

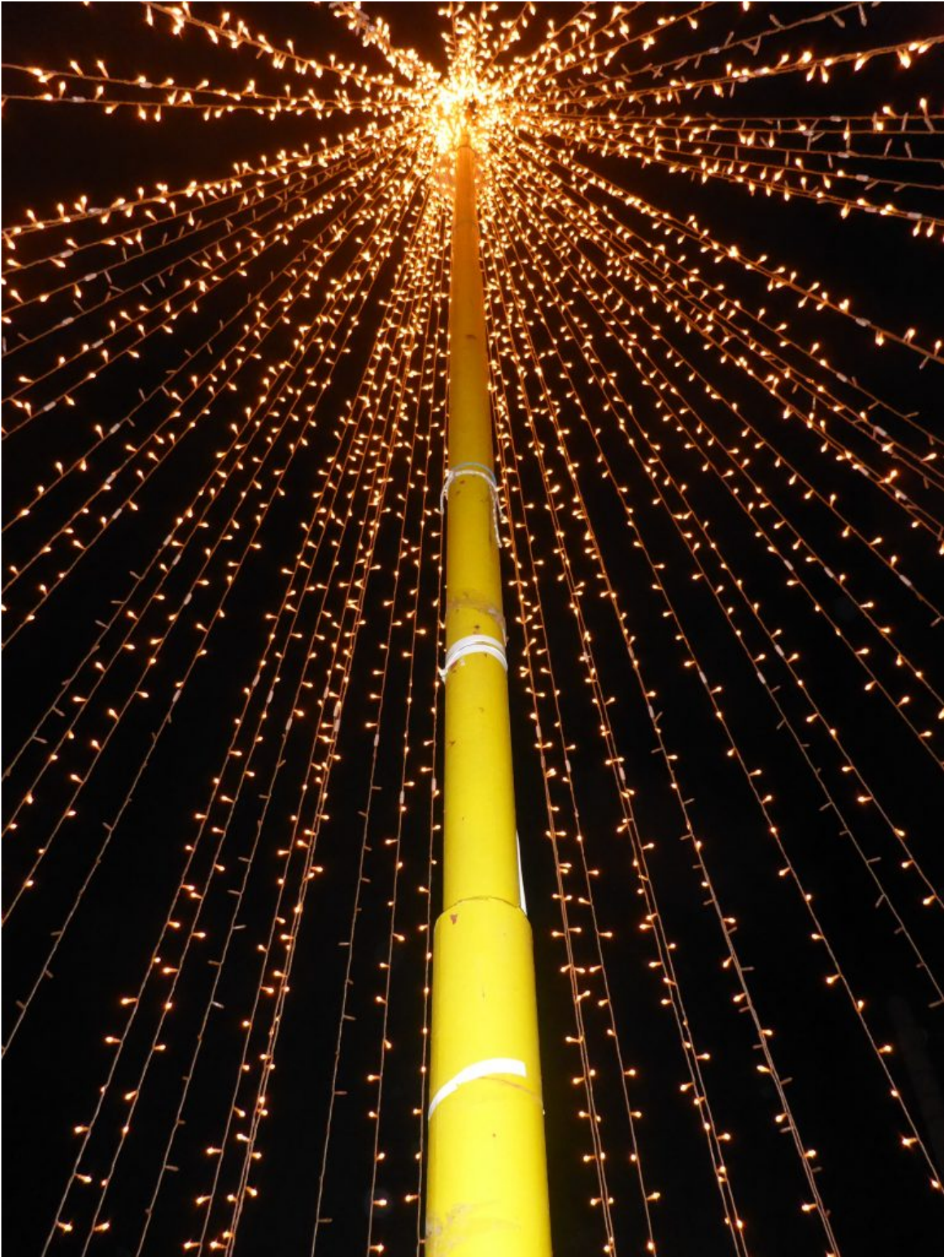
stop. This is often the way and works the same for the best picnic spots as you always pass them at the wrong time of day. In the end it doesn't matter as a last minute Couch Surfing request has been answered by Tassos and he's happy to host us for the night right in the middle of the town.



Tassos, our host in Preveza

Along with a spare room Tassos has a restaurant where he treats us to some very tasty mezze. The only drawback is that we have to put up with having to watch 22 men with extraordinary haircuts chasing a football on the TV (Olympiakos 4 – Malmo 2). A few of Tassos' friends have also been invited but no-one seems interested in the game and instead they have a heated and high volume discussion about politics. Tassos gives us a brief overview as to what the conversation is about which is to do with the upcoming elections and who is the most suitable out of a selection of mostly unsuitable candidates. Everyone is finding it tough and

the higher cost of living of taking its toll. They also have to put up with some over zealous police who have started enforcing laws like having to wear a helmet on a scooter and not smoking in public places which Tassos considers to be 'ridiculous' and are also largely ignored by just about everyone.



Christmas lights, Preveza

Preveza is another town that comes alive in the summer when it becomes a mecca for sailors from around the world. But even in

December there is enough going on in the streets outside our window all night to make sure we don't get much sleep. It seems the Greeks prefer to stay up late and catch up on their sleep during the afternoon siesta when a lot of the smaller shops will be shut.

The lack of sleep along with the ill effects of a mysterious green sludge that has been growing in our water bottles mean that Kirsty needs a bit more rest but we don't have much to do the next day. I'd suffered on Corfu with a dodgy stomach too, so after a wander round the town we give the bottles a long overdue scrub and saddle up again for a short ride to the island of Lefkada. However to get there we have to negotiate a subsea tunnel that runs underneath the entrance to the huge Ambracian Gulf that sits next to Preveza.

Some research had told us that you can't cycle through this tunnel even though it's only 1500m long. We'd also found reports of some cyclists getting charged a fortune to take a taxi through it, while another had simply turned up and played innocent and then been carried through in a pick-up by the tunnel operatives. The latter seemed preferable so we made for the tunnel entrance and nearly began the descent down underground, but suddenly there were red lights in front of us so we pulled up with a queue of traffic behind us. We waited for a short while then a truck arrived with flashing orange lights and a man jumped out waving his finger saying 'no bikes in the tunnel'. He instructed us to wait for 10 minutes in a layby and someone would come and get us. Low and behold a pickup turned up and after some shaking of heads when they see the size of the tandem it gets loaded and we're driven through to the other side. This is actually all part of the service that they offer but they don't like to advertise it as it's clearly a pain. For us it saves an extra 100km of riding around the bay to get to Lefkada which would be a much bigger pain.



Getting a lift through the sub-sea tunnel

Once on our way again we are joined by a chap from Norfolk who now lives on Lefkada and is going for a spin on a shiny carbon road bike. He pulls alongside for a brief chat and tells us how he once rode back to the UK in 11 days on the same bike with nothing but a credit card in his back pocket. He admits it was a bit stupid and we'd agree as he must have missed a lot on the way.



The causeway to Lefkada



## Lefkada Marina

There are quite a few ex-pats living round here who have been drawn to the area by the warmer climate and reliable wind conditions and after a night on the top of the island of Lefkada we're off to stay with a couple more: Joe and Karen who have been living in Vasiliki for 18 years now with Joe working for a sailing holiday company and Karen as a yoga instructor. We were put in touch by a mutual friend who had also worked with boats on Lefkada and also ridden back to the UK several years ago. In fact Quinty and Rona's epic ride which included climbing over the alps in the middle of winter, has been an inspiration for us. We've decided not to follow Quinty's advice of carrying a crowbar to fend off unfriendly dogs though.



### Dockside in Nydri, Lefkada

The weather is a bit British on our way down to Vasiliki, which sits at the south of this small island and we get a good soaking right at the top of the big hill before dropping back down to the sea. But once we're there we're welcomed in to their huge house overlooking the bay. Joe admits that he's actually house sitting for the owner who only uses it for a few weeks of the year. It's a chance for us to wash just about everything we own which is unfortunate for Joe, Karen and their son Harry as they have to eat dinner with me in a pair of tights and a t-shirt. Kirsty dresses properly and is resplendent in her 'going out' skirt (and a t-shirt).



Cyclist tan. Or maybe she just needs a shower.



Joe, Karen and Harry, our fantastic hosts in Vasiliki.

For anyone with a passing interest in wind-powered water sports Vasiliki is one of the top locations in the world so it almost seems a shame that we have to catch a ferry the next day rather than a yacht. Perhaps once day we'll return and join one of Joe's sailing holidays. I don't think they'll be leaving anytime soon and who can blame them.



Another ferry crossing

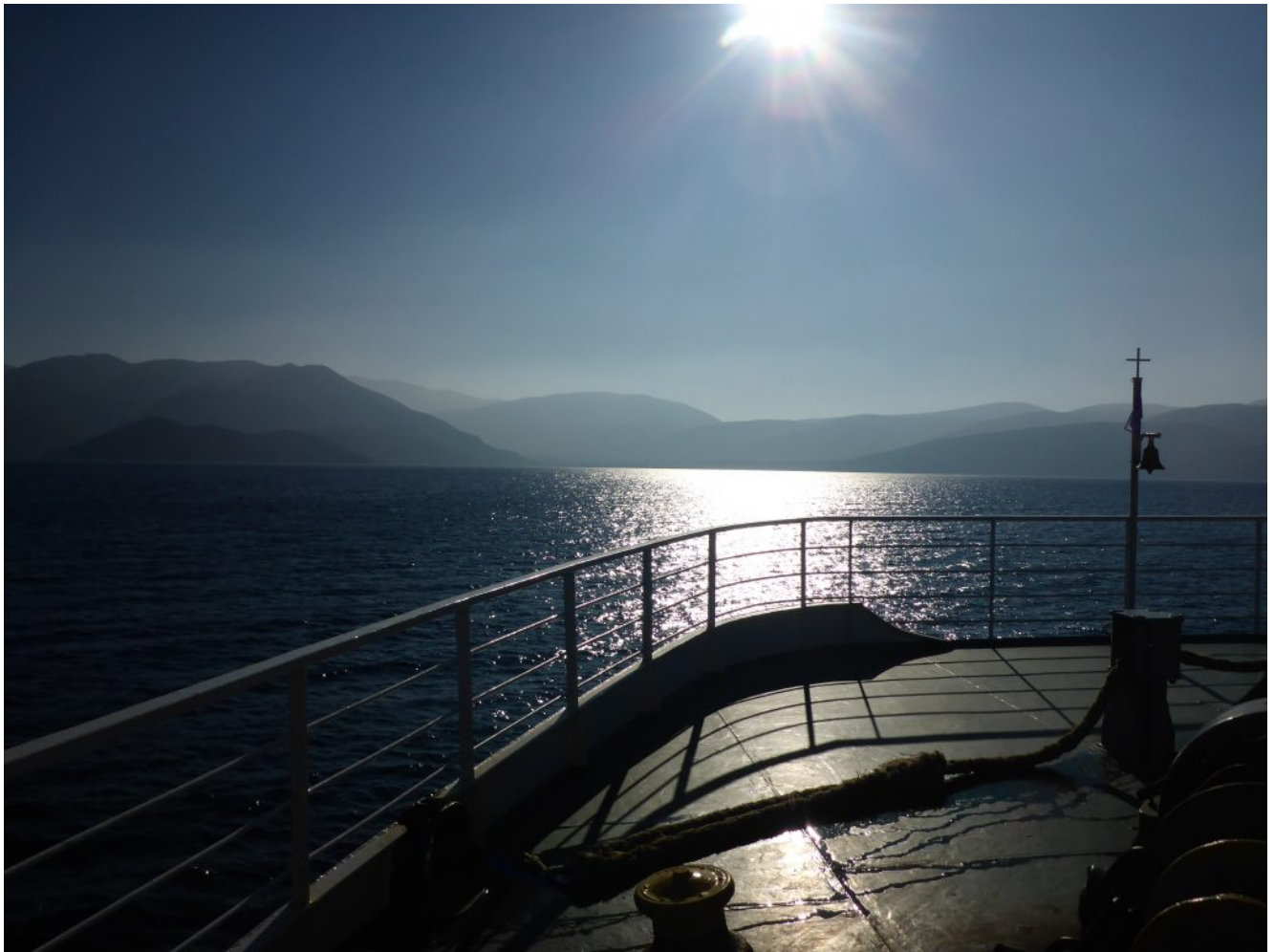


## Vasiliki

The ferry takes us onto our next island of Kefalonia after a quick stop at Ithica. For fans of the ancient classics Ithica is where Homer's *Odyssey* was set. Kefalonia also has some literary connections as it was the setting for Captain Corelli's *Mandolin*. On the boat we meet a French couple who are seven months into a year long trip in a camper van. They are heading east after the islands and plan to cross the Peloponnese to get to Crete for Christmas. We also meet Rita and Mario who rolled onto the ferry just before it weighed anchor. They'd ridden from Switzerland and also plan to be on the road for a year but this is one of many big trips they've completed. They have been bitten badly by the travel bug and don't work for more than 5 years before heading off on another big adventure. This is a life-long lifestyle for them.



Kefalonia





## Arriving at Sami

We decide to join Rita and Mario for the evening and after we've all stocked up with food and water in Sami we venture off up the coast to find a camp spot made for two tents. And we find the perfect location just a pebble's throw from the sea though Rita and Mario are nervous about it as it's clearly visible from the road. Their preferred camp spots are usually well hidden and at least 50m into 'the bush' so we concede by letting them hide their small tent behind our dark green mansion.



Convoy! with Rita and Mario



The sea is invitingly tepid and clear so even Kirsty gets in for a dip. Then it's time for supper, a few swigs of kumquat liqueur and star gazing to round off a very pleasant evening.



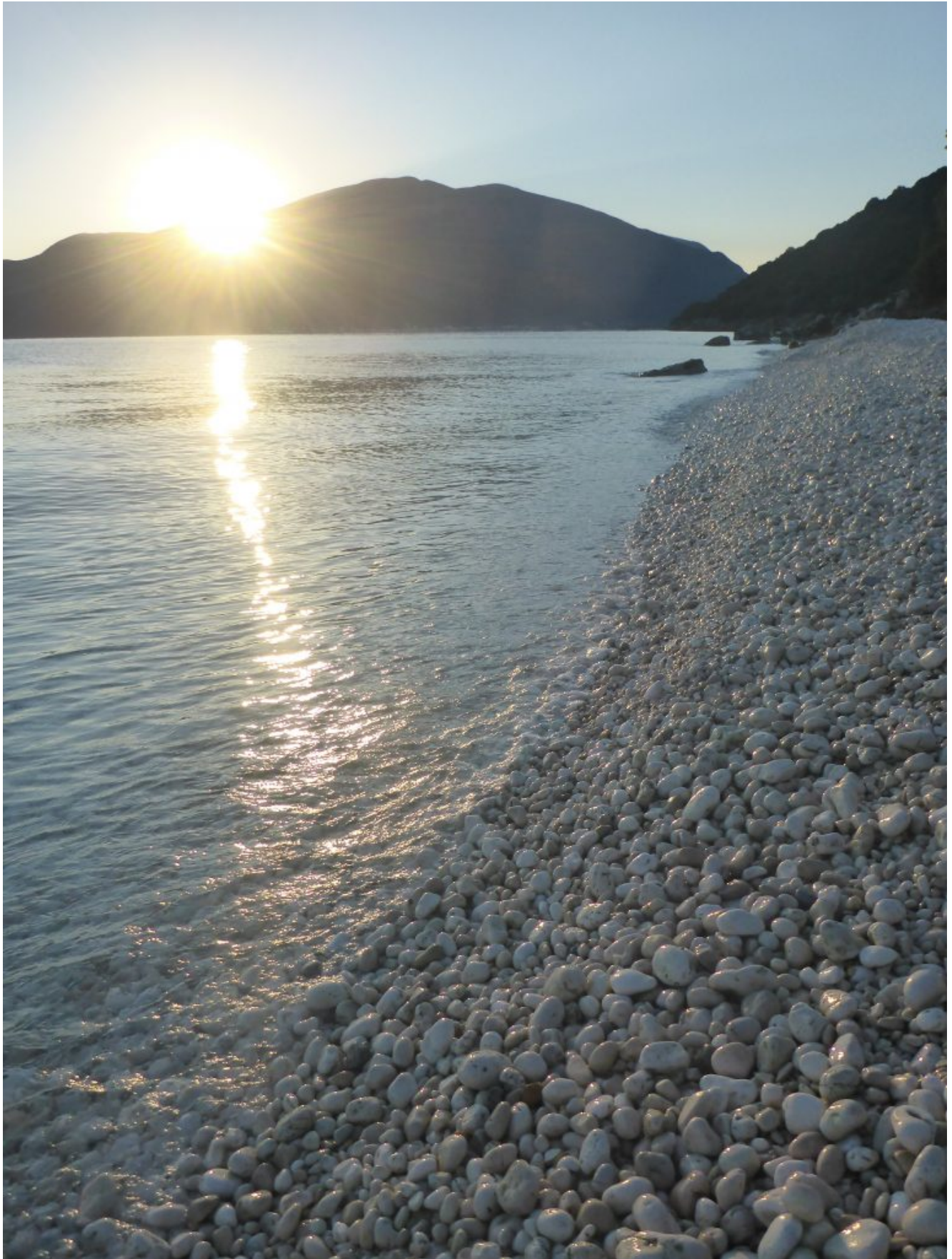
### Evening swim on Kefalonia

I get a solo performance of Happy Birthday in the morning from Kirsty and it looks like I might have a bit more luck with the weather than she did for hers. It's Mario's birthday the day after and Rita's on the 28th so we're all December babies.

After a leisurely start and a stunning sunrise we discuss our plans and when we suggest that we're heading north Mario and Rita say they're going south. Maybe we enjoyed the previous evening more than they did. They plan to ride across the Peloponnese and then onto Crete after Kefalonia but are spending more time off the bikes than us as they like to hike as much as bike.



Birthday beach breakfast



The ride that morning is mostly uphill but the sunshine and views mean that we hardly notice the effort. The road takes us up to the north east of the island so we get views over to

Ithica then back to Lefkada before rounding onto the west coast where we get to look down on to the castle at Assos as we drop down a ladder of steep hairpins.







Looking across to Ithica



Tandem selfie

There are goats with their kids on the road on one of these corners and we chase them over the side only to meet them again at the next hairpin further down so they have to scarper all over again.



Assos



Goats on the road!

From Assos we get to enjoy a glorious stretch of road that sits on the cliff side and with a still, calm, bright blue sea to our right. The road is closed as there is work going on to secure the rock face but we get waved through by the workmen and have the tarmac to ourselves. Kirsty has pulled out all the stops to make this a birthday to remember and I feel a bit guilty about the soggy day that she had had on Corfu. Hopefully this will do for both of us.



The coastline at Assos



Riding the coast road from Assos



Securing the rocks. Apparently it was safe for us to ride past.

After a stop for lunch of a meat feast mezze we keep working our way round the coast and onto the west side of the island

and eventually to Lixouri in time for a drink. I can only wonder where we'll be for our birthdays next year.



Riding to the south west of Kefalonia

The next day is a double ferry day as we cross from Lixouri to Argostoli first thing, passing some rowers on the way. A pretty good place to train by our reckoning, certainly compared to the Bristol docks. It's then a 40km ride round the south of the island which seems a lot more densely populated than the north end. We drop into the port of Poros at lunchtime and it's not long to wait before we board the boat back to the mainland.



Rowing at Argostoli



Valerianos



### Gorge before Poros

With the Ionian islands and our birthdays behind us we're thinking about the next big day in December. We've got a bit of time before Father Christmas does his rounds so the plan from here is to cross the mountains of the Peloponnese then catch a boat to Crete from Piraeus. Let's hope there's still room on the boat with all the other campers and cyclists heading that way!



Merry Christmas! Lixouri

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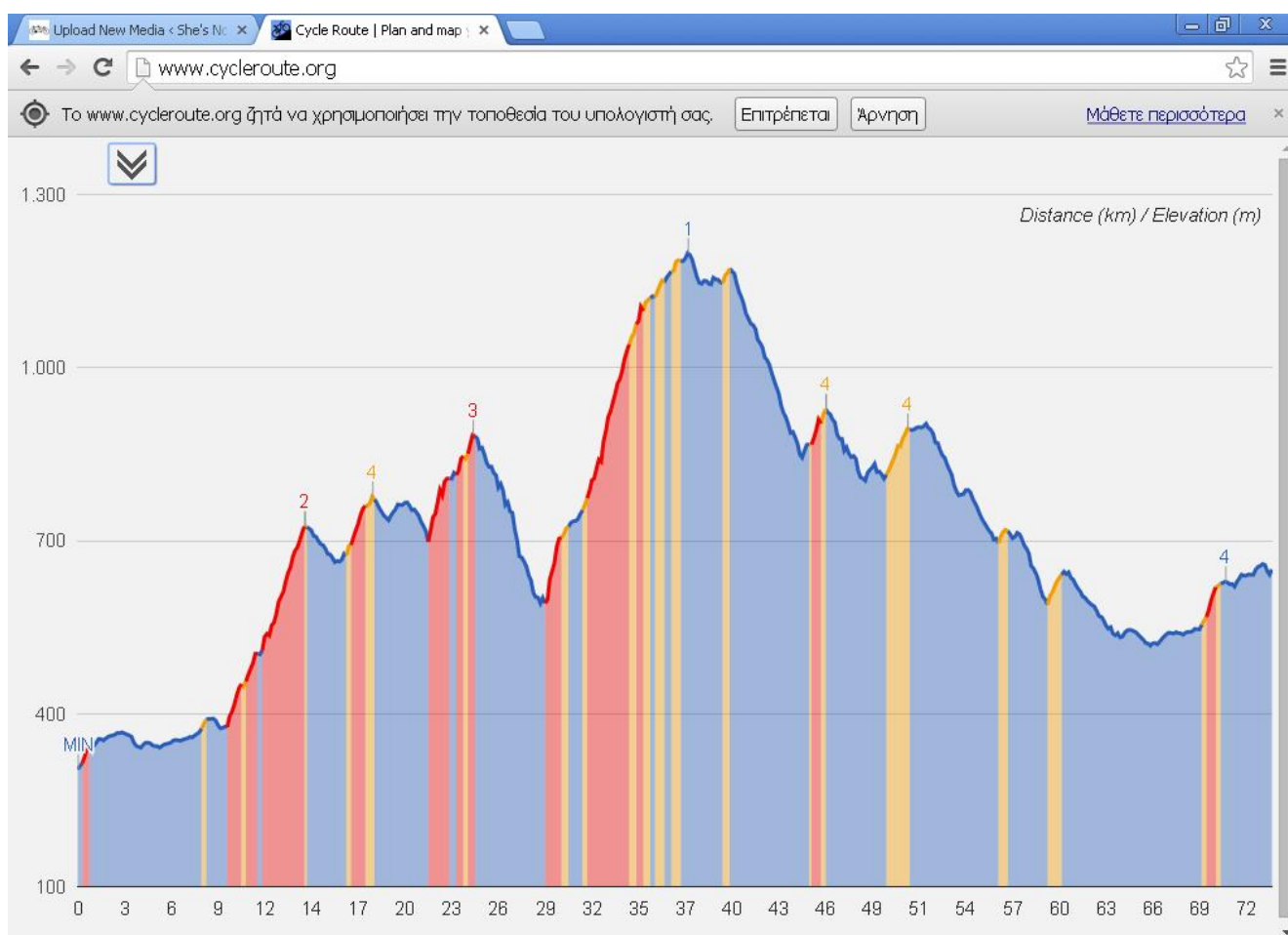
# Albania and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania

written by Marcus | 29 December, 2014



At some stage I'll write a review for the various apps and websites that we've been using so far during our trip as there are so many clever tools that have been invaluable to us. Sometimes getting a signal for free WiFi can be a bit too much of a distraction as it's easy to lose an hour catching up on not much in particular but overall travelling in the age of the smartphone makes life a whole lot easier. One site in particular has become our planning tool of choice now that the landscape is becoming a bit lumpier and that's Cyclroute.org. This is a very straightforward mapping tool that allows you to

ask the way from A to B and then picks a suitable cycling route for you. Plenty of other sites do the same but this one is very simple and crucially includes an elevation profile for the route too. Suddenly the 120km from A to B doesn't seem such a great idea when you know it'll include 3000m of climbing at 20% gradients so we know to scale things back a bit or find another way round. Googlemaps has started to include something similar but with limited coverage whereas Cyclroute seems to be worldwide which is great for us as there are a few mountain ranges along our route.



### Profile for Kukes to Peshkopi

It's a 40km spin from Prizren in Kosovo to Kukes in Albania and the connecting road is big wide and smooth. Someone's spent some money on this bit of highway but for some reason most of the traffic is on the old road alongside so we have it mostly to ourselves.



Huge cutting on the road from Prizren to Kukes



## Sunset ride into Albania

Once across the border our introduction to Albania is a view of 3 cows ambling the wrong way down the dual carriageway. Shortly after we find that the drivers have a similar defiance to the traffic laws as a couple of cars join our side of the road having driven 500m in the wrong direction before finding a gap in the crash barrier.



### Traffic on the Albanian dual carriageway

We drop in Kukës just after dark and are immediately surrounded by a group of boys on bikes and roller blades and then a power cut plunges the whole town into darkness. It doesn't last long though and one of the boys, who we later learn is genuinely called Elvis, offers to show us to a hotel. He also recommends a place called Kastrati as being a good place to eat but the name is a bit off putting. Best not order the meat balls.



Elvis (and friend), our guide in Kukes

Once checked in we venture back into town and ask a couple of policemen the way to Kastrati. They oblige by escorting us up the middle of the street (very few people seem to use the pavements and there are very few cars). Eventually they point us down a very dark alley which looks to be exactly where a police escort would have been useful but they leave us to it. It turns out Kastrati isn't serving food tonight but they are setting up for a wedding and the barman encourage us to have our photo taken in the ceremonial thrones.



The happy couple in Kastrati

Back out on the main street we find the policemen again and get another escort to another restaurant that will actually serve us. It's a tasty mix of grilled meats and vegetables only slightly dampened by the football match on the TV in the background and the occasional shout of 'Frank Lampard!' amongst the Albanian commentary, just like a Fast Show sketch.

Cyclroute.org had warned us that the following day would be a toughie: 75km with 2000m of climbing at uncomfortable gradients so we fuel up with porridge and headed for the hills with some trepidation. After a pleasant warm up along the valley floor the road kicked up and by the height of the peaks around us we knew we'd be climbing for a while. the default gradient seemed to be around 8-10% minimum but there was plenty of it at 18-20% too.



Roadside sheep



And a lot of the time we were moving very slowly. In our lowest winching gear it requires 1.14 revolutions of the pedals for 1 revolution of the wheels and with it we can crawl up some very steep hills but it requires patience. 4kph on a 20% gradient is normal before we're at risk from toppling over. As a little extra tester in the villages we also had to negotiate thick lengths of rope that were stapled to the road to serve as a speed bump. Very effective for cars but very uncomfortable for a slow moving tandem.



But as we climb higher the views open out and reward our efforts with spectacular steep sided valleys. Thankfully the road is very well surfaced too as it was completely rebuilt just 3 years ago. A lot of the main roads in Albania are relatively new as there was a huge amount of building work after the collapse of the communist regime in the early 90's. Up until 1991 there were only 6000 cars in the whole country and all them were owned by members of the communist party. As soon as private car ownership was allowed they realised they'd need some proper roads to drive on so a number of Greek contractors came along and built them.



But out here in the mountain regions most people are either walking, riding a horse or for longer journeys they use one of the many mini buses that have been edging past us and obviously find the hills nearly as hard.



We get calls of 'Hello!' and 'How are you!' from shepherds, boys up trees, men walking along the road in the middle of nowhere and women with babies on the back of donkeys. At one point a group of children run alongside us (well actually walk slowly alongside us) taking selfies with their phones and asking us to stop. But we can't because we'd never get started again on the steep hill.



Our highest point is 1250m and we're in the clouds at zero degrees with the light beginning to fade. By the time we roll into Peshkopi after a long and treacherous descent it's been dark for an hour and so we check into the Hotel Piazza on account that we'd seen it's name several hundred times painted on the side of the road. An effective advertising campaign for these customers. Kirsty haggles 15 euros off the price, gets them to include breakfast and we dine on several of the best kebabs we've ever tasted.



Where should we stay tonight?

In Albania there is litter everywhere as it seems inherent in their culture to just chuck what they don't want into a convenient ditch. We see a couple of people tipping barrowloads of rubbish by the side of the road without a second thought. We'd seen the same in Kosovo and one of Darius's projects is to try and educate some of the local communities and start a clear up but he said it was a very difficult task.



Dogs and litter. Welcome to Albania.



## Litter-fall

From Peshkopi it's not far to the border of Macedonia, or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) as the UN insist it's called after a dispute with the Greeks about where the original, ancient region of Macedonia actually lies. Once we're across the border things look a bit tidier and the houses are noticeably smarter but almost all are not quite finished which is something to do with tax avoidance.



Arriving in Macedonia

We stop at the first town, Debar, to try and withdraw some Macedonian currency and when we ask for directions we get our

very own guide who shows us not only to the bank but also the cafe and the supermarket. He seems very proud to be able to walk through the crowded streets with the 2 strange people and their long bike.



### Macedonian Bus Stop

The road takes us alongside Lake Debar, a huge reservoir and we follow it up to the point where it narrows down into a river running through a gorge then climb up past a dam to another reservoir. The climbing is more gradual and feels much easier than the day before but we still notch up a fair amount of ascent.



Deba Reservoir



Deba Reservoir



### Gorge from Deba

The reservoirs soon seem tiny compared to Lake Ohrid which is our destination that day. It's a massive, turquoise expanse of water on a plateau 750m above sea level with Macedonia occupying one side and Albania the other and is somewhere that we'd been told by several people to go and visit.



Seagulls, Lake Ohrid



## Lunchtime at Lake Ohrid

In the lakeside town of Struga we're leapt upon while stopped at traffic lights and asked if we need a room. We say maybe but want to investigate the options first. After a coffee overlooking the lake, and being entertained by the amazing sight of a flock of starlings moving through the air like a shoal of fish, we return to the bike to find the same man waiting for us and he doesn't seem to want to take no for an answer. So we look at the room and it's cold and grubby. I offer him half his original offer just to see what happens and unfortunately he accepts. While he's off fetching more bedding we decide to do a runner but he returns as we're making for the door. We make our apologies, he's very unhappy and we make a swift exit in the direction of somewhere that is actually habitable.



Flocking starlings, Lake Ohrid



Flocking Starlings, Lake Ohrid



Flocking Starlings, Lake Ohrid

After a short ride to the town of Ohrid the next day the same

thing happens again and again. Each time we stop at some lights or to cross the road or by a garage someone offers us a room. Everyone in Ohrid seems to have an apartment to rent. We settle for a Hostel this time and on our way there one man pulls a u-turn on his bike and begins to give chase. We wind up the pace as best we can but he's persistent and manages to come alongside slightly panting to ask if we want a room. 'NO!'.



Trabant, Ohrid

Apparently there used to be 365 churches in Ohrid, one for every day of the year, and there are still plenty remaining. Amongst the narrow, cobbled streets there are little archways and towers everywhere. It's nice to have the afternoon to have a look round and to give our legs a break after the punishment the hills had given them for the last couple of days.



One of the many churches in Ohrid



Church in Ohrid

We decide to continue round the lake on the Macedonian side

the next day and ride past countless resorts and hotels. Much like Lake Balaton in Hungary, this is a popular destination in the summer. It's also the venue for a 30km swimming marathon that takes place every August. Shame we're too late.



Bunker overlooking Lake Ohrid

At the southern end we cross back into Albania. Our plan now is to spend a bit of time crossing to the coast and then to head south to stay warm. As we cross the border we bump into two Spanish cycle tourists, Hugo and Bega who have come the opposite direction to us. After a few tales from the road, comparing kit and realising that they're route has some similarity to ours (they are on a 4 year round the world trip) we exchange blog addresses and hope to see them again somewhere further on.



Hugo and Bego who have ridden from Spain on their way around the world. [www.aquatanagustito.blogspot.com](http://www.aquatanagustito.blogspot.com)

Gone are the smart hotels and instead we get the worst road we've had to ride so far. It's a complete mess of pot holes, part surfaced sections, gravel and mud. Apparently they have been working to upgrade this stretch for 2 years but the work won't be complete until next summer. The only slight distraction from the bumps are the road side fish sellers who dangle their latest catch at arms length for us to consider as we ride past. I'm not sure the exhaust fumes from all the battered Mercedes and dust being kicked up would add much to the flavour.



Fancy an eel for dinner?

During the communist times the lake was heavily guarded as it was an obvious escape route for those trying to flee Albania. In Lin the hotel owner tells us he used to have to get official permission just to travel from his village to the next town a few km away and there were military checkpoints everywhere.



### Boats at Lake Ohrid

From Lake Ohrid Cyclroute.org was showing a much more pleasing profile. Up a bit then mostly downhill for 80km. At the top of the climb we pass a cluster of bunkers. We'd seen these all over Albania and at one time there were 700,000 of them, one for every 4 Albanians to help defend their country if anyone felt the urge to try and invade.



Bunkers on the hillside



### Goats on the hillside

After admiring the view we begin the long drop down. In every layby there is someone offering car washing services and they advertise this by letting their hoses fire straight into the air at full blast. Supposedly the one that has the highest fountain is the best one to go to and the men who can afford an electric pressure washer are doing the best trade. Water must be very cheap as it seems like an incredible waste.



The long downhill has a few too many parts that feel suspiciously like uphill and each one is marked with a 7% gradient sign but we end the day a few hundred metres lower than where we started and camp on the banks of the river we've been following all day



War Memorial, Pishkash



## Knitting while herding

In the morning we discover that storing milk in an old yoghurt bottle, no matter how well it's been rinsed, only results in more yoghurt so we resort to finding a cafe for breakfast. It's not hard to find a cafe in Albania as every other building seems to be full of men smoking and drinking coffee. We wonder into one but our request for food via Google Translate causes a bit of confusion. First they bring out paracetamol, then alka seltzer. In our disheveled state we must look hung over. Then it clicks that we're not ill, just hungry so they produce what could well be cold goat soup. Not that hungry. 'Rice?' 'Errr not really'. Eventually we get some fantastically fresh yoghurt (not from our bottle), fetta, mandarin and bread all produced within a few km of the cafe.

Meanwhile a woman is busy herding a flock of turkeys across the road. There are flocks of these things gobbling everywhere but we wonder if it'll be earlily quiet after Christmas. The impromptu breakfast is all very exciting for the owner Patrick and he sends us away with a wave and a couple of fresh lemons which will be perfect for a G&T later. If we had any G. Or T.



## Turkey Herding

We take the highway to Vlorë and arrive just as an inky black cloud is forming over the seaside town. That night a huge

thunderstorm hits along with heavy rain so we're thankful that our search for a camping spot was abandoned and that we'd found a hotel instead. Despite paying for accommodation more often of late, everything else has been so cheap that our overall living costs haven't really been affected much.



Coloured buildings in Fier

Splashing through big puddles next day on 'The Albanian Riviera' the weather still looks decidedly unsettled so our plan to climb up and over the next set of mountains may need reassessing. In Orikum there appears to be a power cut as all the cafes are running generators but we find someone that has enough juice to run a WiFi router and check the weather forecast. The prediction of thunderstorms and gusts of up to 65 kph is enough to tell us that it wouldn't be much fun at over 1000m above sea level so we pitch the tent on the beach and settle in for the afternoon instead. I even manage a quick dip in the sea for the first time in a long while.



Storm on the mountains



Waiting for the storm to pass.



First swim since leaving the Baltic

The wait was worthwhile as in the morning the sky is much clearer and it's warm enough for shorts and t-shirts again. The climb is much as we'd expect from Albanian road builders: long and steep. Our heavy breathing is accompanied by an orchestra of cow bells, goat bells and sheep bells. The constant gobble gobble of turkeys provide the vocals.



Climbing up from Orikum



## Climbing up to the Llogara Pass



But at the top, after being greeted by an excited dog who seems very happy to celebrate the fact we've made it to the summit, we're rewarded with a truly magnificent view and a thin ribbon of road snaking it's way down the precipitous hillside. This is the Llogara Pass and is one of the finest stretches of road we've ever ridden.



Top of the Llogara Pass



Top of the Llogara Pass

Tight switchbacks, fast traverses of the hillside and all the

time enormous cliff faces looming over us on one side and a view down to an aquamarine coast line on the other. We're quite glad we waited the day to allow the clouds to clear. By the bottom the drag brake has steam pouring off it having worked hard to keep us under control all the way down.











### Looking back at the Llogara Pass

After the pass things don't let up and we're back into a roller coaster road of double figure gradients both up and down. Villages cling to the side of the mountain with some several hundred metres up above the main road. There are mandarin and persimmons being grown everywhere so it's not hard to find an orchard to camp in before our final days ride into Sarandë. Top Gear had used the stretch between Vlorë and Sarandë for a segment of film that lasts a few minutes on screen but it had taken us 2 days to ride it.





The road just dropped away



Goat and beach



Fresh madarins in the porridge for breakfast

Since leaving Ohrid and finding our way to the coast things have warmed up considerably and in the last few days it's been over 20 degrees so it seems our mission to head south and escape the cold for the Winter is proving worthwhile. Sarandë is a port so we can catch a ferry to various places including Italy or southern Greece but in a couple of days it'll be Kirsty's birthday so we decide it might be nice to celebrate it on Corfu. Hopefully we can find some gin and tonic to go with the lemons.



Views towards Corfu



The road to Sarande



That's what we need!