

Thessaloniki to Istanbul

written by Marcus | 19 February, 2015



There are some cycling records that are truly remarkable feats of human endurance. The round the year award which is to cover as much distance as possible over the course of a 12 month period is probably the most impressive. The current record was set by Tommy Goodwin in 1938 when he rode a staggering 75,065 miles in one year, an average of 205 miles per day. 3 men are vying to better that this year including Steve Abraham who I had the pleasure of riding part of the Mille Cymru with in 2014 and I can only wish him the best of luck for this huge commitment. Incidentally the ladies record of just over 30,000 miles (average of 81 per day) remains uncontested since it was set by Billie Flemming in 1938. Perhaps its time for someone to have a go at this one too?

Taking 6 months to get across Europe isn't exactly a new world

record (last year a friend did it in 2 weeks) but it is a personal milestone for us that we have to admit we're quite proud of. We've also crossed the 10,000km mark without realising. It turns out the trip computer had been calibrated for smaller tyres so had been underestimating our distance and speed by 4% each day since the beginning of the trip. This all adds up so we'd covered 400km more than we thought we had! Steve Abraham will cover this distance every 33 days throughout the year.



The White Tower, Thessaloniki

Our snow day in Thessaloniki starts with a spin across the city to Georgios' shop, Action Bikes. On the way a car pulls alongside while we ride and the passenger insists on giving Kirsty a pair of gloves shouting "Take them, TAKE THEM!".

Georgios has managed to find a new freehub, the one remaining part I wanted to replace on the rear hub making it effectively

now all brand new. His father, Costas, used to turn spanners for the Greek national cycling team so goes about the task of fitting the part and giving the bike a thorough service with a meticulous eye.



Costas the master mechanic



The Action Bike team

We try and arrange meeting up with a walking tour guide later in the day but they send us the wrong location for the rendez-vous so we end up standing around in the cold on opposite sides of the town. Instead of the tour we head back to Georgios' office (the first one) where his partner Eleni shows us to our accommodation for the night: the floor of the board room.



Camping on the boardroom floor

On our way out of Thessaloniki the next day we pay another visit to Action Bikes to pick up a new Ortlieb rack bag that Georgios sells us at a price we can't refuse. We have been contemplating buying one of these for several months as, with a bit of rear end reorganisation, it should give us a bit more capacity for when we need to carry more than 1 or 2 days worth of food and water. Georgios sends us off with some recommendations for our route east and also the number for a friend who lives in a village along the way who he suggests we visit.



The posh new biscuit carrier



..with easy access to our supplies

We've been sent on the hilly but quieter route and pass through the appropriately named Panorama that gives great

views back down to the city. There's still plenty of snow high on the hills all around us but it's a cloudless bright day. Over the top we get to see a range of much bigger mountains over the border into Bulgaria as well as the lakes that we drop down to follow for the afternoon.



Panoramic view of Thessaloniki



Up to the snowline



Snowy Shrine



Bulgarian mountains in the distance



Incoming!

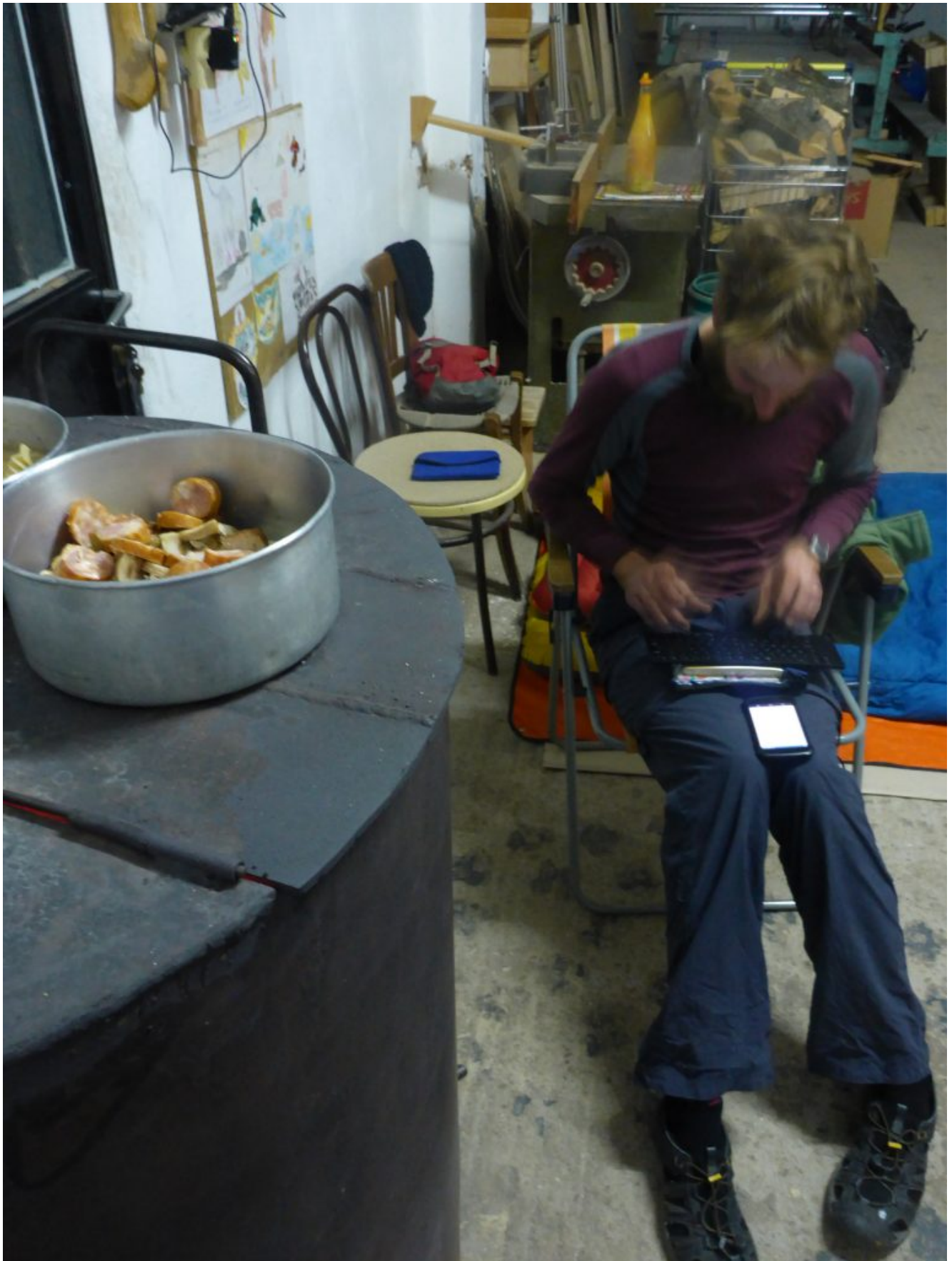
By the evening we've made it to the coast at the north east tip of Poseidon's Trident: Halkidiki. The forecast is for subzero temperatures overnight so we're keen to find some shelter if we can but there are no cosy churches in sight along the sea front at Vrasna. We stop to ask someone if we can camp in an olive orchard on the basis that he has a scarecrow on a bike in his front garden so must be cyclist friendly. While he's trying to direct us to a campsite (that will definitely be closed), his wife comes out and invites us in for coffee. Their wood burning stove, fresh coffee and even fresher roxakia cakes, a traditional Macedonian delicacy, are all very much appreciated and bring some warmth back into our toes. Ah yes, this is the Greek region of Macedonia and the reason why the country that sits to the north west has to be called FYROM.



Tiny cyclist on rocking chair

While we enjoy the coffee and cakes their Dutch neighbours are brought round to translate so we explain what we're doing on a

bike on a freezing February evening. Before long we've been invited to make use of a carpentry workshop just round the corner, and the owner, Vassilis, sets to work sweeping the floor and loading up a huge stove with broken pallets. It soon becomes very warm and inviting and we're left to set up our beds and use the huge band saw as a dining table.

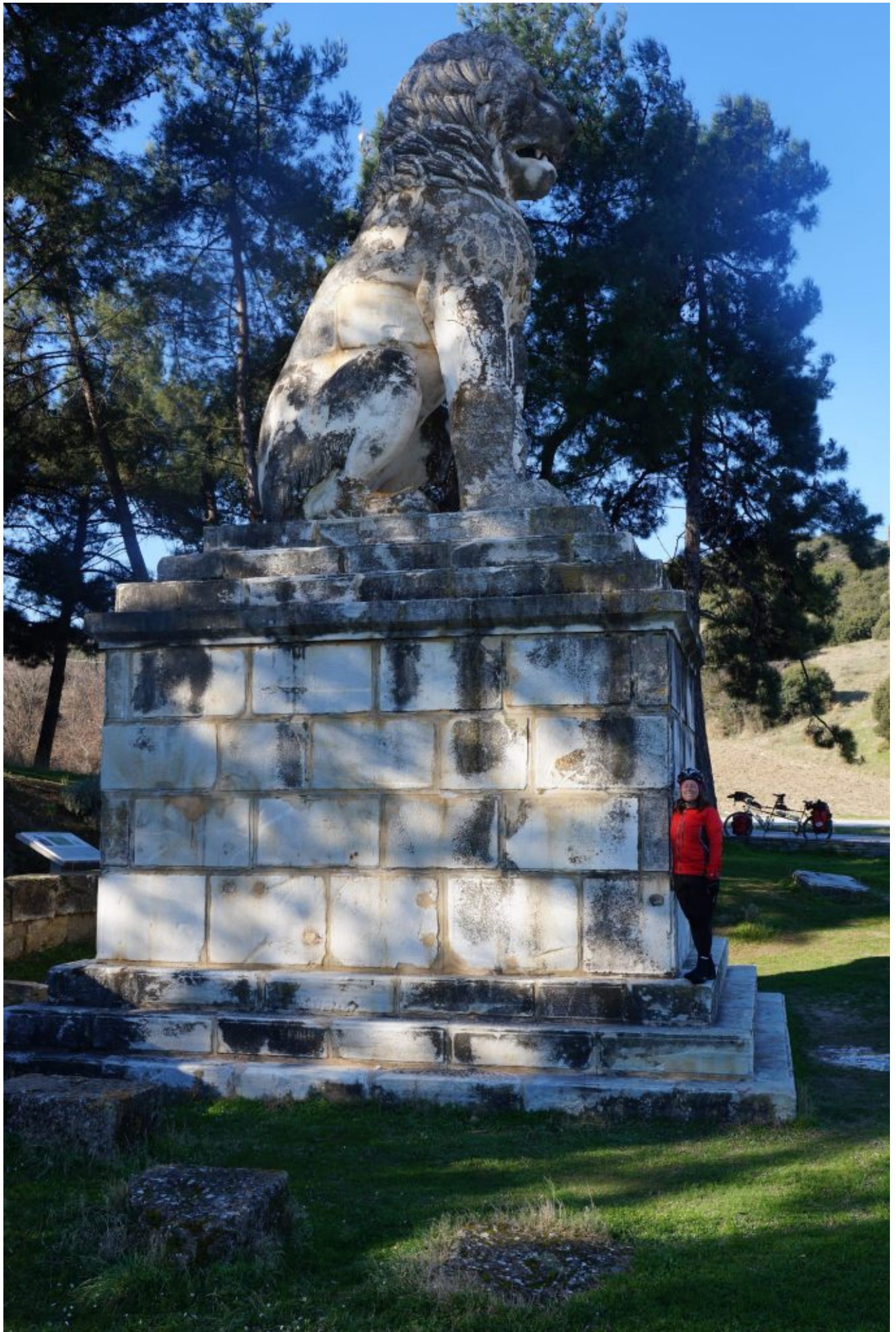


Dinner in the carpentry workshop





Vassilis brings us fresh bread in the morning then sends us on our way back following the coast to the east. Its cold but clear and when we get the chance we turn up towards the mountains to generate a bit more heat with some climbing.



The lion of Amfipoli from 4th Century BC



Riding towards the mountains near Mesropi



Standard chicken selfie

A kind cafe owner refuses payment for our coffees at the top of the hill, then we drop down to the coastal town of Kavala. Here we get chatting to the owners of a small kiosk while we try to buy some stamps for some nieces' birthday cards and get another complimentary coffee and a big bottle of water. This side of Greece seems to be much friendlier than the west, possibly as it sees fewer tourists but also maybe because we're getting further east.



Spring blossom above Kavala



Kind kiosk owners in Kavala

The mercury is set to plunge again overnight so once we've found a nice spot on a clifftop looking back to Kavala we get a small fire going and sip some of the ouzo we were given before pulling on all our clothes and diving into the tent



The aquaduct in Kavala



Cliff top camping near Kavala

Sophia and Antonis, the friends that Georgios had recommended we visit, live in a small village on the banks of the river

Nestos which is where we're heading the next day. The factor that convinced us to call in is that Sophia runs a small bakery, so when we arrive in Toxotes we head straight there and begin choosing from her range of delicious pastries. It happens to be the first day of a carnival season that runs up to Easter so to celebrate there will be some festivities later that afternoon and Sophia tells us we're welcome to attend.

There's time for a coffee and to tuck into the pastries before we join Sophia at her house then walk down to the village hall where a BBQ has been loaded up with souvlaki and meatballs. With loaded plates and cups of wine we get introduced to some of the other villagers while the local priest fires up a pair of turntables to try and instigate some dancing.



Souvlaki and wine!

The children are all dressed in various costumes and Sophia's daughter Eva has come as a leopard. We get to watch a puppet

show in Greek that we think involves a witch, a river and a judge that is actually a love story. Afterwards there's sack racing, more music from DJ Dog Collar and then we retire to the house of some friends of Sophia and Antoni's for another BBQ and homemade tspirou. Strong stuff!



Puppet show



Lunging for the line in the sack race



Home baking and home brew

The couple who put on the puppet show, Miltos and Sozo have given up life in Athens to set up a farm in the mountains and suggest that this is something more people should be doing. It's a surprisingly popular dream amongst people we've met all through Europe with a common desire to become more self sufficient.

Sophia and Antonis kindly offer to let us stay for the night to avoid having to pitch the tent so we're grateful for another warm bed. We'd only originally intended to stop to buy food!



Sophia and Antonis

In the morning we call into the bakery again to load up the Ortlieb bag with fresh supplies for the day then wave goodbye

before rejoining Route 2 eastwards.

After 20km we spot a sign for thermal springs at Loutra Potamias so decide to take a look. We find a steaming hot ditch full of water with a small bath house alongside that the proprietor lets us dip into in return for one of Sophia's biscuits.



Hot springs at Potamias



Hot springs at Potamias

A collapsed bridge forces us to push through a stream to get back onto the main road again and then we come alongside Lake Vistonida. It's a prime spot for bird watchers, but even with our limited ornithological knowledge we can recognise the flocks of flamingos all on one leg, then later a dozen or so pelicans.



Short cut at Potamias



Flamingos at Lake Vistonida



Lake Vistonida



Pelicans on lake Vistonida



More Flamingos at Lake Vistonida

After lunch we venture onto another shortcut that takes us onto a minor road beside cotton fields. As with previous shortcuts it presents the odd challenge with 3 or 4 fords to negotiate and one that requires shoes and socks to come off and we get cold toes.



Cotton fields near Komotini



Cold feet (Mum)ford

The landscape is changing with rolling plains and bigger gaps between basic villages. We're also seeing more mosques than

churches as this region was formerly Turkish and retains a large Muslim population.



Spot the photographer

We set up camp next to the remains of the Via Egnatia, a Roman road that linked Rome to Istanbul and crosses from Albania through Greece into Turkey. There's enough of it left to invoke images of chariots making a similar journey to ours 2100 years ago but we're glad to have nice smooth tarmac instead of cobbles.



Our last campsite in Greece, near Mesti



Mesti



The Via Egnatia

We're woken just before dawn by the ezan sounding out from the mosque in a village below us then the sound of barking. A pack

of 7 or 8 dogs have decided they don't like the look of our tent, and they like the head that pops out of it even less. They soon get bored though and leave us to enjoy our last breakfast in Greece.

We climb over a ridge then swoop down to the coast again into Alexandroupolis. Here we pay an emotional visit to what could be the last Lidl in Europe so stock up on some of our favourite biscuits and sheep's milk yoghurt.



Plain near Mesti

We need to print out our Turkish visas before we reach the border and look for possible options while riding down the high street. A computer printer shop seems suitably equipped and is more than happy to oblige.

But at the border our freshly printed visas aren't even checked and after visiting 5 different men behind 5 different windows we're through and into our first new country for over

2 months. As is often the case with roads leading away from borders, there is a large dual carriageway with barely any traffic due to the natural throttling effect of the passport control. Also typical of roads in and out of a border are the number of petrol stations. It's as if drivers are being told that this is their last chance to fill up with good quality Greek/Turkish fuel before crossing into the unknown.



Country #24

After 20km we're still 15km from the nearest supermarket and the light is fading fast, so we stop at a petrol station with

restaurant attached and ask if we can camp behind it on the basis we'll be buying our dinner from them. This seems to be a popular tactic with most cycle tourists passing through Turkey as there is almost always a nice picnic area beside each service station. So the answer comes back "Of course, but we have a hotel here too!" but we politely decline and pitch the tent then enjoy a romantic valentines meal in the empty restaurant, huddled round the only heater in the room.



Do we need a reservation?

As well as the picnic area the service station has a coop full of chickens and a peacock and also a mini mosque so we get the combined cry of cockerels and ezan to rouse us in the morning.



Standard Turkey selfie

We have a windy and hilly day on a road that reminds us of a similar stretch in Finland. Curiously this is the D110 and the road in Finland was also the 110 so this is clearly a number saved for tedious roadways. The day is brightened a couple of times by some complementary çay when we stop for a breather at a cafe and later a service station.



The picturesque D110 into Turkey

By the afternoon a heavy drizzle has set in so we're thankful that we have a reply from a Warmshowers host in Tekirdağ offering us a place to stay. But there are some complications. Zafer won't be home until 11pm so has suggested we go to stay with another friend until he gets back. While we're sat in a cafe trying to arrange this, another email arrives from Serpil saying we can stay with her, so to save rushing around town in the middle of the night we accept Serpil's offer and send our apologies to Zafer. He doesn't mind as Serpil is one of his friends too!



The D110 in Tekirdağ

Serpil's flat is at the top of a very steep hill but once we arrive and catch our breath she, along with her daughter Ada and cat Bleu Orage make us feel at home allowing us to dry out and warm up again. Although she's not a cyclist Serpil loves travelling and loves hosting travellers just as much. It seems a shame that she's never been to Greece despite it being so close though but the EU Schengen visa is prohibitively expensive for her. We should be very grateful for how easy it is to travel as a UK citizen.

In the morning Zafer makes a surprise visit so we get to thank him in person for trying to help us. He offers us a generous gift of a kilo of chocolates which should require roughly the same number of calories to haul them up the hills as we get from eating them.



Zefar and Serpil

Back on the D110 its a similar ride to the day before only the traffic begins to get heavier as we get nearer to Istanbul. At the risk of sounding like a broken record the wind is of course blowing in an againsterly direction so we're keen to find shelter when it gets to lunchtime. While standing out of the gale behind a closed supermarket, a couple of security guards spot us and invite us into their cabin to offer us some sort of fruit drink that tastes fantastic. The four bar heater is a welcome sight too and there's a risk we'll not be able to extract ourselves and get back on the bike. But we just about manage it and just in time for the rain to start again.



1kg of chocs

The D110 becomes the notorious D100 at Silivri and the change of number only seems to increase the volume of traffic.

Inevitably a city of 15 million people sat on a land bridge between two continents creates a mighty bottle neck that has to be served by some major infrastructure. The subject of how to ride into Istanbul without perishing is the subject of dozens of blog posts and Internet articles with many reaching the conclusion that the best plan is to use the train. Minor roads are few and fiddly and cycle paths start to appear nearer the city centre but for now we have to just grin and bear it on the hard shoulder, which is thankfully wide enough to keep us away from the trucks speeding past.

At the top of a long, soggy climb into Büyükçekmece and with energy levels low after a tough day we pull into a service station to check for emails. We'd sent 2 last minute Warmshowers requests and were praying that one of them had been accepted but unfortunately both of them had to decline. The garage staff take us into their office and serve us çay while we check for nearby hotels on Booking.com. 15 minutes later we're checked in, muddy panniers are chucked in the shower and its a relief to lie down in a warm and quiet room after all the noise, fumes, cold, rain and hills.

It was colder than we thought outside as in the morning there's a compete white-out. A few centimetres of snow has fallen and its beginning to snow again when we set off which should make the D100 even more interesting.



Snowy start to the day in Büyükçekmece



Slidılg cars in Büyükçekmece



Snowy start in Büyükçekmece

Luckily the road is well gritted and the weather is slowing the traffic down to a speed not much greater than ours. I position the bike right in the middle of the lane to prevent any unwanted overtaking manoeuvres and we seem to be getting plenty of space from all the drivers. Most of them quite rightly think we're mad being out in this weather and a few wind down their windows to tell us exactly that, but with plenty of smiles and waves of encouragement. The snow is falling heavily again and after a long downhill from the hotel the front of the bike is coated like a giant coconut cake and I have to prevent total snow blindness by wiping my glasses every 30 seconds.



Snow and traffic and snow on the D100 into İstanbul



Stoker's eye view during a blizzard



Snow capped bar bag

Eventually we get to turn off the main road and pick our way through side streets crammed full of shops selling anything and everything and with the aromas of all sorts of interesting smelling foods wafting out of doorways.

We arrive at the tall apartment block that the Garmin tells us belongs to our host, Erdinç but the entry code we've been given doesn't seem to work. Nor does the doorbell and he's not answering his phone. Cold and wet and standing in the foyer we contemplate our options but just as we're trying to explain our situation to someone living in the block Erdinç calls back and asks where we are. We're not outside his flat that's for sure as that is where he is calling from, so we hand the phone to a bemused cleaning lady who has been watching us and she describes to Erdinç our location. While we wait for Erdinç to rescue us we get given an orange by the cleaning lady and offered çay by a security guard. We were actually a 10 minute

walk from the correct apartment block so not too far out.

So now we're finally in Istanbul, gateway to the east and with a vast city to explore. Only we've been housebound for the last 2 days. The snow continued to fall heavily and there's at least 50cm filling up the balcony and covering cars and the surrounding roads. Flights have been cancelled and there were 800 reported traffic accidents on Tuesday so we have to be very glad we made it here when we did. It's the heaviest snowfall for at least 10 years. But the chances are that if we try to get a bus into the centre we may be stuck on it all night, so our best option is to sit tight and wait for the big thaw which should be starting by the weekend. Luckily Erdiñç and his parents are superb hosts with the typical generous Turkish hospitality that we've already seen so much of. If we'd been one day later then we could well have been holed up in the tent behind a service station right now!



Cars stuck everywhere

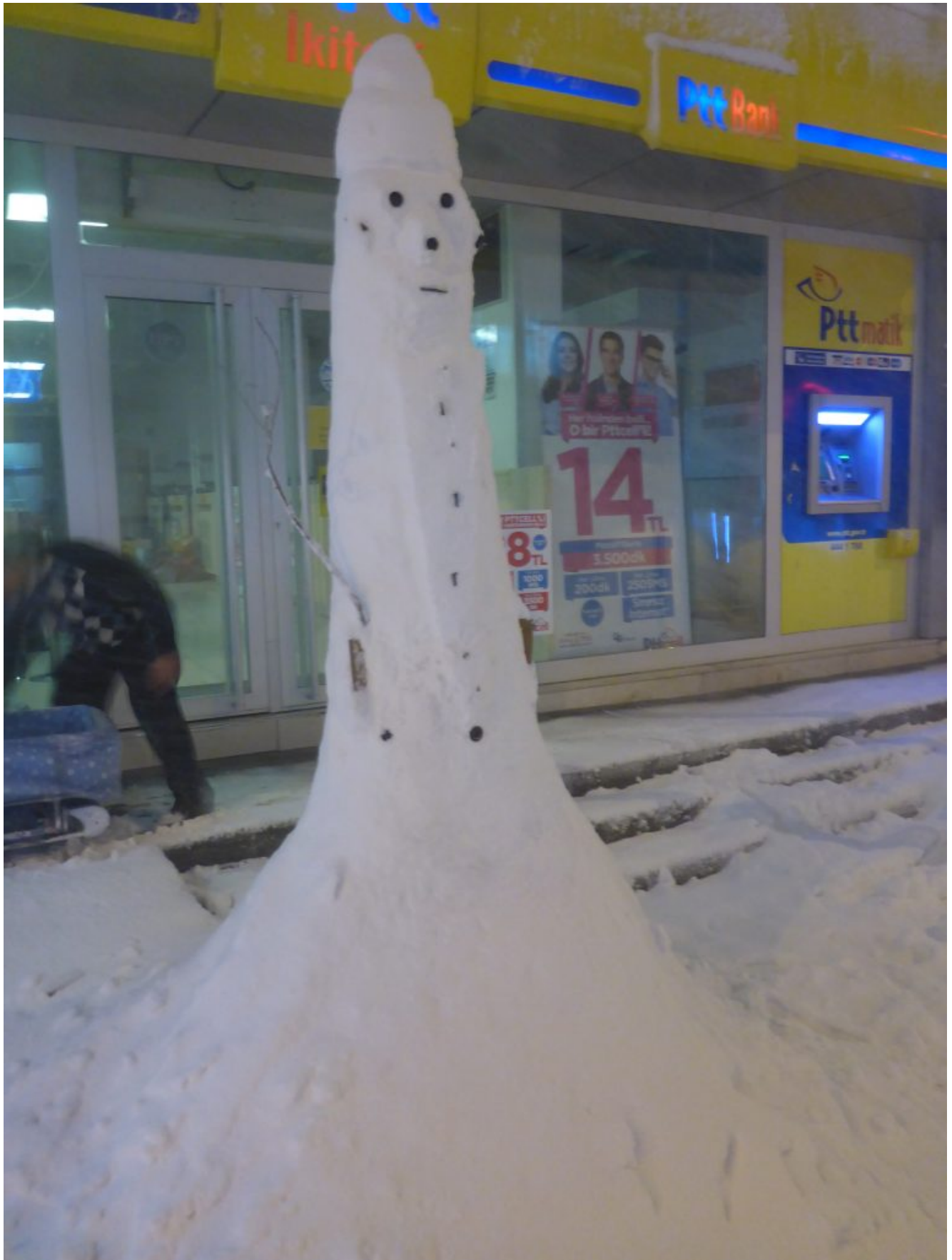


Deep frozen fish



Comparing snowy beards with Erding







Snowy Istanbul skyline

Paros to Thessaloniki – Back on the road

written by Marcus | 19 February, 2015



Things had changed while we were on Paros and I don't just mean the tyres on the bike. Greece now has a brand new government and many people are half joking about the possible return of the Drachma to replace the unpopular Euro.



It's impossible to speak to anyone here for more than 5 minutes before the discussion turns to politics and who can blame them for wanting to try a new tack. We've heard stories of huge property taxes on existing homes, 50% unemployment in some areas, retrospective taxes on income earned years ago and pensions being halved leaving people in their 80's having to grow their own food to survive. Whether Tsipras and his new coalition have the answers to countless problems remains to be seen but the weight of expectation is enormous.



Peeping Kirsty

Our changes were a bit smaller. In our quest to try every model in the Schwalbe tyre range we've now fitted Marathon

Plus Tour, reputed to be 'unpuncturable'. We've had great service from our kit suppliers with Trekit (on behalf of Exped), Portapow, Power Traveller and Leatherman all replacing under warranty equipment that was playing up. Pleasingly, the new Leatherman penknife is purple. After all the issues at the end of last year I've rebuilt the rear hub with new cones and bearings having found what could be the last spare parts in the UK for our 14 year old 'vintage model'. Luckily there were 2 sets available so we have 1 as a spare in case we have problems again but I'll keep a closer eye on it this time.



The new boots.

The temptation to stay on Paros longer was tugging at us but with everything packed back into its rightful place on the bike we manage to roll away from Jim and Irini's house and down to Parikia to catch the boat back to Pireaus. We couldn't have asked for better hosts and they, along with all the animals will be sorely missed. On the animal front,

Mississippi made good inroads into being accepted into the family, albeit only with outside privileges (for now). Unfortunately Paco the dog was being sent to the local animal sanctuary to be re-homed due to the imminent arrival of two more rescue dogs. We would have loved to have taken him with us but we're not sure he would have liked Turkish food. But if you can give him a new home then get in touch with PAWS (<https://www.paws.gr/>) who send stray animals all over Europe. It would be great to see a happy ending for Paco.



Jim and Irini (+Zoo and Charlie)



Mississippi



Paco

The overnight boat deposits us bleary eyed in Pireaus at 5am. Rolling off with us is Jörg an Austrian cyclist who has just

completed his first tour through Italy and Greece on the advice from his doctor that he needed to lose weight. He's had great fun and already planning something longer so could well be chasing us to New Zealand.



Parikia harbour

I love riding into the dawn and soon the sky begins to get lighter before the sun eventually makes an appearance. We make good progress out of Athens helped by it being early enough for most people to still be in bed. There is an incident with a closed road forcing us onto a pavement and colliding with an orange tree leaving Kirsty with a bruised leg and me with a guilty conscience. I try to remember to recalibrate the width I need for the bike now the panniers are back on.



Sunrise near Athens

There are plenty of hills to test our rested legs on but the bike appears to be much heavier and slower than last time we tried to climb on it. It must be the bag of almonds that Irini sent us off with. To help lighten the load we stop to cook porridge in a layby and get told not to start a forest fire by a concerned cafe owner.



Helping a lorry driver fix his truck

By lunchtime we're in Thiva and while stopping to consider bakery options we meet Anson, a cyclist from Hong Kong. He's already ridden from Cape Town to Cairo and has just arrived in Greece to continue up into Europe then across Asia back home. He has Afghanistan and Pakistan on his itinerary so is both braver than us and presumably more persuasive when it comes to obtaining visas. We promise to keep in touch from time to time via his Facebook page – The Answer is Out There.



Anson. He's from Hong Kong.

The early start is taking its toll by the afternoon and at one point I'm sure I hear snoring from my sleepy stoker. But we

make it 30km from Thiva into the middle of an enormous plain with tractors busy working away in all directions.



Road closed, unless you're on a bike

While eyeing up a suitable camping spot in the corner of a field a pick-up pulls alongside and the driver asks if we need help. After telling us to camp anywhere as no one will mind he drives off only to return a few minutes later to dispense some historical facts about the area. Apparently the plain used to be a lake but 150 years ago '...an Englishman came along and dug a tunnel into the mountain and took the water...'. So we spend our first night camping at the bottom of a lake and are back to deciding how many layers of clothes to put on before climbing into bed instead of which setting to put the electric blanket on.





There's more flat riding in the morning before we reach the edge of the plain and have to climb back onto 'dry' land again. And up we go for several km on a warm sunny day that makes us glad to be back in the saddles.



Once over the ridge we get views down to the coast again and in the distance our destination for the day, the island of Evia.



Herbie goes to Greece



This of course means another ferry but after a rapid descent we arrive at the harbour of Arkitsa 30 mins too late so have to make do with a leisurely lunch in the sunshine while waiting an hour for the next one.



Waiting for the ferry at Arkitsa

The plan is to land on Evia then ride the 10km to the other side where we can catch another ferry back to the mainland. This corner cutting exercise should save 100km or so compared to just staying on the mainland and takes us into some more scenic countryside. There's an hour between the first ferry landing and the second one leaving which should be plenty to cover the distance but as soon as we bump off the ramp of the first ferry I can feel that something isn't right. It's a flat on one of our unpuncturable tyres. Hastily squeezing air back into it we hope that it's slow enough not to go down before we get to the second ferry but it needs topping up another 3 times on the way. We make it with what we think is only a few minutes to spare only to find that the timetable changes each week and in fact it won't leave for another hour.



Chimney tops

As it's getting late we decide to stay on Evia for the night and find a piece of waste ground to begin pitching the tent

and replacing the inner tube. The flat tyre has actually been caused by a patch that has come unstuck from a previous repair rather than a puncture so the Marathon Plus Tour's retain their unpuncturable title, for now.

While unpacking our kit an old man calls us over and asks what we're up to. After miming our explanation he tells us to pack up again and follow him. We're not sure if we're in trouble or if he wants to help but follow him anyway. He lives just up the road and says we can camp in his garden where it will be safer. His huge Alsatian should keep an eye on things for us and we have a great spot securely behind his gate. He even brings some fresh water for us to use for dinner.



Gated camp site, Agio Kampos

The Alsatian is a bit too effective by barking at us for trying to take our own bike in the morning but we manage to get away with it and catch the early ferry back to the

mainland. We ride through more rolling farming country where almost everyone drives a pick up truck. After a winding climb at a comfortable 5% gradient we drop onto another huge plain and a rare thing occurs: the wind is actually behind us! We barrel along nicely feeling like we have super strong legs.



Waiting for the ferry at Agio Kampos

But it can't last for long and with another ridge to climb over it begins to rain and then we turn west while the wind turns to hit us from the side.

The last 40km into Larissa are unsheltered so we get buffeted by the cross wind and by the huge trucks speeding past. But 10km from Larissa we have a short break when we spot Eric and Charlotte, a French couple riding in the opposite direction. While we chat and exchange blog addresses the wind seems to drop (www.plqa.fr). We hope to see them again in Cappadocia or on the silk road so we wave an 'Au Revoir' and have a nice

final spin into Larissa.

Our couchsurfing host Panagiotis welcomes us into his flat but after a shower we're off out again as he's invited us to join him at a swing dancing lesson. We're clearly out of our depth as everyone around us spins and bobs in perfect time so we spend most of the time practising the basics in the corner.



Lindy Hopping



Larissa street art



The theatre, Larissa

Our talents seem to be stronger in the simple movement of legs going round and round and in the morning we get to demonstrate the fine art of tandem riding to Panagiotis as he has offered to guide us for the day. He's a keen Audax rider so jumps at the chance to spend a day in the saddle and takes off with all the enthusiasm that riding a lightweight, unladen bike deserves.



Panagiotis leads the way

We spend most of the day chasing due to our slightly more cumbersome steed but it's a great route that he leads us on with views of Mount Olympus from several angles, a lovely swooping road along the coast and then the final stretch over expansive marshlands.



Mount Olympus



Kiwi orchard by the coast



Sulphurous spring at Kokkino Nero Melivias

Here, housing is prohibited without a licence but this is largely ignored as there are plenty of holiday homes,

including one belonging to the mayor of Larissa. The road we follow was funded and built solely for bikes but is conveniently wide enough for two cars to pass.



House covered in shells

As we near the end of the day Panagiotis' engine seems to be running low on gas and admitting he feels 'a bit tired' he drops behind us and we provide a strong tow like only a touring tandem can. However he does have a swing dancing party to get to so he may be saving his energy for that. We wave goodbye so he can catch a train home while we set up camp by the beach behind a hotel's tennis court with the gods on Olympus keeping an eye on us.



Panagiotis on Olympus beach



Sunset on Olympus beach



Low cloud on mount Olympus

Thessaloniki sits in a huge estuary with three major rivers pouring into the Aegean sea. Cars have been well provided for with a motorway following the direct route round the coast from the south but bikes have to come inland by 20km to get to a suitable bridge to get across the first river. We have a cunning plan though to avoid the extra distance.



Precision landing

We approach the motorway with the intention of riding the 4km on the hard shoulder to get across the river then back onto minor roads on the other side. But there's a problem: All our maps, both paper and electronic show a junction where we're standing but in fact it's not been built yet. They've made a start but seem to have abandoned the idea leaving half a slip road and no bridge to the other carriageway. Time for plan B.



Someone forgot to build the bridge

Kirsty had spotted another bridge on a very minor road not far away so we make our way towards that. While stopping to consult the map our nostrils detect the unmistakable aroma of meat being cooked on charcoal. The man in charge of the BBQ spots us and can obviously tell we're peckish as he invites us over. But before we get to sample the burgers he offers us some of his homemade ouzo. It's not bad but the burgers are better. We eventually leave after asking about the bridge we're trying to find and he points us in the right direction then hands us a bottle with more ouzo for the journey.



BBQ man giving us some Dutch courage with his ouzo

The road becomes a track and before long we find the crossing.
It's an old railway bridge that spans a fast flowing river in

full spate and by the looks of things it's not carried any sort of traffic for several decades. There is an attempt at a walkway in the form of rows of 3 sleepers running the length of the bridge on each side and these are laid on widely spaced cross struts that leave a 30cm open gap down to the torrent below. It's not rideable.



The adventure bridge



Don't look down

I carefully lift the bike up onto the sleepers and begin inching my way across. Occasionally some of the sleepers have

rotted away and I have to balance on the same one as the bike, tightrope style. There's also some carrying of the bike from one side to the other when all the sleepers on my side have collapsed.



Careful now



After a precarious 50 mins the bike and I have safely negotiated the 100m bridge and 10 mins later Kirsty makes it back onto terra firma too. No doubt the 16km detour would have been quicker but where's the fun in that?



Safely across

After the bridge a muddy track spits us out into a motorway

service station where we get plenty of confused looks while wolfing down a baguette. Then we're back out onto a proper road for what should be a straightforward run into Thessaloniki.



And it is, apart from the road we want being flooded and requiring some extra km to get across the next river.



Flooded road into Thessaloniki

Finally we make it to the home of our host, Georgios which is in fact an office block and is his temporary accommodation as

he's 'between houses'. He coordinates the EuroVelo routes that pass through Greece along with various other cycling initiatives so is hoping that the new government will find more money for cycle infrastructure. We suggest a bike path into Thessaloniki that uses the old railway line as a good starting point. We're very pleased when he presents us with a large map showing all the EuroVelo routes as these are surprisingly rare.



Meat feast

We don't stay at the office for long though as Georgios has to catch a late train to Athens for a meeting, a 7 hour trip to cover the distance that has taken us 5 days to ride. So we're whisked across to the home of his friend, also called Georgios who has kindly offered to host us instead. On the way the first Georgios points out the roadworks for the metro system that they have spent 4 years trying to build. But each time they dig they find ancient artifacts which complicates things.

The same happened in Athens and there each station is a mini museum showing some of the items that they found.



The Rotunda, Thessaloniki

The weather forecast looks to be cold and snowy so the plan is to spend 2 nights in Thessaloniki before continuing on east with the hope the snow won't last for long. This gives us a chance to pay a visit to Georgios' (the 2nd one) shop, Action Bikes, and have a stroll round the city.



Thessaloniki harbour with Olympus behind

It's been a great return to life on the road and just the kind of week we needed to get us fired up for the next stage of the journey. Just a few days left of Greece... and of Europe.



Bread in all shapes and sizes