

Aktau to Nukus

written by Marcus | 17 May, 2015



To our left the view is 90% sky with the ground so flat you could set a spirit level on it. There's nothing but sand and small shrubs stretching out to the horizon. Looking to the right it's a mirror image. Up ahead the tarmac is arrow straight but there's supposed to be a slight bend to look forward to in 260km time. Another day in the Kyzyl Kum desert.



The road is long, with barely a windling turn.

Kazakhstan is the 9th largest country in the world but also one of the most sparsely populated. There are 18 million inhabitants spread over 2.7 million square kilometres. Or to put that into context, it's roughly the equivalent of the population of Beijing spread over an area larger than western Europe. This means there's space. Lots and lots of space. We've heard of cyclists riding to a state of near madness trying to cross the entire Kazach Steppe so we're glad to have just 550km to cover, it would be very different to anything we'd ridden so far.





Stoker auditions in Aktau

The first 2 days have some variety as there are physical features to ride up and over. We pass at least one town or village each day and the sight of nodding donkeys and swaying camels are initially something exotic to look at.



Nodding donkey



Swaying camels

On our 2nd night we camp on a ridge overlooking the vast expanse of Steppe opening out as far as our eyes can focus. It reminds me of the first time I saw the Grand Canyon. It was a view I fully expected to be underwhelmed by but in reality the sheer scale of the place is hard to take in. It looks like a huge painting and it's truly magnificent. A train that must be 500m long crawls across the plain and looks no more significant than a line of ants on a garden path.



The vast Kazach Steppe





As we continue, a short, stiff climb takes us up onto a new plateau which is where we say goodbye to the contours.

We've actually arrived at one of the best times of year to be here. In the winter it can be as cold as -30°C and in the height of summer its normal to be in the mid 40s. For most of our ride the temperature stays at 25° to 30° which is quite pleasant, we even get a bit of light rain one night. We still end each day with increasingly impressive tan lines and with a salty tide mark on our clothes like a sweaty turin shroud.



kite flying

The number of towns along the 550km stretch can be counted on one hand so keeping a good stock of food and water becomes even more important than usual. Lidl haven't expanded their empire out to here quite yet, but there are chaihanas (tea houses) spaced at 50-100km intervals. These small refuges for travellers on the road provide useful supplies, hot meals and huge pots of milky tea. It's usually served on a low table while we lounge inelegantly alongside on the kharpara mattresses. They vary in form from a converted shipping container to extensions to people's houses. There's usually nothing to advertise their purpose until you walk through the door and see a menu and counter.



Container Chaihana





Tea time in the chaihana

We'd been told that the food in central Asia wouldn't be very exciting but we've found a great variety of dishes. There's Lagman which is a noodle based dish either in soup or fried and usually with fatty mutton stirred in. Mante are fat dumplings, not unlike Georgian Kinkale, filled with spicy mutton. Plov is a good hearty meal being a big pile of rice with mutton on top. For a smaller snack a Samsa is very tasty which is a type of samosa in varying shape and size, stuffed with mutton. This menu is repeated at each Chaihana and it never gets easier picking what to go for.



Kirsty has found some very informative blogs by fellow cyclists who have travelled this route and have detailed exactly where the chahanas are. This takes a lot of the guess work out of how much water to carry so even for the longest stretches we never actually carry more than 7-8 litres in total.



Upping the water carrying capacity.



Some of these blogs are from a few years ago and tell of the struggle of some long stretches with terrible unpaved surfaces. Since then there have been extensive improvement works and for most of the route we have lovely smooth tarmac and feel quite smug about it. But the works are on going and the smiles soon disappear when we have to endure some bumpy bits too although for a maximum of 20-30km at a time. In fact we get to ride everything from mud tracks, compacted gravel, concrete slabs and nice fresh tarmac. At one point too fresh which results in an hour gaining an intimate knowledge of the tread pattern of our tyres while we pick out wet, sticky tar before it sets.



rough village roads



Ahhh, fresh tarmac



Arrrgghh fresh tar!

Rain and sand create a gloop that clogs up bikes in barely a few metres. After an overnight shower camping near a cemetery 200m from the road we appear to be stuck. Fortunately the local grave digger arrives on a motorbike and is able to ferry our kit back to the road. This coincides with Josh and Rob catching us up having left Aktau the day after us. They get treated to the unusual spectacle of a motorbike and side car loaded with our panniers charging out of the desert being chased by Kirsty on foot and with me dragging the bike behind them. It looks like a robbery! Once bike, bag and riders are all reunited we thank the grave digger who returns to his duties and form a compact peloton with Rob and Josh into Beyneu, the last town before the next border.



The grave digger



Rob and Josh



Riding with Rob and Josh into Beyneu

The 90km of road from Beyneu to the Uzbekistan border has good bits and bad bits, but on the most part it's truly awful. All rules of the road are abandoned with cars, trucks and bikes weaving from one side to the other to try and find the smoothest line. When there are no smooth lines vehicles just drive alongside the road and so the rows of tracks get wider and wider. It takes total concentration to thread the bike through the maze of holes, bumps and ruts with the occasional yelp from Kirsty who holds on like a rodeo rider.



The road from Beynu to the border



The road from Beynu to the border



The last shop in Kazakhstan



The border crossing goes worrying smoothly. When we arrive the place feels like a refugee camp with queues of cars filled with sleeping passengers, most of them loaded up with an entire household's worth of furniture. Some people traveling on foot are held in a high fenced pen. After clearing the Kazakh side we get directed down a barbed wire lined alley at the end of which an Uzbek guard nods to a room where we can get our passports checked and then we seem to be free to go, so we do. There's none of the expected thorough bag search and lengthy customs forms to fill out. We can only hope this doesn't cause a problem when we try and leave.

A certain Joseph Stalin was tasked with implementing the soviet 'divide and rule' strategy in Central Asia to create countries where before there were mostly just different ethnic groups. Taking this quite literally he drew a very straight line in the sand at this point with one side being called Kazakhstan and the other Uzbekistan. I suspect no one was going to argue over who had which part of the wide open

nothingness.



Distance to Samarkand.

As such, not much changes in terms of the view and we have the prospect of another 300km of desert to ride. The language has only subtle differences too. 'Rakhmet' becomes 'Rakhmat' for thank you. Chai becomes Choi and Yok for no becomes a much more satisfying Yuk. Russian is still the 2nd language for most of the older generation so we use the odd 'Ruskie' word here and there while anyone under 30 will have learned English which makes things easier.



These Russians had exactly the same bike as us. Amazing!

After a cosy night with some taxi drivers just after the border who offered us chai, then plov then vodka then some floor space to sleep on with an awkward cuddle in the night for me and an unwelcome foot massage for Kirsty, we're back on the desert road.



Our welcoming commitee into Uzbekistan

Soon we find more work in progress than work complete with rocks, ruts and plenty of mud which makes for slow and hard going on the tandem. Amazingly this is a major transport link with Europe and for days trucks trundle past from Latvia, Belarus, Poland and Turkey no doubt enjoying the unsurfaced road as much as we are.



Filthy conditions



Trucks from all over Europe battling along the terrible road
For the worst sections we're actually quicker than the trucks
and we get a friendly toot of the horn as we bounce past.
Thankfully the road improves and we cover the next 300km in 2
and a half days with the wind blowing a different direction
each day. We just get some music playing and get through a few
games of eye spy. Something beginning with S? Sand? Yes.



Katherine on her way back to England from Melbourne.
Travelling ultra light.



Sharing lunch with some Turkish truck drivers from their mobile 'canteen'

After 1 particularly hard 130km day ,The Bon Voyage cafe offers us a sofa to sleep on to save getting the tent up. We wake at 5am to find 20 or so lorry drivers have crept in and are sleeping all around us on every available surface.



Then we reach a river and like a switch the view turns green. Fields, houses, mud huts, trees, animals, people, cars, bikes, buses, donkeys. We're in Kunqorot and have found civilisation again. We're also in the autonomous region of Karalpaqstan (a minor 'Stan to add to the list) and a couple of days later arrive in its capital, Nukus.



Workers in the field



Ranking highly in the list of environmental disasters caused by the soviet union, not far behind Chernobyl, is the Aral Sea. In 1960 the three main rivers that fed one of the largest lakes in the world were dammed so that the water could be used for agricultural purposes. Ever since the sea has been shrinking at an alarming rate and it's now 1/10th the size, leaving behind a salty desert and a devastated fishing community. We decided to arrange a trip to the sea side, while it's still there.



Refreshing fruit soda (not beer)



Nukus Bazaar

After booking a driver for the next day we go in search of a camp site. Pamela finds us eyeing up a field and puts on a fine bull mime to indicate that it's not a good place for us to stay. Instead she leads us back along a dirt track to her village, all the way proudly telling her neighbours that we're "Tourists, Anglia!". Soon a crowd has formed and we all gather for photos and her nephew Amil translates the many questions as he's studying English at college.

Inside the house is sparse with little more than a few patterned rugs on the floor and a low table in the main room that we all sit round for dinner. The only other item in the

room is a 40" flat screen TV. We drink tea, eat soup, bread, jam, vegetable paste then Amir asks if we'd like to meet the rest of his family. It's hard to say no so we go on a walk to his mum's house then across to the next village where his grandparents and sister's family live. Here we have to politely nibble a complete second meal. There is a wonderful custom of holding your hands out at the end of the meal while a prayer is said and then everyone brings their hands down over their faces as if stroking a beard. In my case I actually do stroke my beard. It's something we see being carried out numerous times as we ride through the country.

Eventually we're returned to Pamela's house, much to her relief as she was worried her guests had been poached. We settle down under the stars on the tea bench outside and wake to the sound of the cows being milked alongside us.



Not far to go for fresh milk in the morning

We say our goodbyes and thanks with hands on hearts as a sign

of sincerity. The first impressions set by the Uzbek consul in Baku were unfounded as we've found nothing but generosity and kindness here and leave with some unique memories.



When we booked the Aral Sea trip we knew it would involve several hundred kilometres of very rough roads across the former sea bed and up onto the old coast line. We expected a 4x4 vehicle fully equipped for the ardours of the journey with sand ladders, snorkel kit and raised suspension. What we got was a Daewoo saloon with a spade in the back.

We also got Aylim who more than made up for his lack of equipment by brining his heaviest right foot and a complete lack of fear. What followed were two very exciting yet very terrifying days with Aylim displaying a level of courage never before seen outside the world rally circuit. He had a total disregard for maintaining the integrity of the car and little interest in the lives of its occupants. If things looked tricky, as they invariably did, he'd use good old fashioned momentum to get us through it.



Testing the road ahead. Of course the car made it through easily.

We pay a sobering visit to Moynaq, formerly a prosperous fishing port and beach resort. Now the sea is over 200km away so the fishing boats lie rusting in the desert and the canning factory is long since closed. Somehow there is still a community living there but it's reducing in size every year so could one day be a ghost town.



Moynaq, formerly on sea



Ship graveyard, Moynaq



Map showing the Aral Sea in it's former glory



This is what's left.

While hurtling down across the sea bed we find that inevitably there are a queue of people waiting to profit from the disaster. Numerous drilling rigs have been sunk to tap into the newly revealed gas fields which is much easier without the inconvenience of several metres of water in the way.



Driving across the sea bed

Without a proper road we're in real wilderness and it's a relief when we reach the high cliffs on the other side that used to form the coast line. Up on the cliff top we follow some twisty tracks for a couple of hours more then the Aral Sea finally comes into view. We drop down a very steep gulley and run in for a dip.



Cliffs formed by the waves of the sea, when it was there



finally we see the sea



As well as being 10% of it's former size it's also 10 times as saline so nothing lives in the water and swimmers float like a cork.



An evening float in the Aral Sea

We spend the night half way up the cliffs and while watching the night sky come alive Aylim puts on one of his favourite CDs. Hits from the 90s. It's an unusual experience sipping vodka with nobody near us for 100km in any direction while listening to Snap, Vanilla Ice and Scatman John.



That's what the shovel was for



Camping on the former shore of the Aral Sea



Starry, Starry night

The trusty Daewoo gets us back to Nukus the next day, via a

garage to get the exhaust welded back to together. When we pull to a halt back at the bike we expect the car to disintegrate in a reenactment of the final scene in the Blue Brothers.





The finest rally driver in Uzbekistan

But this is made of stronger stuff, in fact it's made right here in Uzbekistan. General Motors have a huge manufacturing plant in Asaka that the government have a 75% share of. To help support the local industry they have levied a 200% tax on imported vehicles which makes them prohibitively expensive for most people. As such there are just 5 different models of car on the road which either wear a Chevrolet or Daewoo badge. The most popular is a nippy little micro van that comes in any colour as long as it's white and can fit at least a dozen people inside, with a few sheep. Of course the prices are fixed so the cars cost more than in any of the surrounding countries that they are exported to and are released in limited numbers to increase demand. Another good idea borrowed from the Soviet Union.

We're glad to get back to the relative safety of the bike. The route now takes us towards some of the famous historical cities of the Silk Route, following in the footsteps of Marco Polo and Ghengis Khan. We're not quite finished with the desert though and have a few more days of monotonous views to look forward to before we escape to the mountains. I spy with my little eye something beginning with S. Sun? Yes.



Desert wildlife



camel crossing



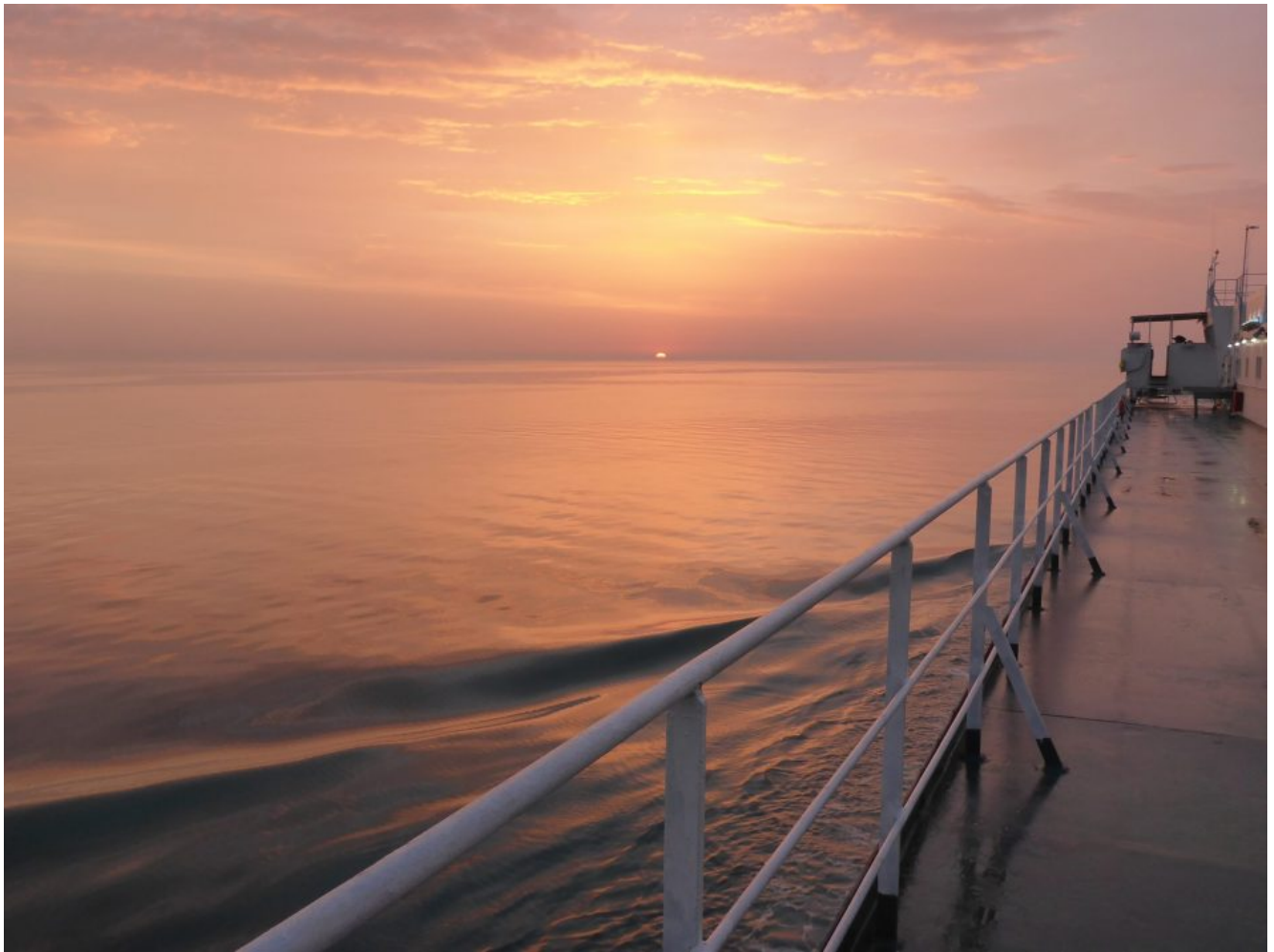
Desert wildlife



Dobin stew

Escape from Baku

written by Marcus | 17 May, 2015





There was a rumour that the restrictions on visas for UK citizens visiting Iran was only temporary and would be lifted once the much publicised nuclear talks had been completed.

Sadly it looks like this isn't the case, or at least nothing has changed yet so our Plan A route to Central Asia is well and truly closed.

Plan B was to take a boat from Baku to Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan. Often referred to as the North Korea of Central Asia due to its former dictator's unusual behaviour (he changed the names of some of the months to include his family's names, a book of his famous sayings is compulsory reading for all citizens, there is even a gold statue of him in Ashgabat that revolves to always face the sun). But Turkmenistan is the 7th least visited country in the world, not helped by yet more restrictive visa conditions. As with Iran, to obtain a tourist visa we'd need to be on an expensive guided tour. The alternative is a 5 day transit visa but with 900km to cover and a boat crossing that could use up 2-3 of these days it would be hard to cover this distance by bike so we reluctantly rule this route out.



Fruit and Veg market

So our Central Asia plan C is to catch a boat across the World's biggest lake, the Caspian Sea, up to Kazakhstan (no visa needed for a 2 week stay) then ride down into Uzbekistan through vast amounts of desert.



Baku is a city of fountains

On an extremely windy day, for which Baku is well known, we struggle against 70kph gusts up to the Uzbek embassy and meet with a very grumpy Consul. He reluctantly takes our completed forms and tells us he'll be in touch within 8-10 days once the visas are ready. Longer than we expected but we hope he's exaggerating. The embassy is on an unassuming residential street and on our way out we bump into an exasperated motorcyclist who has spent the last hour trying to find it and point him in the right direction.



Uzbekistan embassy, Baku

The next day we find the Tajikistan embassy as this is our destination after Uzbekistan. Here the reception couldn't be

more different with a very friendly and helpful Consul who tells us we should be able to collect these Visas within 4 days. The price is less than half that of the Uzbek visa at \$35 instead of \$75 and we can apply for up to 45 days compared to only 30 days for Uzbekistan. As a representative of their country and first point of contact for many foreign travelers it's the Tajik who leaves the much better impression.

WORKING HOURS OF THE CONSULAR & VISA SECTION OF THE EMBASSY REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN IN BAKU	
THESDAY	14:30pm - 17:00pm
WEDNESDAY	15:00pm - 17:00pm
THURSDAY	15:00pm - 17:00pm
FRIDAY	14:30pm - 17:00pm
THE CONSULAR SECTION OF THE EMBASSY IS NOT OPEN DURING THE NATIONAL HOLIDAYS OF THE REPUBLIC OF TAJIKISTAN E-MAIL: BAKUCONSULAR@MAIL.RU	

Tajikistan embassy, Baku

So with a few days to spare we have the whole of Baku to explore. It's a city of 4 million people and has seen rapid growth after oil began being extracted just off the coast, bringing with it lots of foreign investment and plenty of cash for the government.



There aren't many soviet era buildings left in Baku

This wealth is very evident with huge and elaborate buildings crowding the skyline, impressive museums, a shiny marble

promenade along the seaside and some of the cleanest streets we've seen for quite some months (although most of Azerbaijan was largely litter free too which makes for a refreshing change).



Heydar Aliyev museum



Heydar Aliyev museum



Carpet museum



Parliament building



The old and the new

The streets are crammed with vast 4x4s, at least 2 stories high and always fresh from the car wash. Barely reaching their bumpers are a few remaining Ladas but everyone is brought together by a shared love of using their horns. Continuously.



Big wheels in Baku

Behind the glitz and glamour there are still a few slum areas but their days are clearly numbered. This summer Baku will host the first ever European Games and the government is keen to present a prosperous image of Azerbaijan. Bulldozers are parked ready to level some of the inner city areas. All routes from the airport and to the venues have been smartened up with new facades on the buildings and walls around the parts they don't want visitors to see. An entirely new fleet of buses is primed and ready (brand new London Taxis were bought when Baku hosted the Eurovision Song Contest). There are also rumours of street dogs being 'disposed of'.



A less scenic view of Baku

The overall impression is of a strange and false city that bears very little resemblance to the rest of the country that

we have seen. It's also no surprise that Baku aspires to be referred to in the same breath as the mother of all mega-wealthy oil cities: Dubai.



The flame towers by night

Justin and Jess are great hosts and keep us busy when not visiting embassies by inviting us to their local Hash House Harriers event. The Harriers are a global organisation and refer to themselves as a drinking club with a running problem. There are factions all over the world catering for many expats as well as a few locals who enjoy a bit of running and a lot of drinking. For our first outing we opt for a walk rather than a run followed up by much raucous singing, fun and frivolities that are the trademark of the club. Later in the week I get to pull on a pair of running shoes for the first time in 9 months and discover that absence makes the heart grow fonder by thoroughly enjoying stretching my legs with a couple of the Hashers. Then more liquid refreshments and next day discovering that absence also makes the legs grow stiffer after such a long break from running.



Hash House Harriers



We'll certainly look up more HHH clubs in some of the cities further along our route as it's a great way to meet some new people as well as guaranteeing a great night out. I may even

get to go for another run.

The Hash has provided Justin and Jess with plenty of friends including some high volume and great value Americans, Steve and Kathleen who invite us all round for dinner and some Southern style catering (hot, brown and plenty of it). They also introduce us to Gafar, a native Azeri who proves to be a very useful contact.



TOUR
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Just too early for the tour d'Azerbaijan

Gafar is also a keen cyclist and suggests that, as we have a spare day, we go for a ride up one of his favourite climbs. He provides a bike and brings his chauffeur driven support van to get us to and from the climb that passes through the Candy Cane Mountains north of Baku.



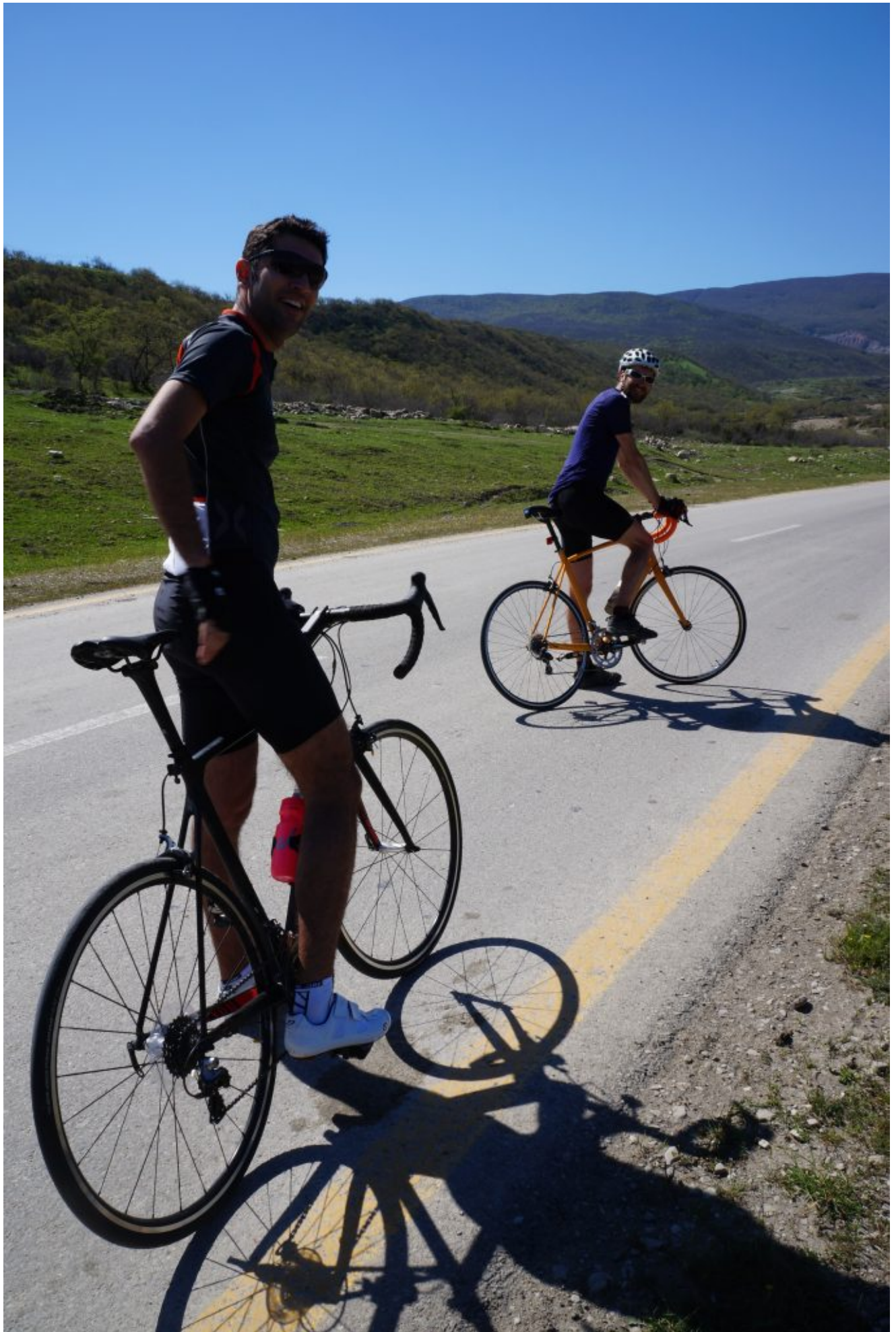
Support crew bus

Having the driver, Emin unload the bike, inflate the tyres and check everything is ready is quite a novel experience. Everything feels twitchy, light and unstable compared to the mighty tandem and it takes a while to stop wobbling all over the road. But I've been goaded by Justin to give this climb some welly as there is a record to try and break so I give it my best shot.



Candy cane mountains

We fire up the 1000m hill that is consistently steep and weave up hairpins through acres of trees. The last 12000km of 'training' seem to have paid off and it feels good to be riding without the panniers. The record falls by just 1 second but it's enough to take the King of the Mountains title. I can only imagine how much faster I would have been with Kirsty providing her power on the back too. We celebrate with a fine meal in Gafar's penthouse suite cooked by his maid. Gafar is a very useful person to know.



Marcus and Gaffar at the base of the climb



Up we go

On the 8th day after applying, a call to the Uzbek Embassy results in the reply we are waiting for, our visas are ready. We had already collected our Tajik visas 3 days before and paid in cash there and then. Nice and simple. The procedure for the Uzbek Visa requires a visit to a bank in the centre of town to pay directly into their account, then taking the receipt to the embassy before they then relinquish the much coveted visa.



On the metro they have a different jingle to announce each station

Now we are ready to set sail across the Caspian. This is not a passenger ferry route but there are cargo ships that have a

limited number of bunks that tend to be used by Mongol Rally drivers, intrepid backpackers and of course the occasional cycle tourist. The boats do not follow any kind of timetable as their departures are dictated by the volume of cargo that needs to be moved, the weather and the whim of the port authorities. So to find out if and when the boat might leave you need to call, or better still visit, the port ticket office and ask if there is a boat leaving that day and if so if there is room on it for two people and one bike.



As part of a \$70 million development this was the world's largest flagpole. It held the record for just 5 months then someone in Saudi Arabia built a bigger one.



Justin sets one of his logistics experts on the task of arranging this for us as it requires an Azeri speaker but his first candidate tells him that we should go via Tbilisi as this is the best route. That person has since been sacked. The second logistics expert has more luck and after speaking to the ticket office learns that there is no boat today.

On the second day of asking there is also no boat but there may be one the next day.

On the third day Kirsty and I ride down to the ticket office ourselves. It's not easy to find being 8km East of the city, down an unlikely rough track and behind an unmarked grey door near the main security gates for the port. We sit and wait for it to open at 10am, which comes and goes. At 11am a head appears at the window and tells us to wait for an hour. At 12pm the door opens and they tell us the boat will sail today at 6pm, not from Baku but from Alat which is 70km south of the

city. We hurriedly handover the \$110 ticket price, grab the tickets and pedal back to Justin and Jess' flat to collect our bags.



To find the ticket office, ride 8km east from Baku centre and look for this sign on the right hand side



The ticket office is behind this grey door at the end of the track. They may or may not let you in.



**AZƏRBAYCAN
XƏZƏR DƏNİZ GƏMİÇİLİYİ**
RO-RO VƏ BƏRƏLƏRİN DAŞINMA TARİFLƏRİ
RO-RO AND FERRIES FREIGHT RATES

İSTİQAMƏT DESTINATION	AVTOMOBİLLƏR / VEHICLES (ABŞ DOLLARI HƏR MƏTƏRƏ / USD PER METER)			MOTOSİKLETlər / MOTORBIKES (ABŞ DOLLARI HƏR MƏTƏRƏ / USD PER METER)		KONTEYNERLƏR / CONTAINERS (HƏR BİRİNE/PER UNIT)				GÖYÖRTƏ YÜKÜ / DECK CARGO (ABŞ DOLLARI HƏR TONA / USD PER TON)			SƏRNIŞIN BİLETİ PASSENGER TICKET (ABŞ DOLLARI HƏR ADAMA USD PER PERSON)
	YÜK AVTOMOBİLİ LONG VEHICLES	MİNİK AVTOMOBİLİ PASSENGER CARS	AVTOBUS BUSES	ADİ (2 TƏKƏRLİ) MOTORCYCLE	QOŞQULU TRICYCLE	40'	20'	10'	5'	METAL/TİKİNTİ MƏTƏRİLLƏRİ CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS	ƏRZƏQ MƏHSULLARI FOODSTAFF	HƏCMİLİ YÜKLƏR VOLUMINOUS CARGO	
BAKİ-TÜRKMƏNBƏŞİ BAKU-TURKMENBASHI TÜRKMƏNBƏŞİ-BAKİ TURKMENBASHI-BAKU	65\$/M	85\$/M	65\$/M	95\$/M	125\$/M	1000\$	500\$	350\$	250\$	01T-10T-\$70 11T-20T-\$60 21T-50T-\$50 51T~ -\$40	100 \$/T	200 \$/T	90 \$
BAKİ-AKTAU BAKU-AKTAU AKTAU-BAKİ AKTAU-BAKU	75\$/M	100\$/M	80\$/M	110\$/M	140\$/M	1200\$	600\$	400\$	300\$	01T-10T-\$80 11T-20T-\$70 21T-50T-\$60 51T~ -\$50	110 \$/T	220 \$/T	110 \$


TARİFLƏRƏ DAXİLDİR / THE RATES ARE INCLUDING

YÜK/CARGO

1. GƏMİDƏ NƏQLİYYATIN / YÜKÜN BƏRKİDİLMƏSİ
LASHING AND SECURING OF THE VEHICLES / CARGOES ON THE VESSEL
2. NƏQLİYYATIN / YÜKÜN TƏYİNAT LİMANINA QƏDƏR ÇATDIRILMASI
TRANSPORTATION OF VEHICLES / CARGOES TILL DESTINATION PORT
3. TƏYİNAT LİMANINDA BƏRKİTMƏ VASİTƏLƏRİNİN AÇILMASI
UNLASHING AND UNSECURING OF VEHICLES / CARGOES UPON ARRIVAL
TO DESTINATION PORT

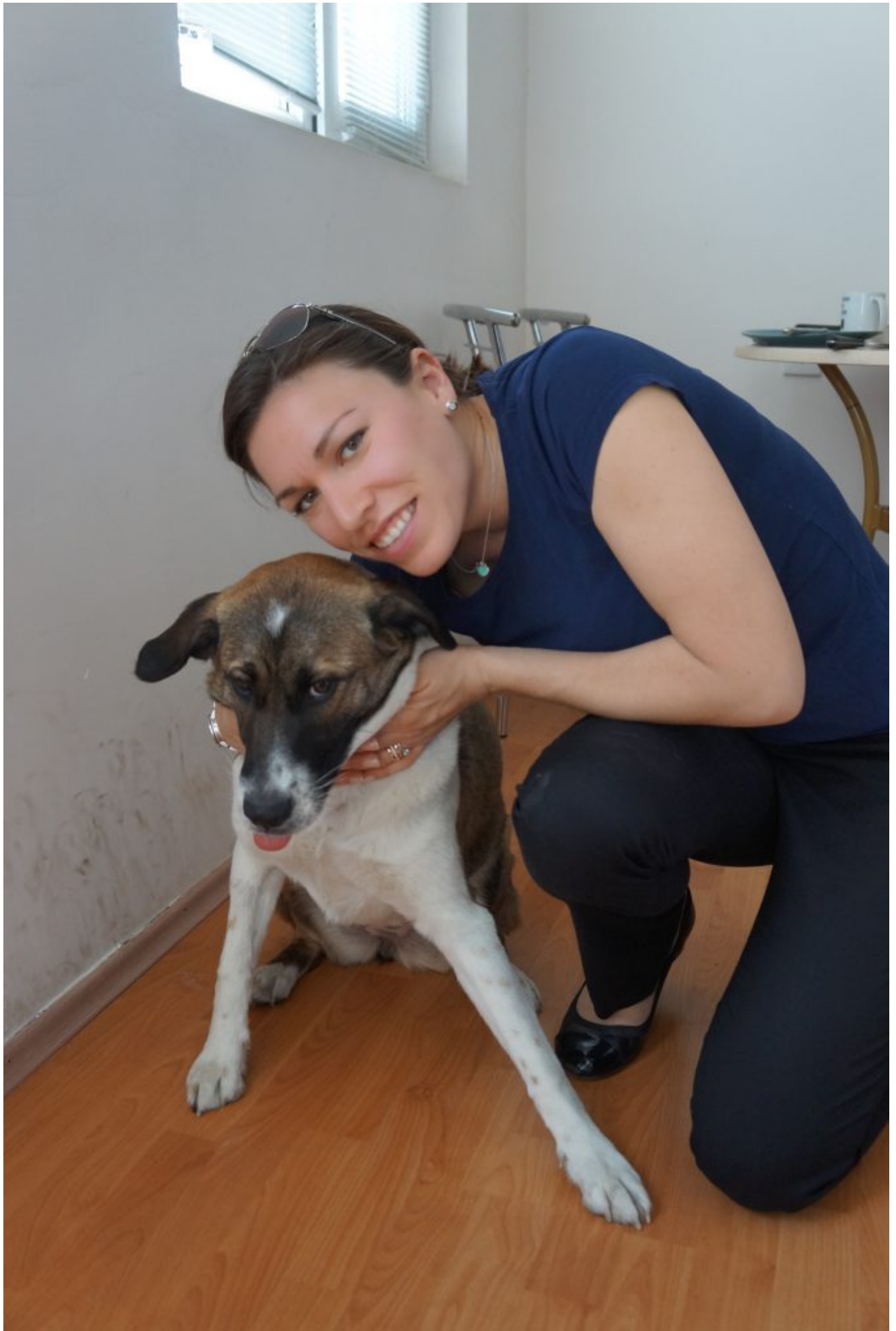
SƏRNIŞIN BİLETİ (SÜRÜCÜ) / PASSENGER TICKETS

1. SƏFƏR ZAMANI QALMAQ ÜÇÜN OTAQ (KAYUT)
ACCOMODATION UP TO PORT OF ARRIVAL (CABIN)
2. YATAQ DƏSTİ
BED LINEN
3. QIDA (GƏMİNİN YEMƏK CƏDVƏLİNƏ ƏSASƏN)
FULL BOARD MEAL (FOLLOWING VESSEL'S MEAL PROVISION TIME TABLE)

 QAYNAR XƏTT / HOTLINE
(012)493 82 84

Details of the ticket prices. Cabin and food included for \$110.

We had anticipated that it might be a bit of a rush so have Gafar's driver and van on standby to drive us down to Alat. Gafar is a very useful person to know.



Jess and Maya



Maya

Baku has become a meeting point for cycle tourists travelling across the world and forms a watershed for those heading into Iran (just about everyone) and those heading across to Kazakhstan (Brits, Candadians and Americans). It was no surprise then that we had met two other cyclists at the Tajik Embassy in the form of Rob (allthewayfromstockholm.com) and Josh (joshcunninghamcycling.co.uk) from London. As they were on a similar schedule to us we had agreed to keep in touch with regards the boat. They had also managed to buy their tickets so we all piled into Gafar's van and headed down to Alat to board the boat.

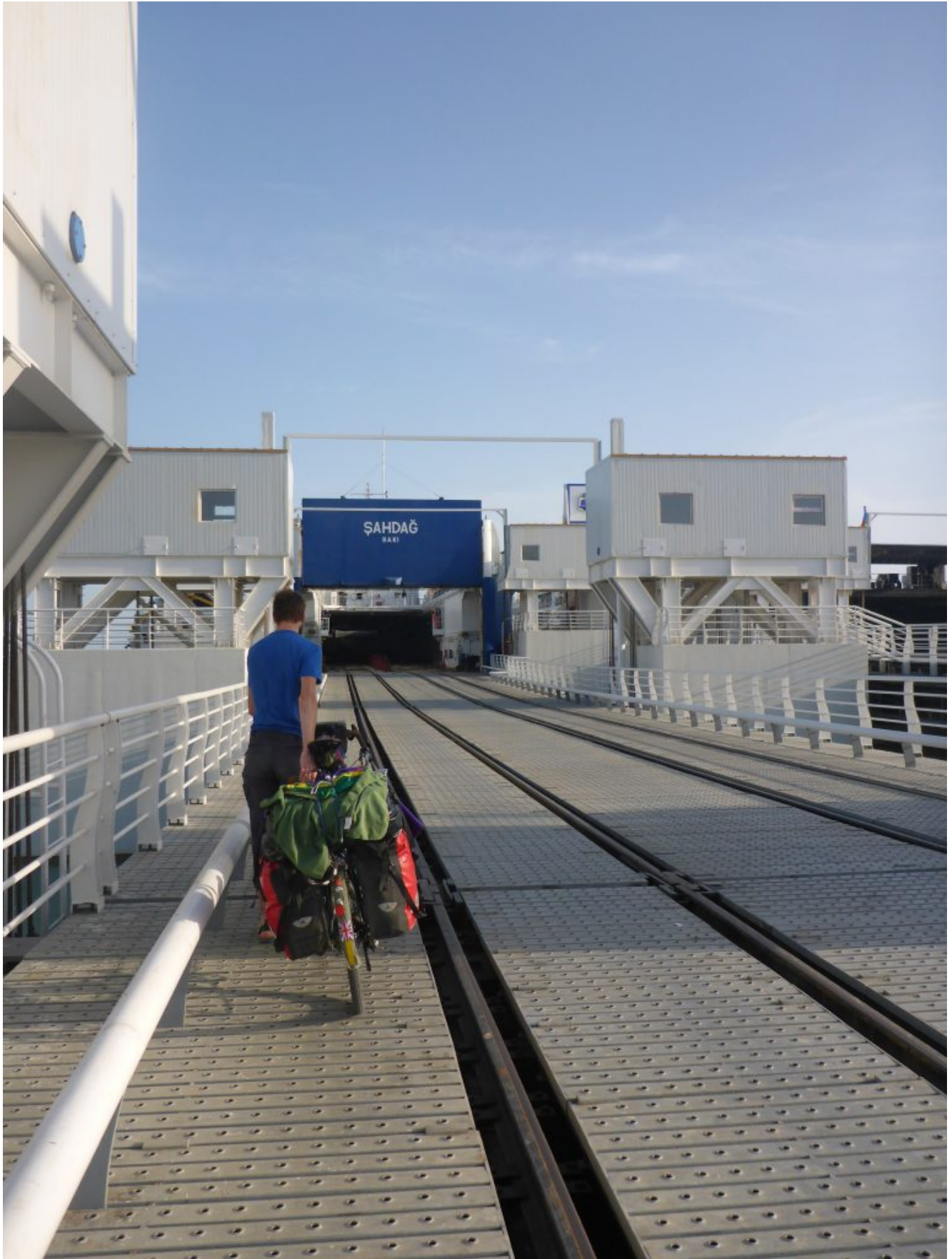
Alat will one day be Baku's main port but for now it is a huge building site with a single jetty and a border control office and nothing much else around it for several km. The border guard doesn't pay us much interest and it's clear that not much is going to happen for a while so we set ourselves up on the tarmac and wait. With the time I manage to get a swim in

the Caspian sea as it looks much cleaner here than back in Baku.



Obligatory Caspian sea swim

After waiting 2 hours, at 6pm we're let through onto the boat and I'm the only one to be asked about the registration with immigration control. This is supposed to be mandatory and requires all visitors to the country to register within 10 days of arriving via their chosen accommodation. It clearly serves no purpose other than to allow border guards to hand out a hefty 300 menat (about \$300) fine to those who fail to do it. Luckily Gafar had sorted Kirsty and my registrations out for us via one of his hotels. Gafar is an extremely useful person to know.



Boarding the Shadag

Our ticket price includes a cabin that we all share and then we have free run of the boat so can explore just about

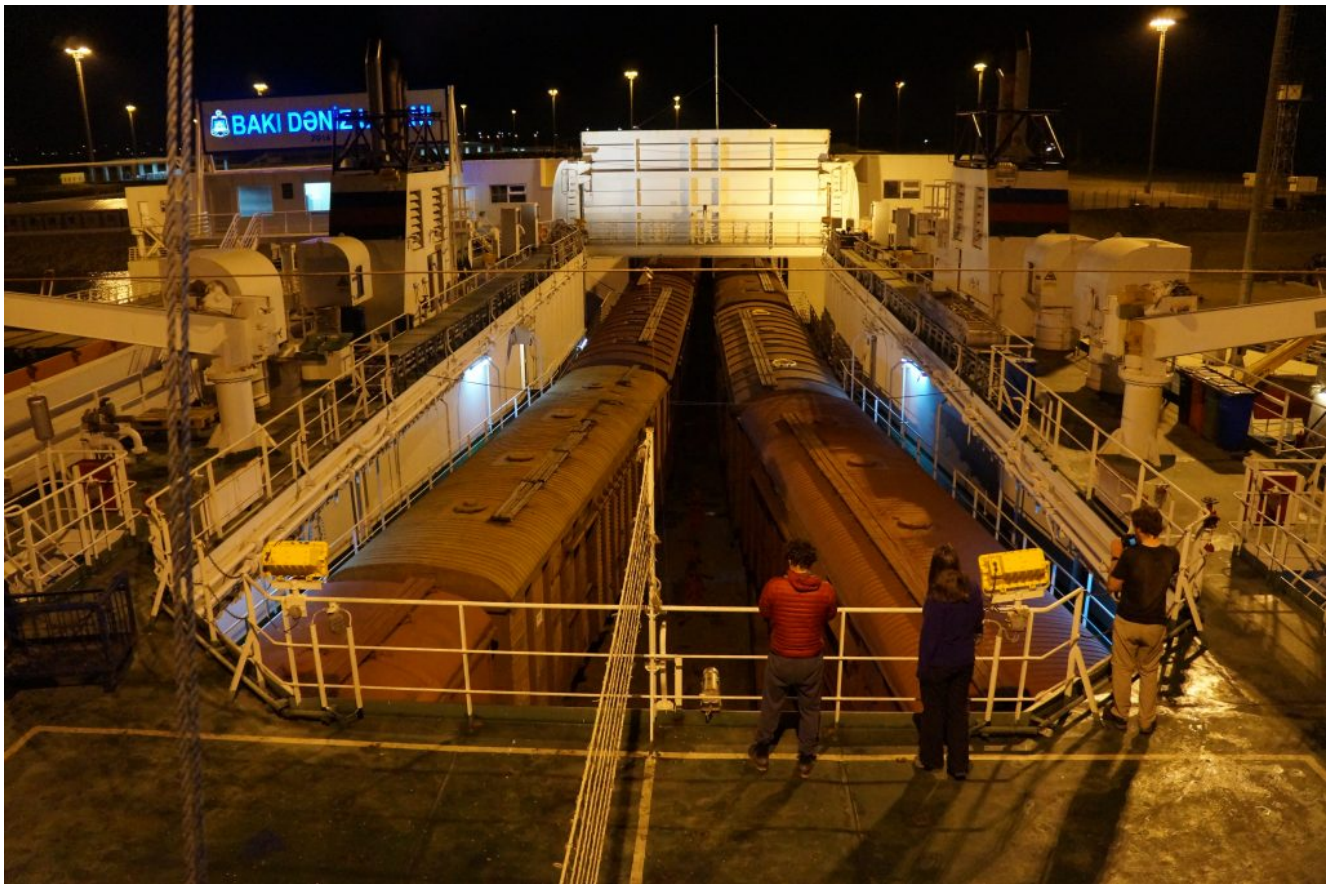
everywhere including the bridge, engine room and climbing the radio tower.



When I grow up I want to be a ship driver

Supper is served at 7:30, again meals are included, then at 9:30 they begin loading the cargo. A lengthy train is slowly wheeled onto the boat which takes about an hour of to-ing and fro-ing before all the carriages are fully on board. Meanwhile we find the volleyball court, midships complete with a ball on a wire to prevent it from going over board. Josh wins 5-0.

Apparently we eventually slipped away from Azerbaijan at 2am but I was fast asleep by then.



Loading the trains onto the boat

In the morning when I woke up I thought we were still still in port because it was so incredibly smooth. Looking out the window the water is like a mirror, broken only by the ripples from our bow wave.

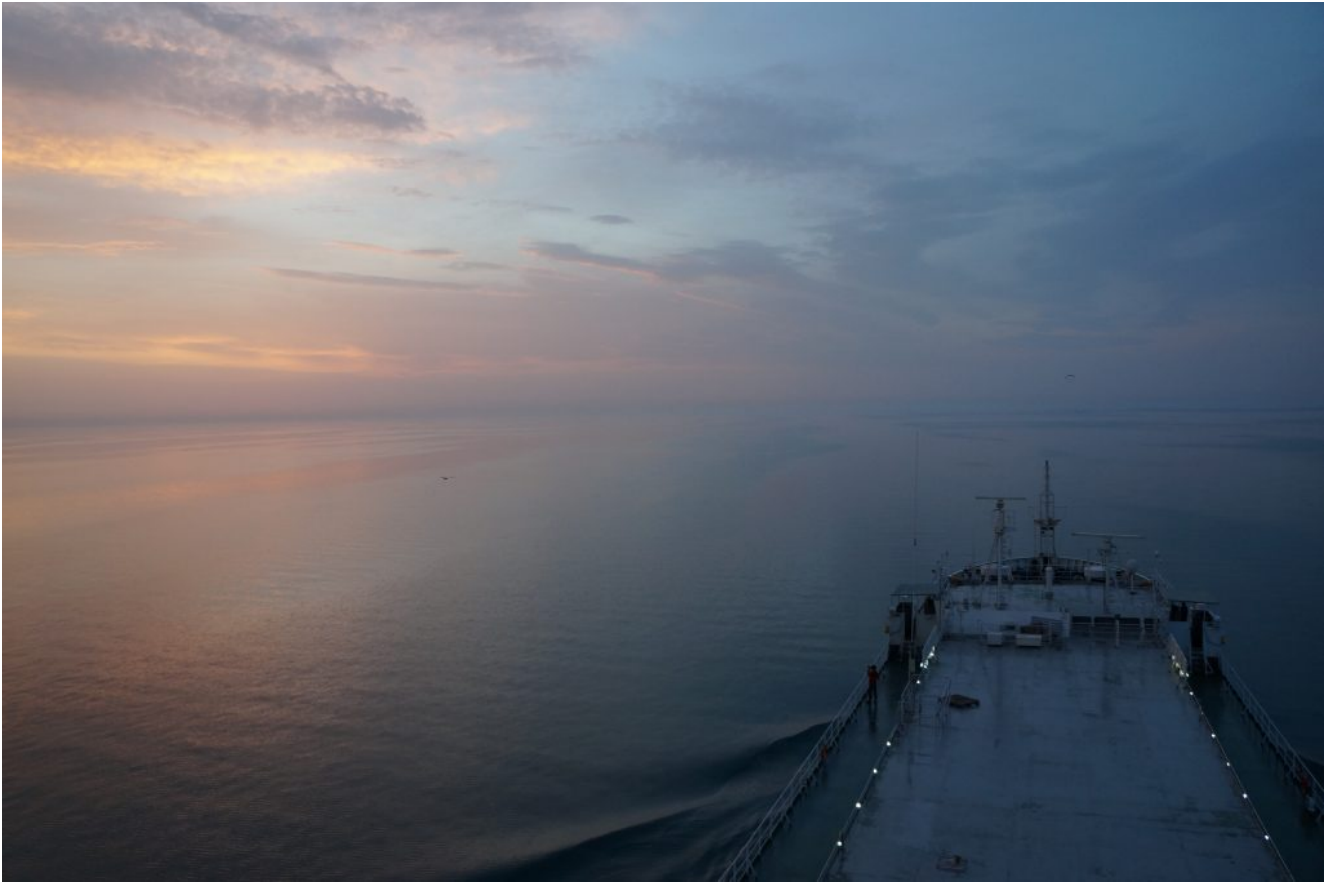


Just before sunrise on the Caspian sea

We all scramble out of our bunks before sunrise for what is promised to be something very special. The best vantage point is found to be the top of the radio mast which we take turns to shin up and snap dozens of photos of the glorious blaze of colour as the sun rises out of the sea. The spectacle in the sky being mirrored perfectly in the still calm sea. We've seen plenty of sunrises and sunsets on the trip but this is one that will be hard to beat.



In the crows nest



View from the mast



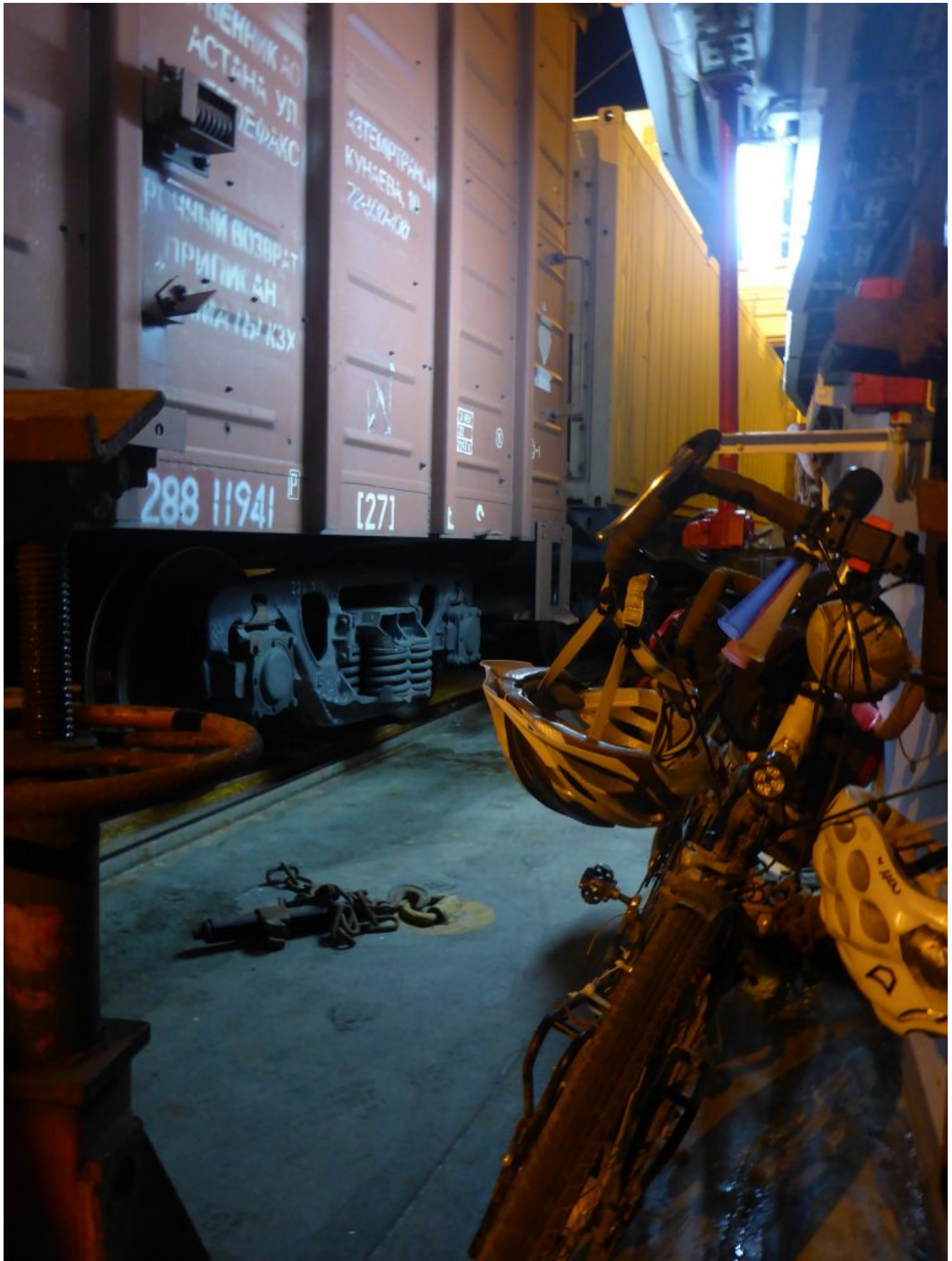
A sunrise to remember

The cook is surprised to see us so early and breaks with

decorum by allowing us to have breakfast before the captain.



A city of oil platforms in the middle of the Caspian Sea



I'd set aside various tasks to keep me occupied during the 30hr crossing the first of which is to service the rear hub on the bike. That's the only thing that gets done in the end

though.

After reassembling the bike again I go and inspect the train and wonder what the cargo is. It turns out to be two Georgian men who are escorting several wagons of frozen chicken, and when they spot me looking up at their carriage they invite me in. It's about 10:30 so they're tucking into a late breakfast which, being Georgian, includes bread, cheese and 80% proof chacha. Also being Georgian means that they insist that I join them and offer a toast to my good health.

A few toasts later and I'm sent to round up the others to join in the fun. I'm a little unstable but manage to climb back up to the main deck where I find Kirsty and Josh and tell them to follow me to the train. They look bemused by my big grin.

The chacha gets poured again, more heartfelt toasts are raised, some homemade wine is produced. Rob is finally found and is made to catch up and before long there's a good old fashioned singsong of Beatles hits.



Enjoying a Georgian breakfast

We're all back in bed by about 6pm and next thing we know it's 7am and Kazakhstan is fast approaching in front of us. Despite the crossing being so smooth I'm looking a tad green so I can only imagine the vibrations from the engine and the smell of diesel fuel have caused me to feel unwell.



Cabin fever



Arriving in Aktau



We dock in Aktau at 9am but have to wait for the border guards to come on board before we can leave. I'm just happy to stay horizontal on my bunk for as long as possible. At 10am we're

told to clear off after an armed guard has had a cursory look in the top of our bags and decided he doesn't want to rifle through cycling kit so gives us the all clear. We're officially in Kazakhstan at long last!

And so begin our travels in central Asia with a few days in the 300,000 square km of Kyzyl Kum desert to kick things off. The map of the region looks like it's had tipex spilt on it, there are few roads and most of them end abruptly at a huge white void. We've loaded up with plenty of food, have our 10 litre water bag sloshing around on the back of the bike and some new hats to keep the sun off.

Things are about to get hot and sandy.



The motley crew of the Shadag land in Kazakhstan

Tbilisi to Baku

written by Marcus | 17 May, 2015



‘For some reason a friend from University had a fascination with Azerbaijan. There were a few occasions while we enjoyed a pint or two of Snakey B in The Lemon Grove that he suggested opening a themed nightclub called “Azerbaijani’s” but at the time I knew nothing about the country so had no idea what that theme would look like. That friend now runs a hotel in Port Isaac and as far as I know has not ventured into the club business but perhaps he’s just waiting for the right moment to open Cornwall’s next big party venue with a Caucasian twist.



Leaving Tbilisi

We hopped back on the George W Bush Highway to get out of Tbilisi, past a flock of sheep huddling under the slip road in

what must be the most inappropriate grazing of the trip so far. Unlike our ride along the same route the week before, we've got a cool, dry day so the potholes are no longer hidden in amongst puddles of an unknown depth and as such are much easier to avoid.



This time we turn off the main road before Satichala and ride north towards Sasadilo, crossing our old friend the Iori river on the way. The valley we ride up is densely forested but without my brother we're stuck trying to identify what the trees are. It feels a lot like a valley in mid Wales with added drizzle for effect. Then the road starts to nudge up a few percent and ahead is a ridge that is a six hundred metres higher than Mount Snowdon, just to remind us we're actually a long way from Gwynedd. We decide to break the climb up and camp before reaching the top leaving the last stretch for the morning. To help extend the life of the drive train I've been swapping between two chains every 1500km and this service

interval is long overdue so I decide to change the chain before setting off. It's a foolish mistake as we have all sorts of trouble getting the gears to engage properly with the new chain on the old cassette (it's usually fine after a day or two once the chain has 'broken in') which means a lot of walking up the hill and a fair bit of unhelpful shouting at the bike. Near the top it starts snowing but we also find a gear that works so can ride to keep warm. Then on the way down the snow turns to sleet then to rain as we lose altitude and get cold again.



Drizzle turns to snow as we climb

Telavi is a town with no cafes, at least none that were open on an Easter Sunday so we grab a Katchapuri from a streetside

serving hatch and continue on. It's our second Easter as the Orthodox calendar is different from the Anglican one and this year they are celebrating a week after the UK. We've seen lots of eggs dyed red for sale but not a single one made out of chocolate.



Georgian Easter cake







After a flat and fast afternoon, for our last night in Georgia we settle down on the edge of a field overlooked by the foothills of the Upper Caucasus. Justin is again missed as he was very useful for wood collection and fire starting duties. He would also have been needed for fire fighting duties when a rogue ember lands on my waterproof jacket melting two neat holes in the back. As one of the more essential pieces of kit, particularly with heavy rain forecast for tomorrow, it's a cause for more angry and unhelpful shouting, this time aimed at the fire.



Fire vs jacket

Unfortunately the forecast is correct and in the morning we hear the pitter patter of rain on the roof of the tent, always sounding several times worse inside than it actually is outside. Once we've extracted ourselves from the dry and warm shelter and get everything packed, we quickly pedal off towards our next border. One of our last Georgian towns is Ganjala which also seems to be home to several building supply shops. I pull up outside one hoping to be able to find some gaffa tape to patch up my jacket. It seems to be a flooring shop and we're welcomed in to scour the shelves for what we need. Unfortunately the best they have is a type of selotape which doesn't look up to the job but Kirsty is barged out the way so that two of the small crowd that has now gathered can begin covering my back anyway. Meanwhile we're asked if we want a drink and a tray arrives with çay, water and a bottle of vodka. As we've seen all over Georgia, there seem to be jobs for everyone and although this is a small,

specialist shop there are at least three sales assistants, a manager and two tea ladies. Also typical of elsewhere in the country, the ladies have a magnificent set of gold teeth that shine brightly when they smile but are always swiftly covered up by tightly closed lips as soon as the camera comes out.



The flooring shop crew



After a cup of cay, a glass of water, two shots of vodka and only just managing to convince them not to try and make us drink any more (my mime of a drunken cyclist swerving down the road then falling off always seems to work) we get back on the road again. My back is semi mummified in selotape which stays in place for at least 500m.





The rain continues all the way to the border where we meet some friendly guards with wide rimmed hats. Seeing us shivering while we wait to have our passports checked they come out with some çay and two Snickers bars. It creates a good first impression that most border guards could learn from.

Azerbaijan fact #2: Out of the 11 different types of [climatic zones](#), 9 are present in Azerbaijan.

It's no drier on the other side of the border but it is very lush and green as a result of all the rain. After 12km we reach the town of Balakan and head for the first of two hotels that are listed on the Garmin. Since Turkey we've been using Open Street Maps on our GPS which are free to download and so far have given a surprising level of detail including shops, ATMs, petrol stations and accomododation.



Balakan taxi rank

I'm shown two rooms that at first glance have a similar level of degradation with peeling wall paper, cracked bathroom tiles and the type of bed that allows you to feel every single spring in the mattress when you lie on it. But for some reason one is offered at \$20 and the other \$10 so of course I opt for the \$10 room. We soon learn that the extra \$10 would have paid for a heater and hot water.



Heydar Aliyev, the former president, kept an eye on us from billboards all the time while we were in Azerbaijan

We head out to find some food after a tasty kebab and çay we stumble upon a sewing shop. I present my waterproof jacket and

peer through the holes in the back and the tailors soon get the idea. A roll of faux leather in almost exactly the right shade of blue is brought out and I give them the thumbs up. Their resulting handiwork is better than I could have imagined and I have to admit that the smart new blue diamond deftly attached over the holes is actually an improvement on the original design. It also makes for great advertising space so if anyone wants to add their company logo then let me know and we can negotiate a donation to charity.



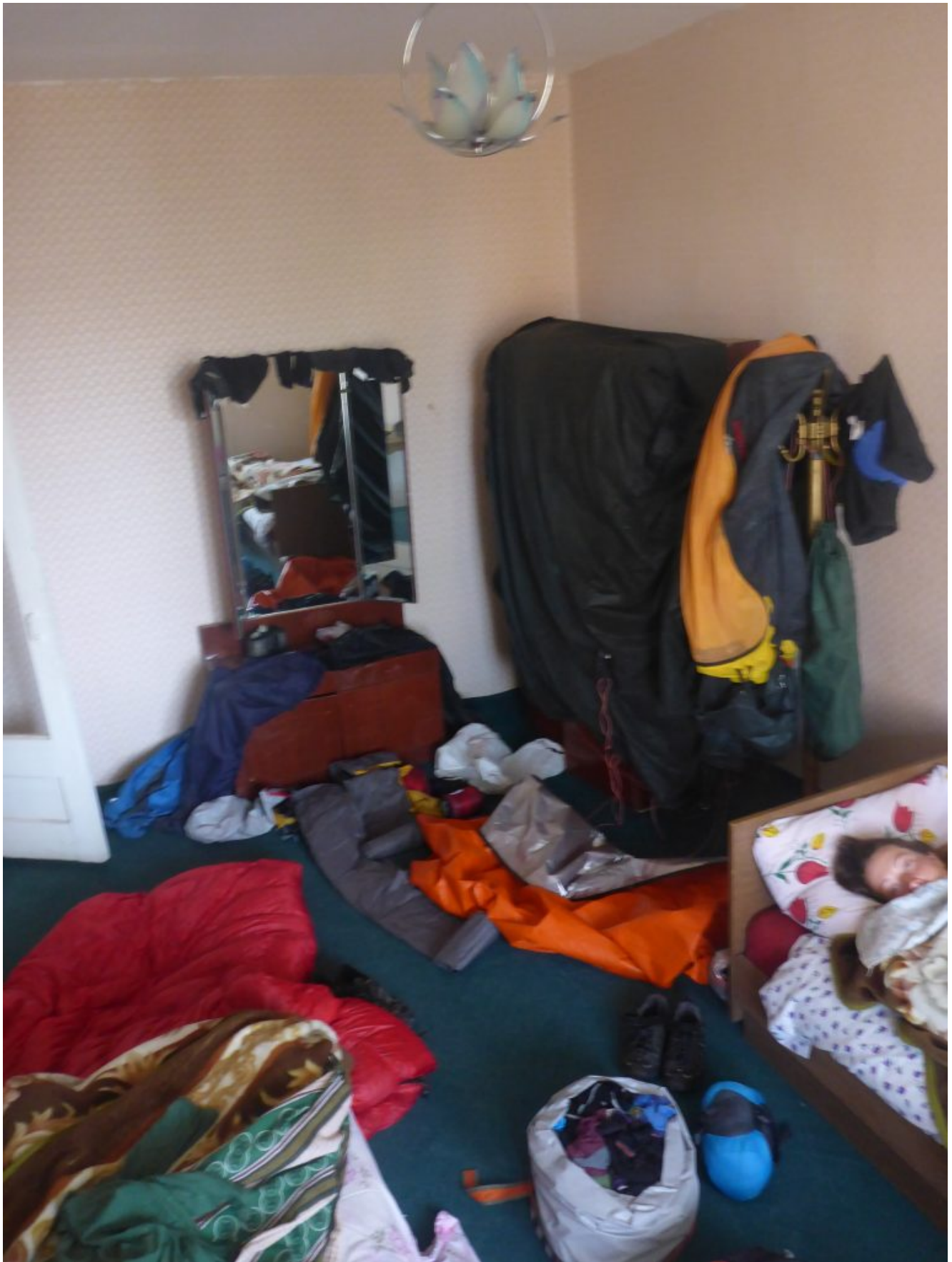
Azeri tailors at work



The new improved jacket

Back at the hotel we find that there is a new person holding the fort and he tells us to pack our bags as soon as we walk

into the reception. Not because he wants us out though, he's actually moving us to the penthouse suite. Apart from being larger (we now have 4 single beds) its in a similar state to our previous room compete with another threadbare carpet. However it does have the important addition of hot water and a heater. All our kit quickly gets unpacked and hung from every available hook, door and lampshade to dry overnight.



A full blown kit explosion

Azerbaijan fact #3: Azerbaijan is one of the six Turkic countries and shares a lot of the same language as Turkey.



The view from the window is of the local mosque with an impressive brick built minaret that looks a lot like a Victorian, industrial chimney stack. This means we get woken

early by the call to prayer then make our way down to breakfast. The friendlier of the two hoteliers asks if we'd like to climb the minaret which sounds like a great idea. I begin warming up the vocal chords in case they need a new imam to sing the ezan.

The view from the top back into our hotel room is fantastic, and the mountains beyond aren't bad either.



This one goes out to the faithful massive







Back on the road we enjoy some fine sunshine having left the rain back in Georgia but it's a shame I can't try out my new improved jacket. For a couple of days our road follows the

foothills of the upper Caucasus on our left with a series of horrendous invisible climbs. It's the kind of road that looks flat and everything around it looks flat but for some reason we're forced down through the gears and the trip computer shows that we keep gaining altitude. This continues through Katex (hello Katex) and Zagatala before we get to enjoy the opposite effect. The road looks flat but we pick up speed and effortlessly cruise along at 30 kph.



We're now passing green meadows, fields of oil seed rape, fruit orchards and nut groves. In amongst the trees nestles a small cafe, not much more than a plywood roof with a stove at the back but two of its patrons wave and call us over with the promise of fresh çay. We've barely taken a few sips when they decide we need something stronger and the tea is replaced by two large glasses of beer. Our protests that we have more riding to do go unheard so we bravely finish them up. I even struggle through a second one but when the third one is

suggested we have to say our thanks and get going otherwise we'd be there all night (not a bad prospect in hindsight).



Çay and beer in the orchard



Staying close to the mountains, we winch up another long drag into Sheki, famous for its ancient Caravansary, a place to stay for the silk route traders and travelers, and also for its super sticky and sickly sweet baklava that we're obliged to buy and try. While tucking into lunch we get invited to record a sound bite for a national TV show. We're not sure what Ziq Zaq is about but apparently we love them.



Sheki Caravansary. Requires a climb up a steep cobbled hill but worth a look.



Ceiling in Sheki Caravansary



Our first view of a camel train, Sheki



Filming a message for Ziq Zaq TV show

Azerbaijan Fact #4. They are very superstitious and believe things like:

"Don't drink cold drinks in winter as you'll get ill".

"Do not lend money or bread at night."

"Do not give sprouts as a present, the plant the sprouts are taken from can die."

"Leaving scissors with opened blades brings misfortune and even death."

"If you meet a person with empty buckets, you are bound for misfortune"

There are huge dry river beds at frequent intervals, ready to take the winter deluge and spring melt water from the mountains. In fact spring has well and truly sprung, bringing with it all kinds of flying, slithering, croaking and biting things out of hibernation. The insect repellent gets dusted off for the first time in many months.



We crossed lots of these enormous dry river beds









Outside Sheki we camp behind an old shack but not out of sight enough to escape the attention of a pair of policemen. They imply we should move on but eventually give up and say we can stay. Later that evening a different pair of law enforcers spot the smoke from our camp fire and also try and move us on with a similar level of success. In the end they even chuck some extra wood on the fire for us and bid us a good night.



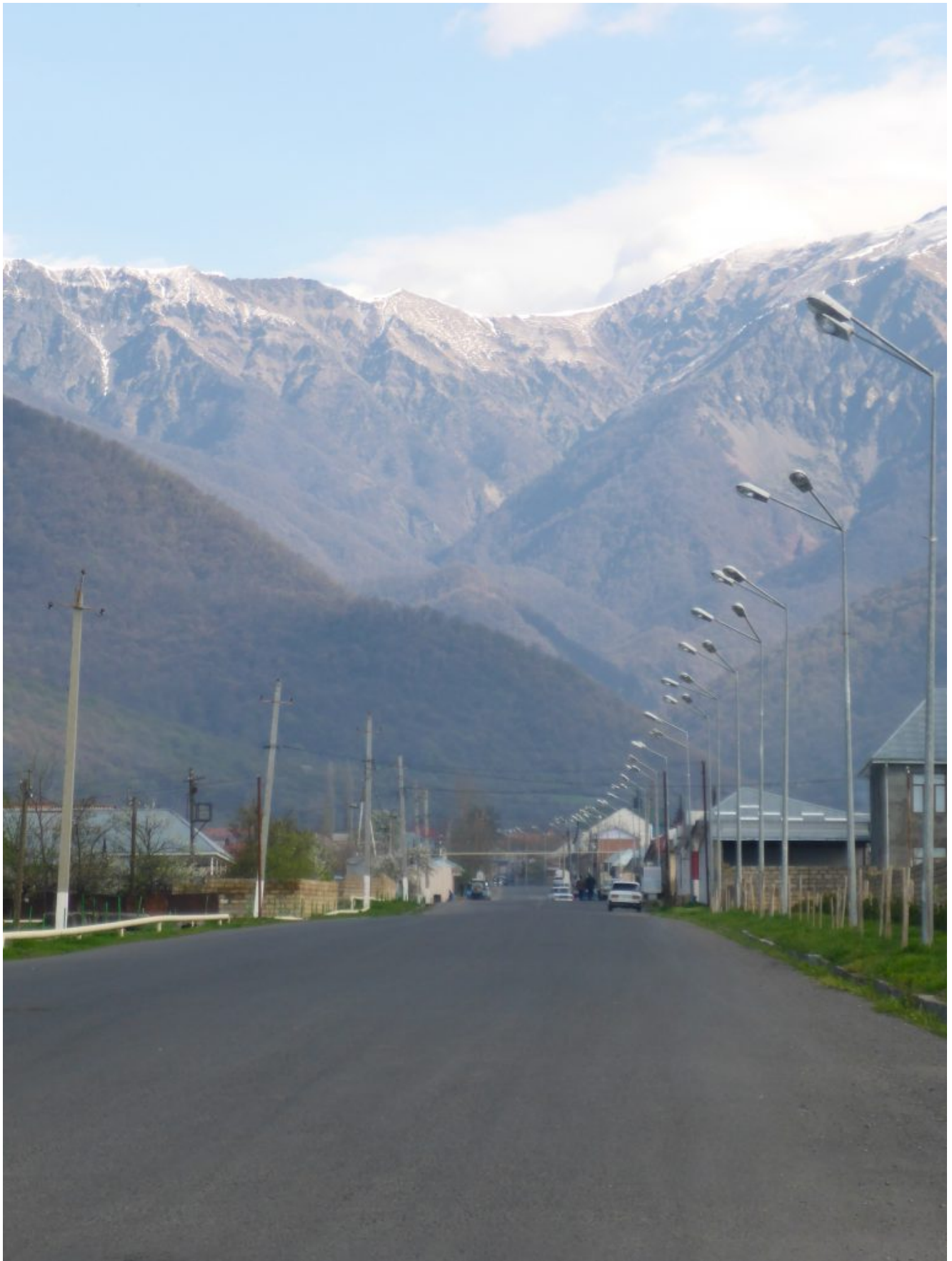
Illegal camping near Sheki

We ride across to Oghuz and onto a very tandem friendly road that descends at a 1% gradient. Unlike Turkey where the çay is

served by the glass, here the cafés give us a whole pot that seems to be bottomless. Kirsty also notices that all of them have a picture of a strawberry on the side. Except in one case where it's a flower instead and she nearly sends it back in disgust.



Roadside bread oven







While passing fields of grazing cattle we spot the unmistakable silhouette and laboured pedal strokes of another touring cyclist coming towards us. Jimbo is from Japan though

we suspect this isn't his real name. His itinerary so far makes us very jealous having taken in the Karakorum highway from Pakistan to China and also 3 months in Iran. Our perfect route would be very similar but we've got to take diversions at both these areas due to visa restrictions. However his tales of a winter on the Pamir highway enjoying -25 degC sound less inviting. He tells us the road up ahead is very good after Ismaili and with that we go our separate ways. It would be interesting to know how many cyclists crawl out of their tents on any given morning, ready to take on another day in the saddle riding slowly towards a faraway destination.



Jimbo from Japan – www.kotambola.blog.fc2.com

After Gabala we suddenly find ourselves surrounded by trees in a beautiful forest. Thinking back, we haven't seen this kind of view since Estonia but sadly these woods don't have the well equipped camping facilities that were provided in the Baltics. What they do have are cafes and lots of them. As it's

still early in the year plenty of them are closed but even at peak season it's seems surprising that there would be enough trade to sustain them all. One such closed cafe provides an ideal camping spot but without the fire place and stack of wood that we would have enjoyed in Estonia.



Traditional Azeri head gear





Chocolate pud a l'orange







The forest continues for much of the next morning until we emerge into low rolling hills that then brings us to the foot of a long steady climb back up to 950m. The variety of landscape is astonishing as is the rate that it can change from one km to the next. After the summit we ride a ridge that gives us views to the left to some very stark mountains with little vegetation and another broad but dry river bed snaking between them. On our right are more of the round topped, green pastured hills. Blowing across the ridge is a harsh cross wind that then makes the descent a little too exciting in places and all the way down we can see that our exit from the valley bottom looks to be quite testing.

Hauling ourselves up the other side again at a granny ring spinning, knee creaking 15-20% we arrive puffing and panting at a layby with great views and a cluster of boys trying to sell us flowers. One look at Kirsty tells me this is not the time for romantic gestures so I decide not to buy any and

after a breather we continue on.



Hill top flower seller

Azerbaijan Fact #5: It is referred to as the land of fire and claims

to have the first fire place dating back 700,000 years.

It's much better to cash in hard earned potential energy over a long distance at a shallow gradient than splurge it on a short steep drop. The road down into Shamakhi is lovely and seems to go on for ages with barely a pedal stroke. On the way we pass restaurants with cows heads sat on chairs outside, which seems an unusual advertising idea. Later we see butchers with live sheep and cows penned in outside their shops, waiting for customers to pick which one they want for dinner.



Come and get your fresh cows head



Animals awaiting their fate

Shamakhi is a lively little town and the former capital of Azerbaijan before Baku took over the title. Kirsty pops into a

supermarket while a crowd gathers around me and the bike. One curious taxi driver asks for a ride so I oblige by taking him for a quick spin up the street that brings a lot of amusement to the other onlookers.



Giving the taxi driver a ride. "You'll never guess who I had on the back of the tandem the other day..."

On the outskirts we pass smart walls that seem to be in place to conceal more run down areas of town which is a common technique that we've seen all over the country. It's a bit like trying to sweep the dirt under the carpet. Its still there but now out sight and out of mind.



Before the end of the day we start to get hints of what's to come as the vegetation starts to disappear and in its place the landscape becomes orange and red rock and sand. There's one last long, steady climb to get up before we can pitch the tent and get the stove on for a well deserved cup of tea.





Crawling from the tent and blinking in the morning sun the view could well be of an alpine meadow. Lush, green grass with wild flowers sit in the foreground while the horizon is a jagged range of huge, snowy mountain tops.





The quilt airing ghost





This all changes as the day progresses as the greens and browns become reds and oranges and finally the drab beige of the desert. The desert towns are bleached by the sun with dusty tracks between the buildings while a simple tin roofed mosque is one of the few religious buildings that we've seen. Islam is certainly nothing like as visible as in Turkey and very few women wear head scarves.



Desert mosque



We spend the afternoon charging across the desert with the wind in our faces like a hair dryer, until it begins to give way to more and more civilisation as we approach Baku. The cars get smarter, the drivers more aggressive and the road gets wider and wider until we're on a six lane highway that probably isn't really designed for bicycle traffic.

Azerbaijan Fact #6: When a courting groom's parents meet his potential wife's parents they will drink tea. If the tea is served with sugar then the engagement is accepted, without it's rejected.



But we make it safely into the centre of this very modern looking city and meet up with our host Jess. She and her husband Justin are friends who we used to share a swimming lane with in Bristol. They moved here 18 months ago after Justin landed a job with a dairy product company while Jess has some very useful and very portable English language teaching skills so works at a nearby school.

While in Baku we have a few tasks to complete before we can continue on so we need to be here for a few days. There are visas for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to apply for and also a few running repairs and maintenance needed on the bike and kit. Once that's all been done we then have to work out how to get onboard the legendary and notorious Caspian Sea crossing but all of that is a story for another post.



Flame towers, Baku