

Sary Tash to Bishkek

Anyone remember The Adventure Fairy? Well in Kyrgyzstan she was back with a vengeance.



Trading a ride on a donkey...



...for a ride on the back of a tandem

After a half day and a full night sleeping in Sary Tash Kirsty feels much better and I've got a tiny bit more energy so we

decide to continue. After so many days at high altitude and several nights camping above 4000m our blood would probably ring alarm bells in a UCI doping test. As a result Kirsty feels strong going into the morning's climb which is good because I'm running on half power.



Sary Tash with Pamirs looming behind

It's a laborious plod in 1st gear to the top, 500m above Sary Tash, then we roll down a couple of km only to have to climb once again to the second summit which sits at a comparatively normal 3600m.



Over the moon to have made it to the top, only it isn't quite the top



This time the road drops away below us around a ladder of hair pins that appear to be built on the side of a landslide. Despite the drag brake being set to 'cruise' we still manage to zoom past the heavy trucks that crawl down the hill.



An impressive engineering feat

Then the wiggles straighten out to take us alongside a small river in a gorge full of yurts and caravans. We meet 2 French riders coming the other way who tell us that the road ahead will be 'Paradise for you' so we look forward to more freewheeling fun. The direction they're going doesn't look like such an enticing prospect but they've already been

climbing for 3 days from Osh so are well warmed up. We meet a dutchman, 3 Koreans and an Australian later in the day. This is a very popular cycling route.



Typical Kyrgyz view

The gorge opens up into a wider valley. On top of the hills directly ahead sits a black cloud like a mortar board but we can see that not far beyond the sun is still shining. By pedalling hard we nip through the brief rain shower and emerge back into the dry and can ease off again. It's great when the weather is so clearly defined and visible. Passing through a small town the children run out and ask us to take their photo and to high five them. This has happened a lot during our time in Central Asia and they love to see their image on the back of our cameras. Another cyclist we met carried a polaroid camera so could give them a copy which is really nice idea. Sometimes they come a bit too close and need a yell to avoid a nasty tandem/child collision.



Akbosaga

There's only a short climb in the afternoon that requires much effort, other than that gravity does the work for us, which is fine by me. We decide on an early finish and find a nice secluded spot by the river.



Worn out by all the descending

Which is where we stay the next day after my body goes on strike in the morning. It's an effort just to rush to the nearest bush and then down to the river. But it's a chance to clean the bike and bags which were still filthy from the Kyzyl Art Pass out of Tajikistan. Then rest, eat, read and dodge the thunder showers that roll around the hills and occasionally pass overhead. This is the first time the tent has stayed in one wild camp spot for more than one night.

We're back on the road the next day primarily because I'm too impatient to wait another day though I do feel a bit better. Thankfully the road continues downward and 30km passes in less than an hour and with barely a pedal stroke. A four year old boy spots us and instead of the usual cry of Hello! we get a middle finger salute and are told to F off! Who knows where he learnt that but it's not the kind of greeting we had expected.



Solitary yurt

Then I slam on the brakes as there's a puppy in the road. At first we think it's been hit but it doesn't appear hurt, it just can't stand up properly. I carry it to a nearby bus stop and whenever it gets up it walks a couple of steps then falls over. A local man comes to take a look and suggests it may be drunk, which is certainly what it looks like.

Kirsty stays to keep an eye on the poor thing for a while but it's hard to know what we can do to help. In the end she carefully lifts it up and over a small wall, here it can stumble around without the risk of falling back into the road so it seems safer. We can only hope that it either gets better, someone comes to look after it or it sobers up.

The hillsides are so colourful with green meadows laced with reds, yellows, blues, browns from flowers, yurts and animals. It's so refreshing after the sepia tones of the high Pamir plateau that starved us of variety.

We're following the River Gulcha and enjoying watching it gather momentum and increase in volume. The road takes us into

the town named after the river where we stop for lunch in a small park and I entertain some children with a rendition of 'Wish You Were Here'. The guitar they lend me isn't a 12 string so it's hard to do the song justice but I think they get the idea. No tips though.



How I wish, how I wish he
would stop

The downhill ends at Gulcha and is replaced by a climb up another high pass which is not an appealing prospect in my weakened condition. We pull over and set up camp instead and I load up with imodium, rehydration salts and listen to Pink Floyd in the hope it'll be the cure.



The sanitorium

It's not, so we vote for another recuperation day. It's going to take a while to get to Osh at this rate!

We have great views, a nice little river and some friendly children for company who let us help them catch fish. It's not a bad place to be ill. There are more thunder storms and sunshine while we watch a skilful horseman herding his cows up to a different pasture. Almost everything seems to be done from the saddle of a horse round here.



Frantic fishing



Catch of the day

It seems Richard Ashcroft was wrong as the drugs do work. The next day I feel so much better and can finally begin making use of our high altitude training. We climb up the long pass with renewed vigour and after tackling some 12% gradients and a few hairpins we arrive at the top which seems to be a yurt city.



Caravan home

We see horses being milked for the first time. The milk will

then be carefully bottled and fermented to produce the popular drink Kumis. Stalls line the road selling this stuff in old coke bottles and its hugely popular but its not the refreshing drink we're after at the moment so we pass them by, for now.



Horse milking

Ahead lies Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second city. It's 50km away and 1500m below us so this distance passes in just over an hour. It's a wonderful yet subtle descent and we feel like we have a motor on the bike traveling at that speed on what looks like an almost flat gradient.

As we get lower the temperature gets higher and the housing more dense. This is the first proper town since Khorog, 3 weeks ago and it feels like we're entering a proper city with actual super markets, bars and restaurants.



Osh town houses

We find several other cyclists in the Bayana Guest House including Tim and Carina (www.booby2east.com) and later Paul and Greet who we had met back in Dushanbe. For the last few days I've been craving burgers, pizzas and milkshakes so we all go out to gorge ourselves in a nearby fast food restaurant. Normally we'd stay well away from this kind of place and eat local dishes but gosh it tastes good after some fairly bland food over the last couple of weeks.

A rest day in Osh is mostly spent eating 60p burgers, 30p water melons, 10p ice creams. I've got some weight to put on after being sick and I'm committed to doing it as quickly as possible. If I'm not in front of a plate of food I make sure I have a Snicker's in my hand.

There's a huge outdoor pool which is perfect for cooling off so we head there in the afternoon and find months of cycling have not helped our arm muscles, even Kirsty 'dolphin' McGaul finds a lap of the pool an effort. But the main activity seems to be diving rather than swimming so before the assembled crowd I introduce the locals to the fine art of performing the

running bomb.



Osh Lido

The next day, after a wide eyed visit to the supermarket (so much choice!) we leave Osh with bulging paniers and ride out into the heat.



Harking back to the past in Osh

Although our bodies are on the mend the bike is now misbehaving. The middle chain ring is coming to the end of its life so we have to now use either the big ring or granny ring. Either a big heavy gear at a very low cadence or a small, super spinny gear, both of which are uncomfortable.



The road rises and falls over rolling hills and follows a convoluted route. There are fingers of Uzbek territory stretching across from the west which we have to skirt round adding a considerable distance. Our frustration is added to by the terrible drivers. They have absolutely no appreciation for how much space we need and often pass so close that we could reach across and take the phone out of the drivers hand. Driving licences are simply bought which removes the inconvenience of learning to drive and passing a test.



Grains of every variety



The hills are sunburnt and orange, there's a risk we'll start going the same way. After Jalalabad we find a shallow reservoir that offers the perfect camp spot and enjoy a refreshing dip to cool off. We manage to end the next day next to another reservoir too, this time camping on an island.



Andrijan reservoir



Mountains of massive water melons

The road then follows a steep sided valley with the river Nurak captured in a series of bright green reservoirs lying at the bottom. At the end of each one there is a large dam which we have to climb up and round, often including a short but dark tunnel. All of Kyrgyzstan's power comes from hydroelectric plants like this one. We, on the other hand, have no power as our dynamo hub has packed up meaning no front light and making the tunnels more exciting.



Following the River Naryn

This is a hard road that ramps up at 12% then drops down just as steeply, often with a sharp bend at the bottom making it tricky to carry much momentum into the next climb. The

problematic gear box means we have to stamp on the pedals in the biggest chain ring then quickly change to the smallest chain ring when the hill steepens up again.

Just before Karakul we pull in, hot and bothered, to buy a round of cold drinks and ice cream each at a small shop. Followed by a round of cold drinks and ice cream, which is enough to power is up the last long climb of the day.



Emergency ice cream stop

Like it's Tajik namesake, Karakul has a lake but this one is much smaller and much warmer. It's a popular place with most of the town enjoying an evening swim and kids daring each other to jump off the 10m high diving board. We eat melon and shashlik kebab, chat to some Russians visiting on holiday then pitch for another lakeside camp site.



Karakul swimming lake

A bigger lake awaits us on the other side of a long climb back up to 1500m. Once up and over this hill we begin following the shore of Toktogul reservoir. It's an annoying road that prefers to head for the hills rather than stick to the water line. All the time the lake is far below us with no obvious route down and as such no chance to cool off. Instead we find some shade in a chaihana and the owner shows us shrapnel wounds that he says he picked up when fighting in Afghanistan, presumably during soviet times.



Skirting round Tortogul Reservoir

The hard climbing and inappropriate gears are causing Kirsty's

back to complain in a very painful way. We also manage to break the chain, which is now on its last legs along with most of the drive train. We need a short day to recover and regroup and have visions of lazing under a tree by a sandy beach alongside the lake.



Uch Terek

8km down a rough road beyond the town of Toktogul and we arrive at our 'beach'. It's a barren, pebble strewn shoreline that drops down 1m to the water. There's no shade and only a dusty patch of ground well away from the lake itself to pitch our tent. It'll have to do though as Kirsty needs some hydrotherapy.



The rough road to 'the beach'



Tortogul reservoir



Tortogul reservoir

From Toktogul we have the longest continuous climb of the trip so far, rising 2000m over the course of 65km. Despite still feeling sore, Kirsty decides to get back on the bike the next day and we bounce our way back up to the main road and begin gaining altitude. Almost immediately the trees close in around us and we have a freezing cold river full of melt water to dip our feet into at lunch time. It's a nice steady gradient that would be a perfect middle chain ring spin, if only we had one



that worked.



A grassy, shady spot alongside the river is too good to pass so we stop early to help Kirsty's back recover some more. As we're putting up the tent we're approached by a man in a straw hat who calls out 'She's not pedaling on the back?' in a Leeds accent. Reece (<http://worldwidecycle.blogspot.in/?m=1>) left Baku 2 weeks after us and has been trying to catch us since he landed in Kazakhstan. He's been riding with Virgile, a laidback Frenchman who's been on the road for 4 years and we invite

them both to camp with us. The rest of the climb can be tackled together in the morning.



Reece and Virgile

It's great to have some company and we all chat away to take our minds off the task in hand. Up and up we go.



Virgile stops for a snap

We're offered Kurut outside a yurt while we stop for lunch. These are dried yogurt balls that have the consistency of chalk, smell like strong cheese that's been left in the sun and taste like sour, salty yogurt. Not a pleasant snack but like the Kumis they are incredibly popular. I nibble a corner

then pocket the rest for disposal when we're out of sight.



Making Kurut yoghurt balls



Yurt dwelling family

Up and up we go some more. By mid afternoon we're beginning to wonder if this hill actually has a summit. Maybe we're in an

Escher drawing? But we persevere and finally the road levels off and we're at the top. Windproofs are pulled on and down we go on the other side.



speedy descent after the long climb

We're now dropping onto a massive, yurt filled plateau ringed by a ridge of high mountain peaks. We have to cross this then climb out again on the other side. That second climb can wait until tomorrow though so once we've found the only decent shop for 100km in any direction we set up our little tented village behind a stripey canvas building. The wind whips across the wide open space so the shelter from the building is very



handy.



An evening amongst the yurts



Reece and Virgile cooking up

The second climb out of the plateau is a tough slog. We winch up 1000m in 15km, this time the smallest gear is the only one we need. The hill ends with a tunnel that chops the top of the mountain off for us but we're still up at 3600m now. I dig out my head torch for this one as it's 2.5km long and lined with pot holes. Many cyclists hitch a lift at this point as it's notoriously unpleasant inside but we choose to ride it. And we survive with only mild carbon monoxide poisoning.



The final pass before Bishkek



The tunnel of certain death

On the other side a glorious view awaits us. The road drops down steeply but smoothly through several hair pins and diving through short tunnels. It begs to be ridden fast and I wish I was on my race bike instead of the cumbersome tandem.



This looks like fun

Down and down we go. After the steep section we enter a narrower gorge that seems to be channelling a strong wind back up the hill. We have to pedal hard when we should be freewheeling. As if we haven't done enough work already to get here!

We catch up with Reece and Virgile who have been waiting for us in a chaihana then go in search for a place to camp.

Over the last 11 months we've become pretty good at spotting nice places to spend the night. We also thought we had a good feeling for when somewhere was safe or not. Rounding a corner we look down on a pleasant patch of ground alongside a river and not far from a yurt and a long tent. This looks ideal.

We have to pass through a barrier to get there and have a chat with the yurt owner who tells us it's no problem for us to use the patch of ground we had our eye on. We even get given a bottle of Kumis by someone staying in the tent.

The rest of the evening is spent trying the Kumis then trying to get the taste out of our mouths. Imagine drinking sour, fizzy, alcoholic milk and you have some idea of what its like. We watch the yurt owner sat alongside one of his mares, squeezing out a fresh batch of milk for the next batch of

unsuspecting cycle tourists.



The unmistakable taste of Fermented
Mares Milk 2015

In the morning I sleepily crawl out of the tent and wonder up to the makeshift toilet nearby. I have a vague feeling that something isn't right which grows into a strong feeling of panic when I return to the tent and realise the bike has gone.



Something seems to be missing

It has to be some kind of prank so I rush round the immediate area looking in bushes and behind trees. I walk along the river bank to see if it's caught on some rocks. But there's no

sign.

Reece, Virgile and Kirsty join in the search with Reece grabbing his own bike to ride further up the valley. Neither his nor Virgile's bike have been moved. We also have all our kit as it was safely inside the tent so it's just the tandem that has gone. On the track near the turn off from the road I find one of my gloves and also the distinctive tracks from our tyres which is when it becomes clear that the bike has been taken away. The adventure fairy is really having fun now.

Reece finds nothing up the valley so then tries searching up the road in the direction the tracks seem to be going in. There's nothing up there except a toll booth and police checkpoint with some unhelpful guards.

At a loss for what else to do we decide we need to get to the main police station, but that is 20km away and moving our kit without a bike is extremely difficult. Luckily a car stops when we stick out a thumb and takes us up to the police check point. From here the guards flag down a bus which takes us all the way to Kara Balta police station.

We arrive with our pile of paniers and begin trying to explain the situation. The first police man seems friendly but wants us to give him cash for petrol so we can drive back to the scene of the crime. Before we have a chance to say 'nyet dengi' (no money) his superior arrives and takes us up to his office.

Detective Iscanda is short on height but high on seriousness. He's keen to hear our story so he can help. He speaks basic English, enough to understand us as long as we speak slowly and carefully. This is a huge relief as most of the other officers only seemed to speak Kyrgyz and Russian. After we've described the series of events from the previous evening through to arriving at the police station we bundle into a police car. Kirsty, me, Iscanda, two other officers and a PA

in a car with 5 seats makes for a cramped and uncomfortable journey.



Kyrgyz flag and Kyrgyz
serpent fighter

Back at the camp site, the yurt owner is interrogated for half an hour but appears to know nothing about the bike. We point out the tyre tracks to the officers then drive up to the toll booth to ask them to look through their CCTV footage. It's going to take a while so we're driven back to the police station and told the toll booth security will call if they spot anything suspicious.

Lengthy statements are written and signed by me but not Kirsty (she doesn't get asked much despite being joint owner of the bike). A translator is then called who asks me if I will want to prosecute the thief. If we do it could take months so he suggests we say that the bike is missing rather than stolen to make things simpler and to avoid us having to return to Kyrgyzstan to testify.

After all this we're free to go. Detective Iscanda suggests we

plan to stay in Kara Balta for a week while they make some investigations and try to find the bike. We check into a grubby hotel across the road and sit down in stunned silence. What now?

Kara Balta appropriately means black axe and is described to us by one local as 'the worst town in Kyrgyzstan'. The glory days when it was the main uranium processing centre for the soviet union are over. It's not somewhere we'd have chosen to spend a week.



Hammer and Sickle in Kara Balta

So many things go through our heads: What are the chances of seeing the bike again? What can the thieves do with such an unusual bike? Do we end the trip here? Do we fly home and buy another tandem? Do we try and buy two solo bikes? It's a sleepless night not helped by music, dogs and traffic outside our window.

In the morning we have a plan. Firstly we pay Detective Iscanda 1000 som (£10) to allow him to place adverts on TV,

radio and in the local magazine. Then we find a cobbler to sew up the splits in our rear panniers. It won't help us find the bike but we might as well get it done while we have the time. Next we find a printer who prints a poster I've made with a description of the bike and saying that there's a reward for anyone who finds it. 150 copies should be a good start. After that we move to another hotel which happens to be a bunk room above a football stadium. It's less than half the price of the previous hotel at \$1 each per night, more comfortable and quieter. A marshrutker (minibus) takes us back to Sosnovka, the nearest town to where the bike was stolen, and we spend a long, hot afternoon putting up the posters and chatting to everyone we meet about the stolen bike. Most people are genuinely sympathetic, some are nonplussed while others actually laugh at us which does little for our tempers. We were hoping for a lynch mob to help search the town and flush out the thief but it doesn't look like things work that way in Kyrgyzstan.



Kara Balta Olympic Stadium
(and international hotel)

Back at the hotel we flop down on our bunk beds and now the

waiting game starts.



Have you seen this bicycle?
Cash waiting.

It's horrible being so helpless so we try to keep busy. In the morning we walk to the bazaar for breakfast supplies and get stopped by some people who mention our 'velociped'. It's far from being a tourist town and so we stick out like a sore thumb as being 'not from round here'. One of the stall holders gives Kirsty a sympathetic hug when she realises we're the ones with the stolen bike. It seems the word has already begun spreading thanks to the adverts and our posters.



Tiny chicks for sale in the Kara
Balta Bazaar

I also email the national press and some TV and radio stations in the capital, Bishkek just in case they can help. One of them comes back and tells me that they want to run the story and that we should record a short video, which we do and email it across. They also say they have contacts with the Minister of the Interior so will ask for his help. This all sounds very useful.

Then we have the best dinner for a long time. The food is OK being a regional dish of horse meat on pasta with some circular fatty slices that make us wonder which part of the horse they came from (and get left on the plate). But what makes it special is the phone call from Detective Iscanda to tell us to come to the station in one hour as they have found our bike!

We try to contain our excitement and relief until we actually see our trusty steed but sure enough, as we stand outside the police station an hour later a black Mercedes pulls in with our bike hanging out of the back! It's precariously dangling from the boot, held in by bailer twine with the front wheel 50mm off the ground but at first glance seems to be intact.



The elite crime fighting team of the Kara Balta police

Once we extract it we get a proper look. The chain has broken but all the pieces are still there. The pouches that sit on the top tubes have been moved around and some items are missing. Kirsty's windproof jacket, some anti mosquito spray, a small set of Allen keys, a compass and most annoyingly my LVIS cycling cap have all gone. But we have the bike so it doesn't really matter. We've been through so much with that machine over the past few months so it's like being reunited with a close friend.



Friends reunited

2 hours of form filling and statements about the quality of the police work that led them to discover the bike then follows. I have to declare that there will be no charges brought against anyone, we are very happy with the way the case has been dealt with and that as far as we're concerned no further action is required. Case closed.

I ask how the bike was found and the initial story is that a 20 year old 'boy' saw our posters and went to look for it so he could claim the reward. I ask if we could meet this local hero so after a short discussion a man is brought in and introduced as the one who found the bike. He's about 40 and clearly one of the policemen who we'd seen earlier. 'Where's my reward?' he asks so I hand over the small amount of money in our purse, 1200 som (£12) and he seems happy enough. It's enough for he and the rest of the officers to have a few drinks if nothing else. We'll never know what the actual story was that led them to the bike. A quick Google search revealed blogs from a couple of other cyclists who'd had their bikes taken on the same stretch of road which could be coincidence or a sign it's an organised scam, but again we'll never know.

There are none of the bribery and corruption laws that protect us in the UK here. In fact bribery and corruption seem to be part of the law. A student wanting to join the police academy will have to pay several thousand dollars. They'll then pay for decent grades before deciding which job they'd like and paying again for the relevant position. Traffic police pay dearly as they can then exploit speeding motorists who may not even have a genuine licence so have the potential for high earnings.

The same police Mercedes that brought us the bike ferries us back to the hotel with me sat in the boot to stop the front wheel hitting the ground. Good job the police are on our side for this highly illegal journey!



This boot isn't big enough for the both of us

So at long last we can ride into Bishkek. With illness, injury, malfunctioning gears, a malfunctioning dynamo and a stolen bike the adventure fairy has pulled out all the stops over the last two weeks. Surely nothing more can happen to us in this country?