

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 chaihanas 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



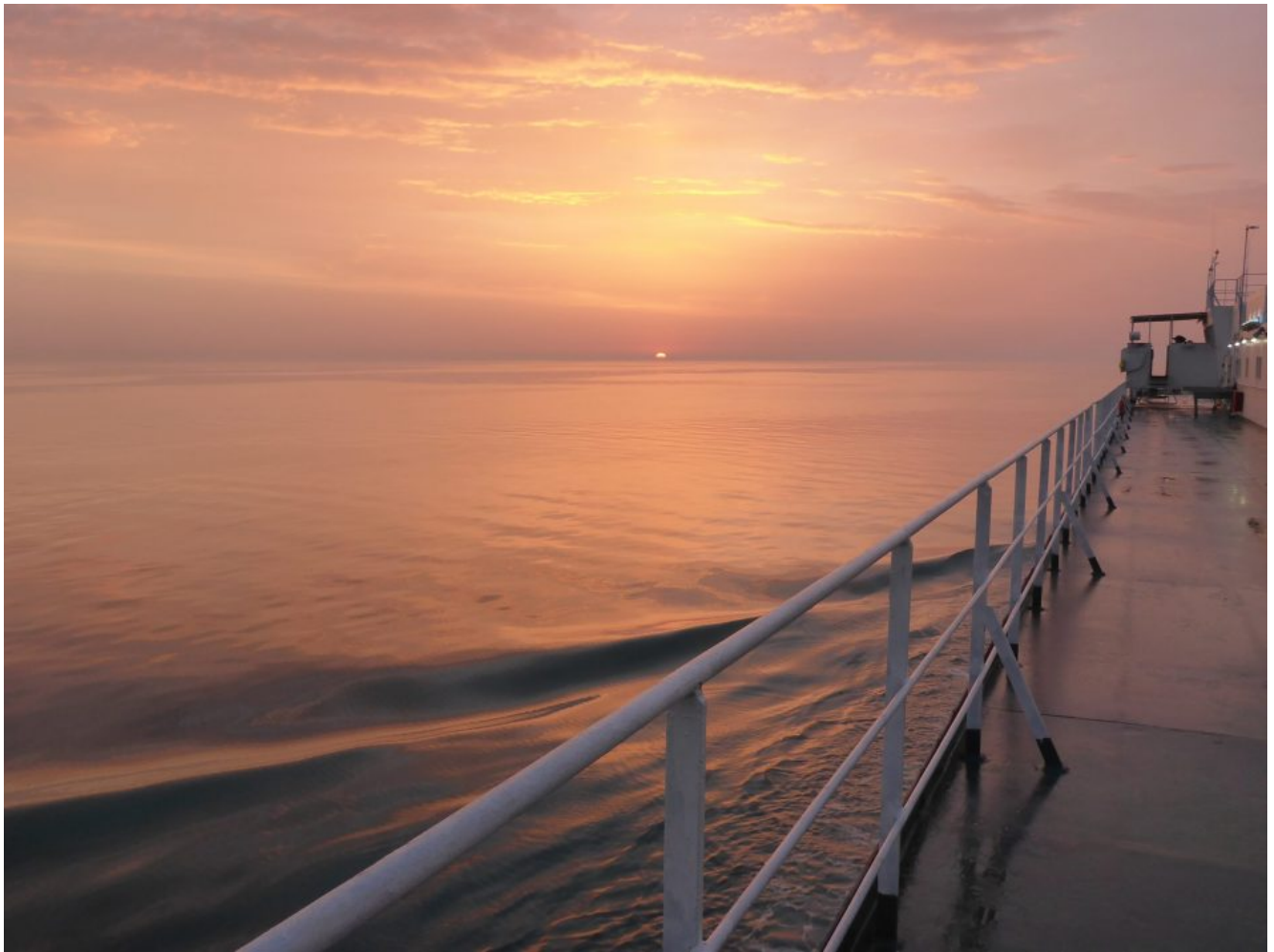
Desert wildlife



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.



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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.



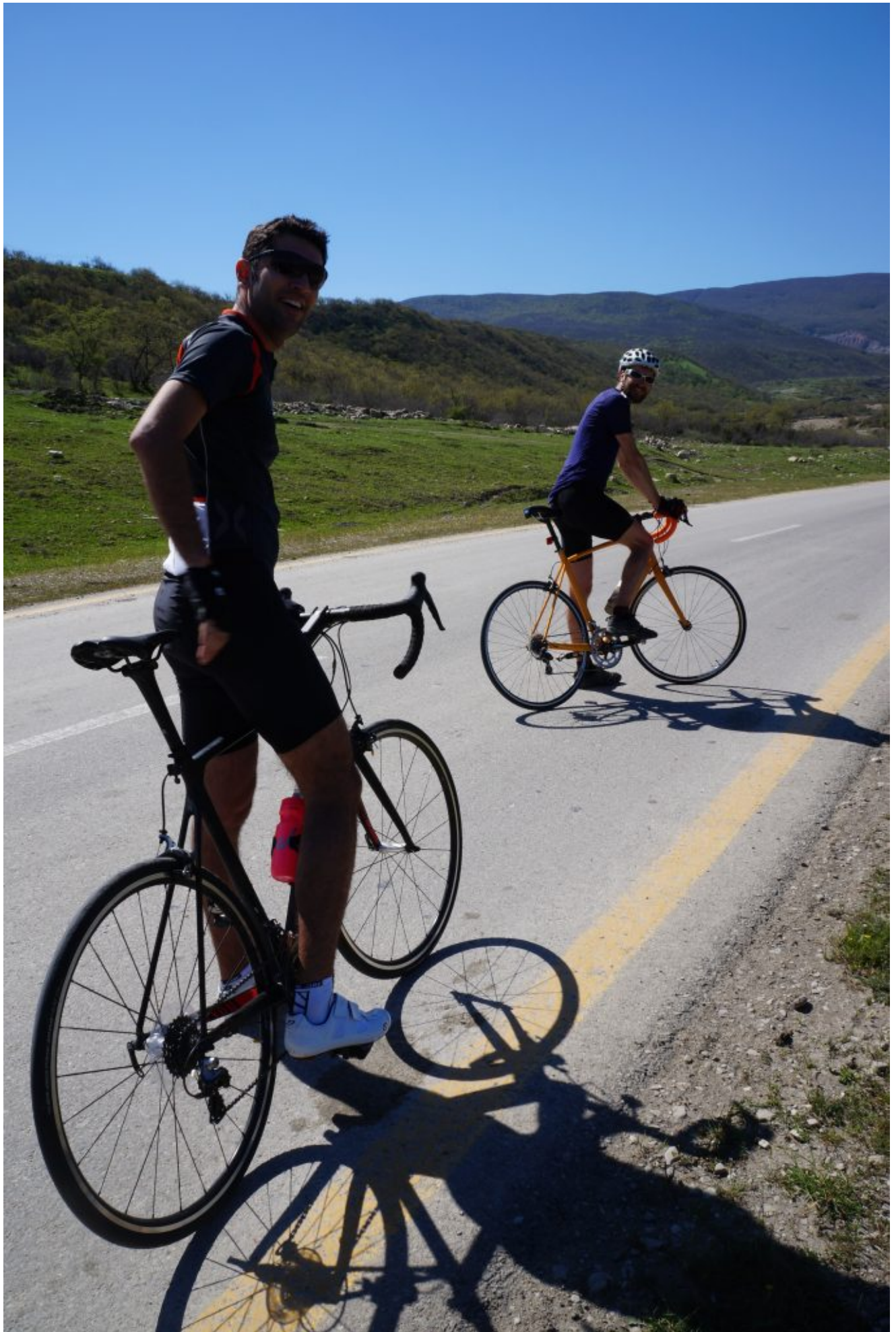
Support crew bus

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

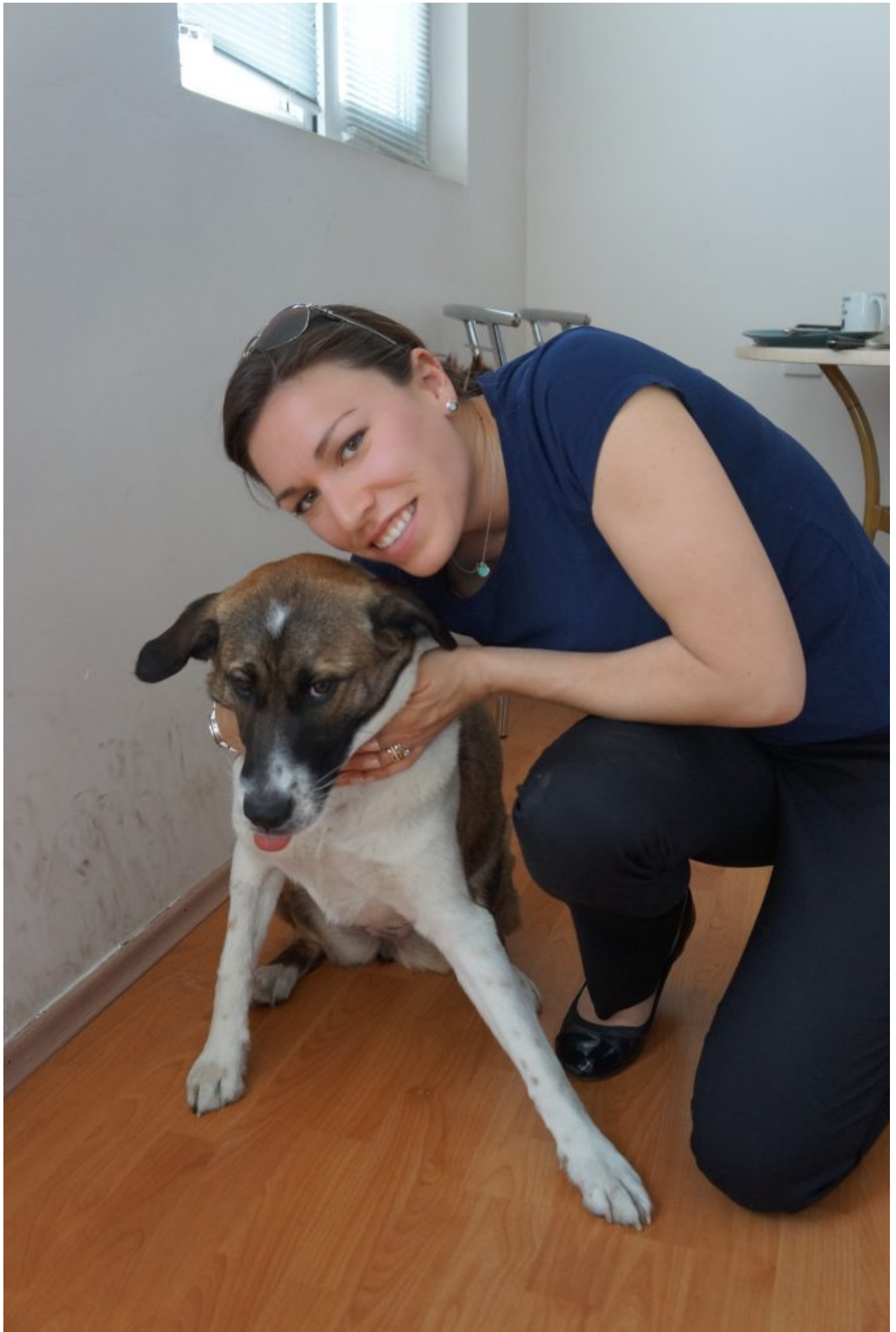
1. SƏFƏR ZAMANI QALMAQ ÜÇÜN OTAQ (KAYUT)
ACCOMODATION UP TO PORT OF ARRIVAL (CABIN)
2. YATAQ DƏSTİ
BED LINEN
3. QIDA (GƏMİNİN YEMƏK CƏDVƏLİNƏ ƏSASƏN)
FULL BOARD MEAL (FOLLOWING VESSEL'S MEAL PROVISION TIME TABLE)



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.

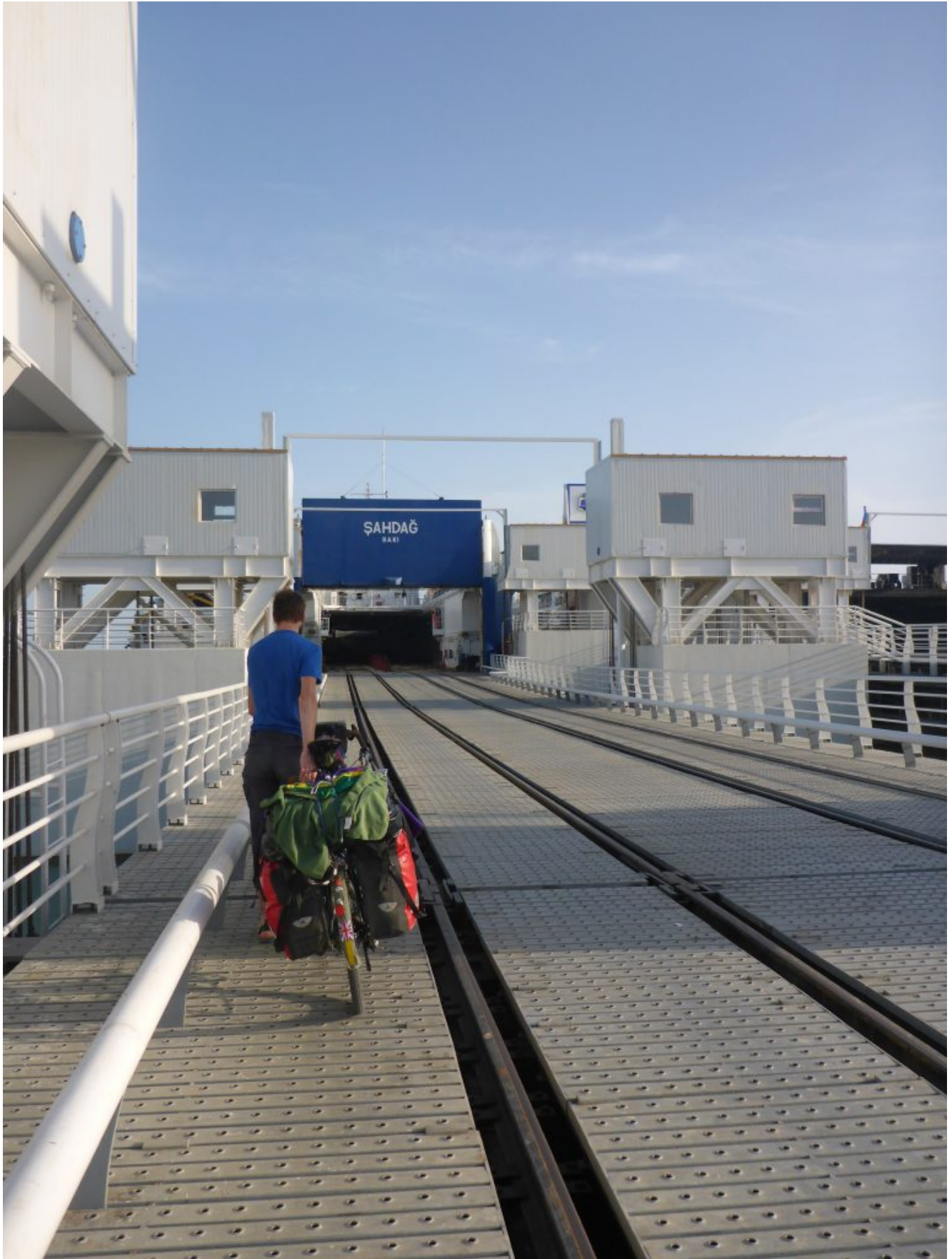
Alat will one day be Baku's main port but for now it is a huge building site with a single jetty and a border control office and nothing much else around it for several km. The border guard doesn't pay us much interest and it's clear that not much is going to happen for a while so we set ourselves up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

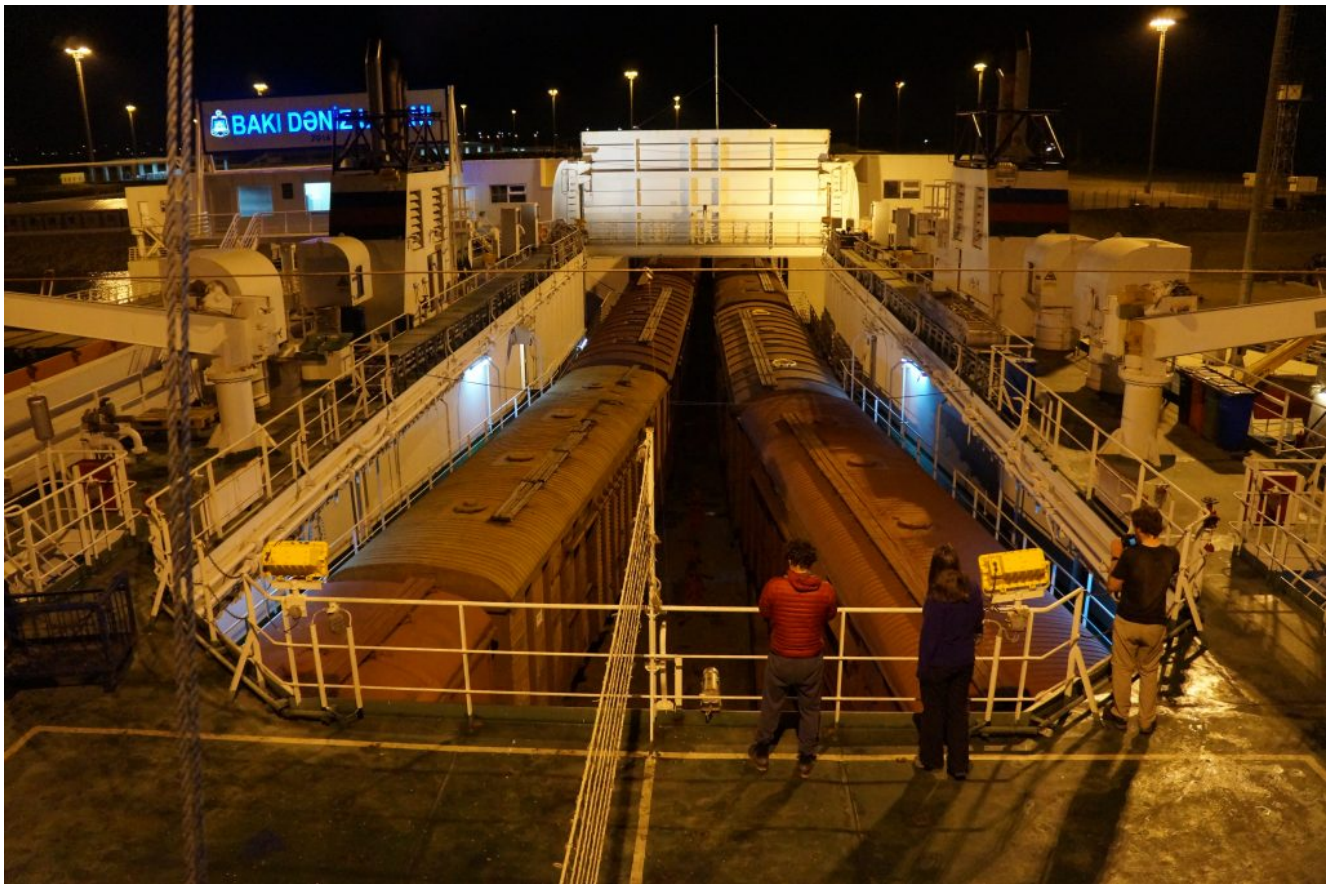
everywhere including the bridge, engine room and climbing the radio tower.



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.

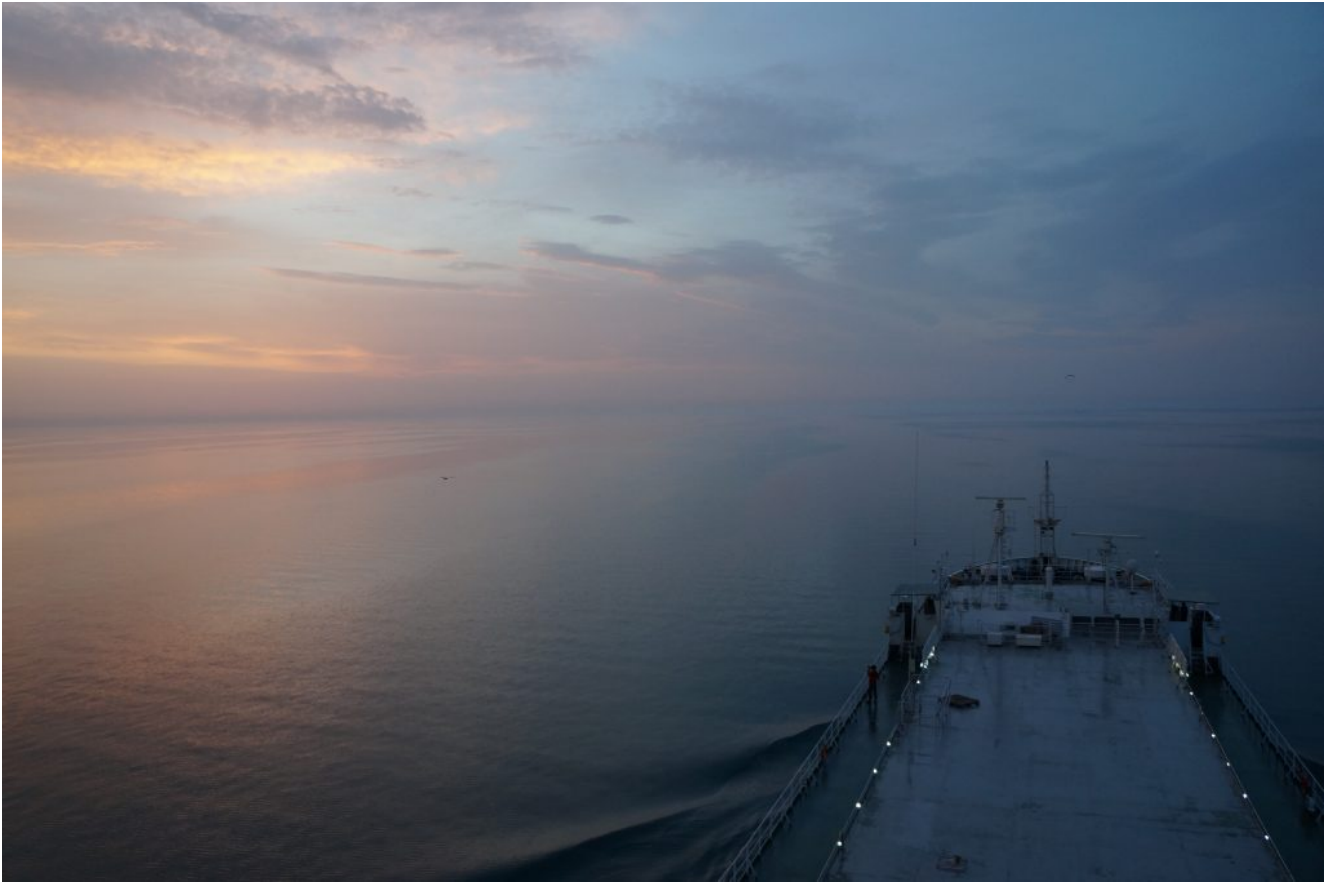


Just before sunrise on the Caspian sea

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



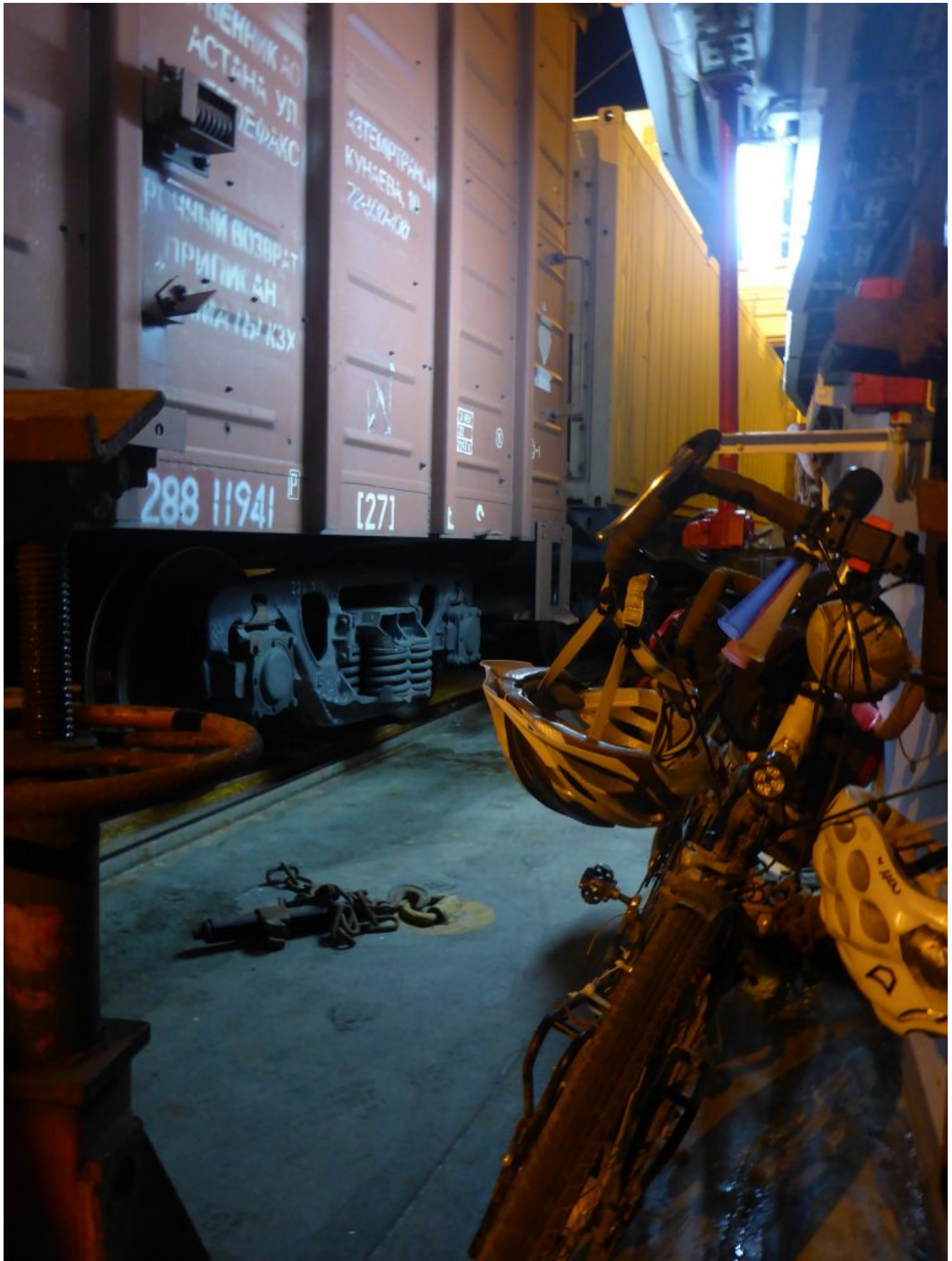
A sunrise to remember

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