

# Samarkand to Dushanbe

written by Marcus | 5 June, 2015



***24th May to 5th June 2015***

Kirsty was always very proud of her attendance record at her former place of work. In the 14 years she was there the number of days off that she took due to sickness could be counted on one hand. One of those was partly my fault after taking her to a sea food restaurant where she ate a dodgy oyster. We've managed to stay fit and healthy for most of the journey so far with just the occasional sniffle to deal with but there's a certain amount of inevitability to getting sick when travelling for a long time.

Leaving Samarkand we're both feeling good as we pick our way through some small residential streets on gravel roads and emerge on the main highway that leads to Tashkent. Riding a

few km north we arrive at our destination for the morning: the Samarkand Rowing Canal.



### Samarkand Rowing Canal

We'd always planned to try and do some rowing during the trip if we got the chance. So when I found out there was an international rowing lake in Samarkand I got in touch with Savara at the Rowing and Canoe Federation of Uzbekistan to see if we could go for a paddle. She was incredibly helpful and organised for us to meet the national team coach and borrow a boat.



## Bike and boats

We roll up to the boat house and get warmly greeted by Manucher. It's much like any rowing lake with just over 2000m of water, a small grandstand compete with Olympic rings symbol (don't tell the IOC), and timing booths every 500m. But there are a few things that make it different from Eton Dorney and Holme Pierrepont in England. In the distance a huge range of white, jagged mountains fills the horizon. Cows graze around the 500m marker and a team of workers are cutting the grass on the bank by hand using sickles.



Manucher, Uzbek national team coach

Manucher shows us our boat and blades painted in the Uzbek national colours and we quickly take to the water. Also in common with most rowing lakes there's a strong cross wind which makes the paddling a little trickier. But it's lovely to be out on the water for the first time in 3 years. In fact the last time we were in a double scull I ended up proposing to Kirsty.





He's not paddling on the back



Cows grazing at the 500m mark

After a trip to the end of the lake and back and a few racing 'bursts' we're glad to have stayed upright and dry so decide to cut our losses and head back to dry land.





Some of the Uzbek national squad. And me.

After thanking Manucher and a photo with some of the national squad we're back on the bike and pedaling again but we'll be on the look out for more rowing lakes.

At this point Kirsty admits to be running at about 80%. Perhaps the efforts in the boat took more out of us than we realised? It's hot and hilly which doesn't help so we stop for chai and shade mid afternoon and spot a lake in a few km that would make for a good early camp spot.

In the end we settle for a small river instead of the lake and soon gather a gang of interested children who watch closely while we put up the tent and I carry out some running repairs. Meanwhile the shallow river is busy with cars being driven into it for their weekly car wash.





A critical audience





At the car wash

In the morning we're both under par with grumbling tummies. There's a 1000m climb ahead of us which we tackle slowly, all the time watching for suitable bushes to hide behind, just in case.



The only way is up

A lengthy lunch at a Chaihana is needed along with a snooze. The great thing about the tea beds is that as well as being a place to drink tea, they are also a bed. In most chaihanas there is someone asleep on one. We've also found people sleeping behind the counter in a few shops too.





### Stopping for a breather

The hill continues steeply up and we're ready to stop long before we actually find a patch of flat ground near the top. The one benefit of having to dash out of the tent in the middle of the night is that I get a great view of the milky way overhead.



View from the top

We finish the climb in the morning and are rewarded with views opening right out to the mountainous Tajik border. This is a new face to Uzbekistan with huge green hills, woods and meadows. Down we go for several bumpy km relieved not to have to exert much energy other than to squeeze the brakes.





The Uzbek version of the village people suffer from Dyslexia



The only way is down

The temperature is now 41 degrees so we stop for ice cream as soon as we spot a sign with a range of tempting frozen delights on it, only to find the ice cream machine is broken. The disappointment is palpable.



They love their mini vans

Pushing on into Shahrisabz the heat isn't so noticeable while we're moving. The faster we go, the cooler the breeze.

We were warned by an Aussie in Samarkand that Shahrisabz promised a lot but delivered very little. He was right. There are plenty of ancient buildings of interest but the whole town seems to be a building site surrounded by clouds of dust. I'm sure it'll all look lovely when it's finished with some grand landscaping showing off the mosques and monuments but for now a visit to the bazaar for fresh fruit and a swift departure is the order of the day.





## Shahrisabz

Another lengthy lunch stop in the shade of a tree and then a last stint in the cooler, late afternoon brings us to a small gulley where we set up camp. During the evening we watch various groups of animals being led down to the stream for a drink. Even the horses can't resist as it's been a hot day for everyone.





Curious shepherd

We try to get away early to get some riding done before the day heats up. Already there is a busy market in full swing a

few hundred metres from our tent. Sheep with enormously fat bottoms overhanging their back legs are being loaded into ladas and mini vans and onto the back of motorbikes. The bigger the bottom the better as it provides more fat for the Lagman/plov/manti/samsa. These animals are the J-Los of the ovine world.



They love big butts...

We pass wheat fields and groups of waving, whistling workers. There's almost a constant barrage of 'Atkhuda?', Russian for 'Where are you from?' from everyone we meet. After telling them we're from 'Anglia' they seem satisfied and wander off.





‘Atkuda?’



The road rises and falls and rises some more. The temperature also rises to 42 degrees and it's a very dry heat leaving our tongues as dry as Gandhi's flip flop.

The now routine and necessary afternoon stop finds us next to a stream under a tree. Some children creep out and after the inevitable 'Atkuda?' practice their English on us which mostly involves listing types of fruit. We mime the type of fruit in response to show that we understand, much to their amusement.





Is it a banana?

One of the parents then invites us in and we're fed a type of delicious milky cheese with tomatoes and sent away with fresh

bread.

A steady climb ends the day and we're joined by a friendly dog who enjoys the view down into a valley with us. He's happy to finish off some stale bread that we'd been carrying for a few days. Presumably this doesn't count as throwing it away?

The climb continues through a small dusty village with a police check point on the far side. We've passed several of these all through Uzbekistan and have always just been waved straight through without stopping. This time though we're told in no uncertain terms to stop and present our passports.



We're given the all clear then it's brakes off, into the big ring for the rewarding descent. It's a rocky, red landscape with a few patches of green tucked into the sharp ridge lines. There are huge slabs lent against each other like a collapsed set of dominos.



At the bottom the cliffs close in on us, the road gets rough and we arrive at another police checkpoint. There's lots of whistling and friendly, perhaps even frantic, waving as we ride on through past the queue of parked cars. They really do seem pleased to see us here.

I stop a couple of hundred metres further down the road to take a photo of an interesting junction and a few seconds later a car skids to a halt alongside. A policeman jumps out and demands to see our passports. We're then made to ride back up to the checkpoint so they can write our name in what looks like a large school exercise book. I suppose this gives the impression of the authorities knowing where people are throughout the country. There is also a registration system that asks you to collect a stamped receipt for each night a visitor is in country. Fine if you stay in hotels every night but difficult if your accommodation is a tent. We have four receipts for over 3 weeks in the country which causes a lot of shaking of heads and looks of puzzlement. We shrug our shoulders and indicate that that's all we have, knowing from other people's experience that this rule is rarely enforced, if ever. Reluctantly they let us go.

So back to that interesting junction we roll. Turning right would take us onto the road to Mazar-I-Sharif and onwards to Kabul. An interesting prospect if it wasn't for the fact that we don't have a Afghan visas. Or a pair of kevlar vests. We turn left instead to continue on towards the safety of Tajikistan.



Turn right for Afghanistan





Or left for Tajikistan



After lunch we endure another very long, hot climb with a bumpy decent on the other side so again no reward for our efforts as I'm hard on the brakes all the way down. While pootling through Baysun an Irish voice calls out to us and another cycle tourist pulls alongside. "You must be Marcus and Kirsty!". Our reputation precedes us as this is Will who had been riding with Rob and Josh up until a few days ago and had obviously been tipped off that we were on the road ahead of him. He's staying the night here but we want to go a bit further so we agree to try and meet the next day and ride to the border together.

We'd both been feeling much better for the last few days but the following morning I wake with stomach pains. It eases off once we start riding though so hopefully just a short lived bug from a dodgy ice cream, or the water from a hose or the unmarked bottle of water i'd drunk.





A 7.5 pence ice cream







We have a 15km head start on Will and enjoy dropping down into a wonderful valley with a stream cutting deep into the valley floor. There's a timeless view of a shepherd in a traditional long coat tending to his flock of lardy sheep. Then it's up and up before a smooth long descent along a ridge with rolling brown hills on either side. It's nice to be able to let the bike go for once as the road surface is very good.



It looked like we were arriving into a flat plain but after stopping for juice and biscuits and to soak our heads under a cold tap we find its actual very lumpy. A series of short, sharp climbs with just as steep a drop on the other side, sometimes rough and unsurfaced get us working up a sweat. It's over 40 degrees again.

Lunch with our feet in a stream is a refreshing relief and I'm about to lie down in it when a small snake pokes it's head above the water, takes one look at us and then disappears. Time to get moving again. But not before a few passersby have given us bread and biscuits.

We don't get far as we're distracted by some plum trees and stop to pick some. At the same time a car pulls up to us and a man we recognised as one of the bread and biscuit donors climbs out with his 14 year old daughter. She explains that she is at the top of her English class and wants to practice.



She also wants an English pen friend so we hand her our email address but we're still waiting to hear from her.

Will finally catches us as we're pulled over once more to receive an offer of chai. The tiny roadside stall sells an eclectic mix of goods ranging from individual cigarettes, to bars of soap, noodles and fizzy drinks.

The two bikes move quickly into Denow where we pick up supplies then navigate our way straight out again. The stomach cramps have returned and Will admits he's not 100% either so we begin the search for somewhere to hide the tents.



Big yellow wasp

The options are very sparse as it's all quite built up but we settle for some rough ground next to a derelict building. Not very salubrious as it also seems to be the village tip but desperate cycle tourists can't be too picky. We're all a bit despondent as it's not the memorable last night in Uzbekistan

we'd hoped for.

But before we can pitch the 'palatcas' we're saved from a night on the dump by our neighbours from across the road. It appears to be some sort of oil processing depot and they proudly show us their laboratory and bottling shed. Will has a reasonable grasp of Russian having studied it for a few months before starting the trip (putting us to shame) so he's able to convey our respective stories as well as our needs.

The owner is a Mr Choiyny who happens to be in Germany at the moment so we're offered his cosy room for the night. In case we're in any doubt that he won't mind a phone is presented with Mr Choiyny on the other end. In a combination of German and Russian Will is given the message that we are more than welcome and that his staff will look after us.



A feast was laid out for us

A table is brought out followed by several courses of



delicious food. Both Will and I have perked up again so manage to gratefully tuck in. It's a lovely, restful evening and just what we needed to recuperate before the last stint to the border thanks to Mr Choiny and his staff.



Dinner at the oil depot with Will

Things are not quite as pleasant in the morning though. Will had decided to pitch his tent on the hard standing and we find him lying on a piece of carpet outside it looking very much worse for wear. He'd had a rough night with an upset stomach and is in no fit state to ride that day. We explain to the oil staff that he needs to sleep and ask if he can stay but to our surprise the answer is "no, clear off". It's a complete turnaround after the generosity of the night before. We can only assume that this is due to a fear of being caught by the authorities. It's actually forbidden for tourists to be given accommodation unless in a licenced hotel or guest house. This is one of the reasons they have the registration process. The

nights in Pamela's and Moyrags homes and also the night here at the oil terminal are actually illegal.



Saying goodbye to/being kicked out by the oil workers

Despite this we'd hoped that Will could have been concealed for one day but instead we have to help him pack and are told there's a guest house in the next town, just 2 or 3 km away.

4.5 km later we arrive having towed Will as best we can. We're immediately told there is no guest house which comes as a blow. Our next move is to ask at the nearest Chaihana for some sleeping space and after some discussion with the proprietress a door is opened in a small shed and Will is installed on the mattress inside. We stock him up with water and crisps and he insists we carry on without him. All being well we'll see him again in Dushanbe the day after.

The run up to the border takes us closer to the huge mountains we'd started seeing since leaving Samarkand. We stop to pick



wild cherries by the road side and then again to let a huge heard of horses come galloping along the road.



Cherry picking





Horse herding





## Horse herding

We've now ridden the entire length of Uzbekistan and it's been quite a journey full of colourful characters, spontaneous generosity, interesting history and wonderful landscapes. But mostly desert.

Standing in the customs office we're a bit nervous as we don't have the declaration form that was supposed to have been given to us on entry (we managed to skip that on the way in from Kazakhstan). Their main concern is movement of foreign currency so we declare that we have \$25 and there doesn't seem to be a problem. However they then start a search of our panniers diving deeper and deeper into the murky depths, opening tins and rummaging through our medical kit. When the customs officer reaches the oily tools and spares section she rapidly loses interest and tells us to repack as we're free to go. But not before a quick body check. For the second time in my life I'm told I have 'very strong legs' after a squeeze by

a customs officer. I'm not sure whether to be flattered or disturbed.

At the passport control there's more shaking of heads at our lack of hotel registration slips but we get the ink on the page and push off in the direction of the Tajik border control. Luckily the \$200 concealed about Kristy's person was not found.

Up a hill (we'd better get used to this) we quickly meet the Tajik guards, fill in a form with no apparent purpose and have our temperatures taken as a cursory health check. Given the all clear we're released into Country #29: Tajikistan.

The smooth processing at the border is followed by a smooth road all the way into Dushanbe, the capital and also the Tajik word for Monday. This must cause some confusion.

-When are you going to Dushanbe?

-Dushanbe.

-Yes but when.

-Oh, I'm going to Dushanbe on Dushanbe.

-??

Another Warmshowers legend is waiting for us in the form of Véro. There can't be a single cyclist travelling through Tajikistan who doesn't pitch their tent in her garden and when we arrive there are another 8 people staying from Hungary, Belgium, Germany, America, France and Taunton. Véro moved here from France 2 years ago to work for the EU and has since opened her house as a peaceful refuge in the middle of a busy city.

We need a few days to compose ourselves for the next leg of the trip as it's going to be a tough one. For the flattest part of the Kyzyl Kym desert we climbed just 1,200m over the course of 1,200km. Up ahead we have the Pamir highway with 20,000m to climb over a 1,200km distance and some very high altitude passes.



It's not as if I'm in a hurry to go anywhere anyway as my stomach is still complaining about something I put into it. Everyone in the house who has arrived from Uzbekistan has had similar troubles so it seems like a standard parting gift.



Vero and her guests

We have a couple of tasks to do while we stay in the city, the most important of which is to apply for a permit to enter the Badakshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) that encompasses the Pamirs. We'd had a fright in Khiva when we'd been told by some other cyclists that permits were no longer being issued. Apparently the pesky Taliban had been trying to ruin things for everyone by coming too close to the Afghan/Tajik border so the Tajik government didn't want tourists going that way. Luckily they've now been pushed south so it's deemed safe again and permits are available again. It takes a day and 20 somani (£2) to sort out the vital slip of paper to allow us to get into the mountains.

On one evening we're invited to join a party at the home of some Americans. They are US Special Forces celebrating a changing of the guard as one group leaves and another arrives to take over. We get an interesting insight into their work training Tajik soldiers (all highly classified) but quickly the party degenerates into a cross between American Pie and Team America with a highly realistic wrestling match towards the end. Their work over here has been slightly tarnished with the recent defection of the Tajik head of police to ISIS, taking with him a lot of the training and information given to him by the US Special Forces. Let's hope the new lot have more luck.

Will did arrive the day after us after a harrowing experience in the Chaihana. In the traditions of his home town here's a Limerick to tell the story:

*There was a young man called Will  
Who while cycling felt really quite ill  
At a tea house he rested  
And his composure was tested  
When he was offered much more than the bill.*

He was even more glad to reach the safety of Véro's garden than most.

After four days in the tranquil surroundings of Véro's garden (apart from the screeching peacocks from the adjacent presidential palace and Véros talkative, whistling parrot) I'm feeling 90% well which is enough for me to want to get going.

It would have been easy to stay longer (the record is one month) but on a sunny Friday afternoon everything returns to it's rightful place in our panniers and we head out onto the road again. Hopefully we won't have too many more off-days to detract from our attendance record.



---

# Nukus to Samarkand

written by Marcus | 5 June, 2015



It's compulsory for any blog about a journey to Samarkand to include this poem, so here it is:

*We travel not for trafficking alone;  
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:  
For lust of knowing what should not be known  
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

By James Elroy Flecker. [Full version here.](#)

From Nukus we have the unfamiliar experience of riding up and down some low hills along with the familiar view of sand dunes. It's another section of road that is in the process of

being upgraded but the new part is mostly finished so we drag the bike over to it and have the smooth tarmac to ourselves.



Leaving Karalpaqstan region

After 50km we turn right and find the water that should be in the Aral sea. Again the scenery changes from drab beige to lush green thanks to a network of drainage channels, sluices, pumps and irrigation systems. The fields are full of colour but not from the crops. The women in central Asia wear fantastically vivid floral and patterned dresses and head scarves, even when working amongst the neat rows of cotton and vegetables.





A floating bridge









Most of the work is done by hand but for heavy duty jobs there is usually a 3 wheeled tractor on hand to do the donkey work. Actually no, the donkeys have to do the donkey work. At night the familiar sound of dogs barking is accompanied by the sound of rusty gates blowing in the wind which in fact are donkeys complaining about their terrible hard day of labour.



Hand pump hair wash

In one village we're beckoned over to join a family for chai and fresh bread, curious to see where we're from and how our



bike works. Bread is held with a great degree of reverence here and most houses have a clay tajin oven for cooking several disk shaped loaves each day. Guests are offered bread on arrival and it's sacrilege to throw any away. We've been given stale loaves by passing cars a few times so feeding hungry cycle tourists is clearly a good way to get rid of unwanted bread.



Mobile bread delivery. His back sat was full of loaves!

But with this family we get to see the whole process of bread going into the oven, coming out again and being eaten and it tastes much better fresh.



Preparing the dough





Cooking in the tajin



Fesh and tasty

After two days we arrive at Ichan Kala, the old town of Khiva. At 10m high and nearly as thick, the huge imposing walls make



it look like a huge fortress.



Huge city Walls of Ichan Kala, Khiva



Khiva from the top of a minaret





Like a film set

Inside are a maze of alleyways and narrow, car-free roads. Around every corner are tiled medrassas, mausoleums, minarets



and mosques. Most decorated with exquisite blue and turquoise tiles. It's like stepping onto the set of an Indianan Jones film. The authenticity is added to by the fact that most of the visitors are Uzbek rather than Western tourists so there are colourful dresses and sequins everywhere. The men just wear jeans and t-shirts.



Djuma Mosque









Most mouths are full of gold









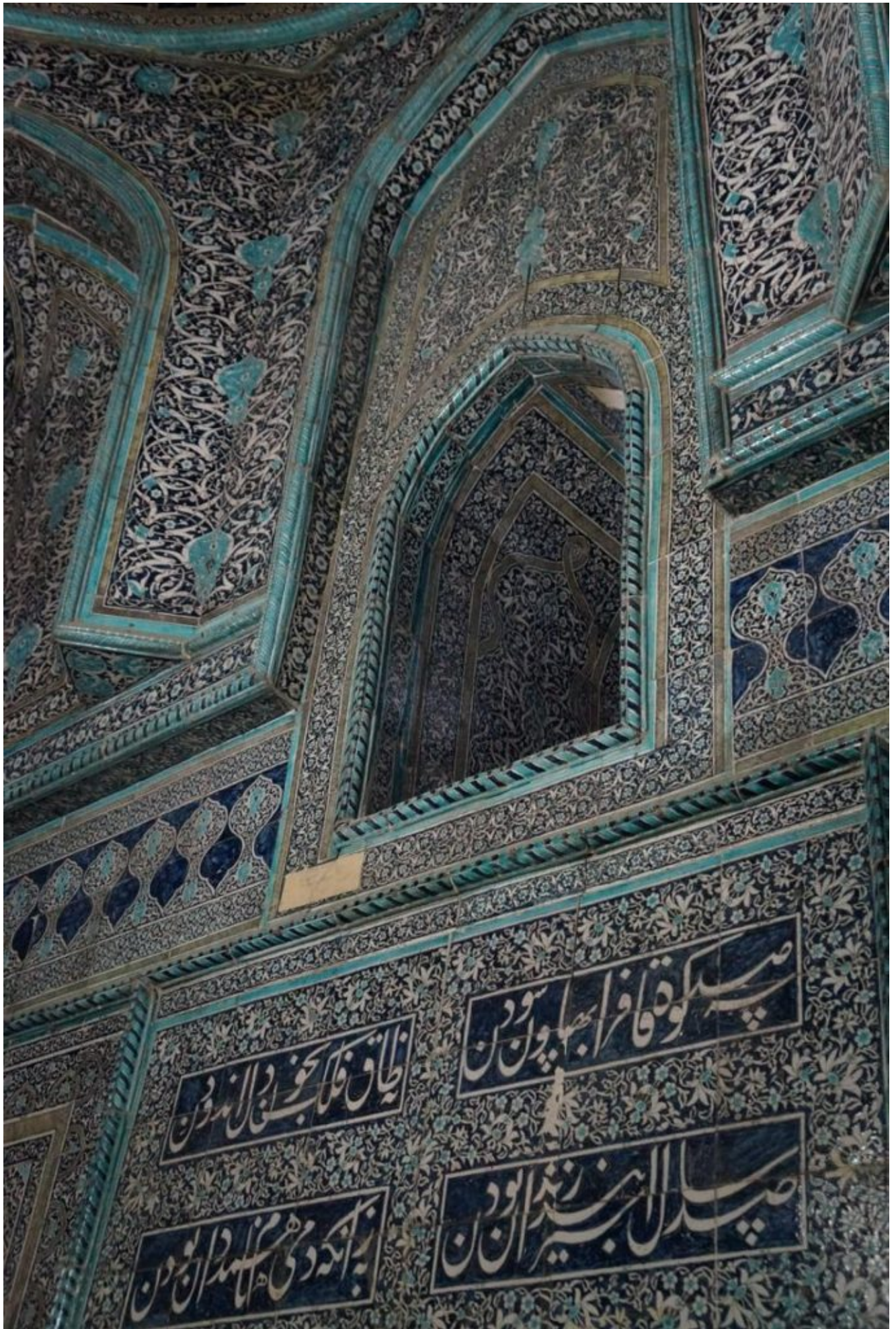
Traditional dancing in Khiva











سپه کو قافرا به پور دین  
نایق فلک بخون دین

سیدالبنیادین  
زبان دمی شاهان دین



## Mausoleum of Sayid Alauddin







!00 year old LVIS shepherd's coat

We spend the night at the excellent Guest House Alibek with a great spread for breakfast and we can just see the Kalta Minor



Minaret peeking over the walls. An ambitious Khan ordered a minaret to be built that was tall enough that he could see Bukhara (400km away) from the top. He died part way through it's construction so it was abandoned and never reached it's 75m intended height, but is impressive none the less.



Kalta Minor Minaret



Kalta Minor Minaret

After haggling in the Bazaar and changing some money we're set to go again. The money in Uzbekistan is fairly ridiculous. The official exchange rate is set at 2500 som to the US dollar but the black market rate is usually much better. We manage to get 4000 – 4500 som per dollar from men with holdalls full of cash hanging around bazaars and taxi ranks. The most common note is 1000 som so \$50 returns a stack of 200 or so notes. We have to



make a lot of room in our panniers for our new found 'wealth' and always feel a bit self conscious pulling out 2" of notes just to pay for lunch.



Lots of cash with very little value (1000 som = 15p)

Back on the road the local cyclists love to race us on their single speeds, and usually win, even with a passenger on the back who genuinely isn't pedalling. One cyclist pulls alongside us in a broad rimmed hat and an even broader grin with some kind of spraying machine strapped to the pannier rack.



Dog on the move





Moyrag and sprayer

He pulls up outside his house and darts inside to return with the inevitable disk of bread, then asks if we'd like to stay.



Inside we pass a tiny galley kitchen with the only available water being a tap in the street. The main room has a raised platform where the low table sits on a patchwork of rugs. Our new friend, Moyrag, sits with us while his wife, Sonia begins preparing food and fetching drinks. There's still a huge amount of inequality in Uzbekistan and we feel a bit uncomfortable by the way she is ordered around while Moyrag does nothing. We're also joined by his 81 year old mother who,



with years of sitting on floors is remarkably supple and is much more comfortable in the lotus position than we are.

The bread is fresh, the beer strong and the conversation is mostly about how many children we should have. Moyrag suggests 10 and wants us to call him when the first one is born. Family is hugely important here so the fact that we don't have any children is something they just can't understand.



A neighbour arrives and practices the Uzbek tradition of guest poaching by inviting us back to his house where of course another full spread is laid out in front of us accompanied by vodka. This house is much smarter with decorated walls and an inside staircase. We learn that the neighbour's job is in IT which seems to be better paid than Moyrag's mobile spraying service.





Now with very full bellies we stagger back to our original hosts to enjoy a bit of dancing before it's time for bed. I'm given a mattress in the living room while Kirsty is offered



Moyrag's mum's bed. She has to argue for quite a while that she doesn't want to make an 81 year old sleep on the floor and they eventually give in. Both of us have a restless night thanks to the tiny occupants of the bedding. They're riddled with bed bugs.

Sonia is up early to sweep the paths all around the house, to tend to the chickens and to prepare breakfast. Moyrag surfaces late just as the chai is ready and we all have breakfast together then it's time to say our thanks and hit the road once again. We promise to call in on our second lap of the world.



Moyrag and family

More orderly cotton fields lead us up to a wide, shallow canal which is the last open water that we'll see for a few days. Emerald green birds that look like large kingfishers swoop over the water and a couple of fishermen are casting their



nets. It's a rough, sandy track for 20km before we pop out onto the main dual carriageway and have the pleasant feeling of a smooth surface under the tyres and the wind on our backs.



Rickety bridge (we didn't take the bike over this)



We're back in the desert but it looks different to the earlier sections. The sand is a reddish orange, there are larger shrubs and there are bigger dunes and more hills. Riding along one ridge we can see down into Turkmenistan.





Looking over to Turmenistan

Lizards scatter from the hard shoulder ranging in size from 4cm up to 30cm and come in a range of colour combinations. In a bizarre incident while we stop at a roadside stall to buy water a truck pulls in and a man in the back holds up a lizard that must be half a metre long. How he caught it and what he plans to do with it we'll never know.



An unfortunate and large lizzard

It's also getting hotter with the temperature nudging 37 degC.  
Cold drinks and ice creams at the chaihanas never tasted so



good. While we lounge in the shade swallows dart in and out of the door and seem to be making nests in the ceiling of every building we stop at. They've got plenty to feed on as there are annoying black flies everywhere too.



Chaihana stop



Nesting swallows in the roof of a Chaihana

The handy tail wind blows us to our longest day yet of 145km and another night camping in the desert. It's amazing how much life there is in the sand with dozens of types of ants, beetles, bees and spiders. Most are small and harmless but one morning Kirsty goes to put her glove on and something moves inside it then drops to the floor. It's a huge camel spider, about the size of my hand and it scurries up the bike to hide behind a pannier. They hate sunlight which seems an odd characteristic for an animal that lives in the desert. After much prodding with a stick the spider is extracted but it chases our shadow and climbs back onboard. Eventually I manage to throw it clear and we can continue without the unwanted hitchhiker.





Friendly desert beetle



Camel spider trying to hitch a ride





4 days after leaving Khiva we arrive at our next Silk Road town: Bukhara. This is a popular traveler's destination so we meet several back packers, other cyclists and a family from France travelling to Malasia by camper van with 3 small children. The conversation between the different types of traveller is quite different with the back packers talking about buses, trains and hostels. The cyclists are more interested in road conditions, severity of the hills and weird encounters with the locals.

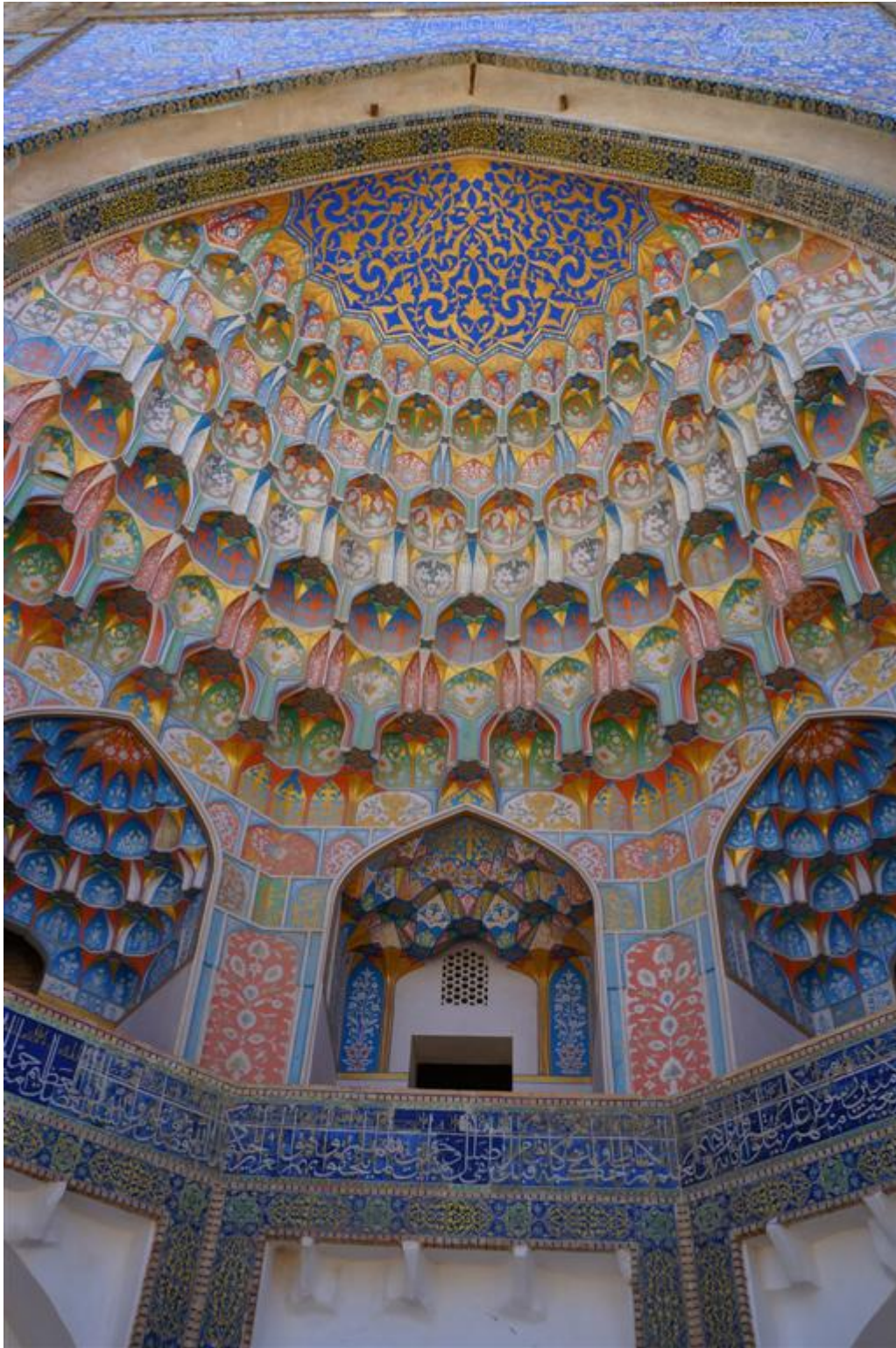
In the 13th century Genghis Khan came to Bukhara and ordered the whole place to be levelled. But he was so taken by the Kalyan Minaret that he let it be spared. This is definitely a good thing for us as it's an impressive structure amongst some more wonderful Medrassas and Mosques on a larger scale than Khiva. It's not so good for the local criminals who were thrown from the top, earning the minaret the nickname of the tower of death. Amazingly this gruesome punishment was still

taking place up until the 1920s.



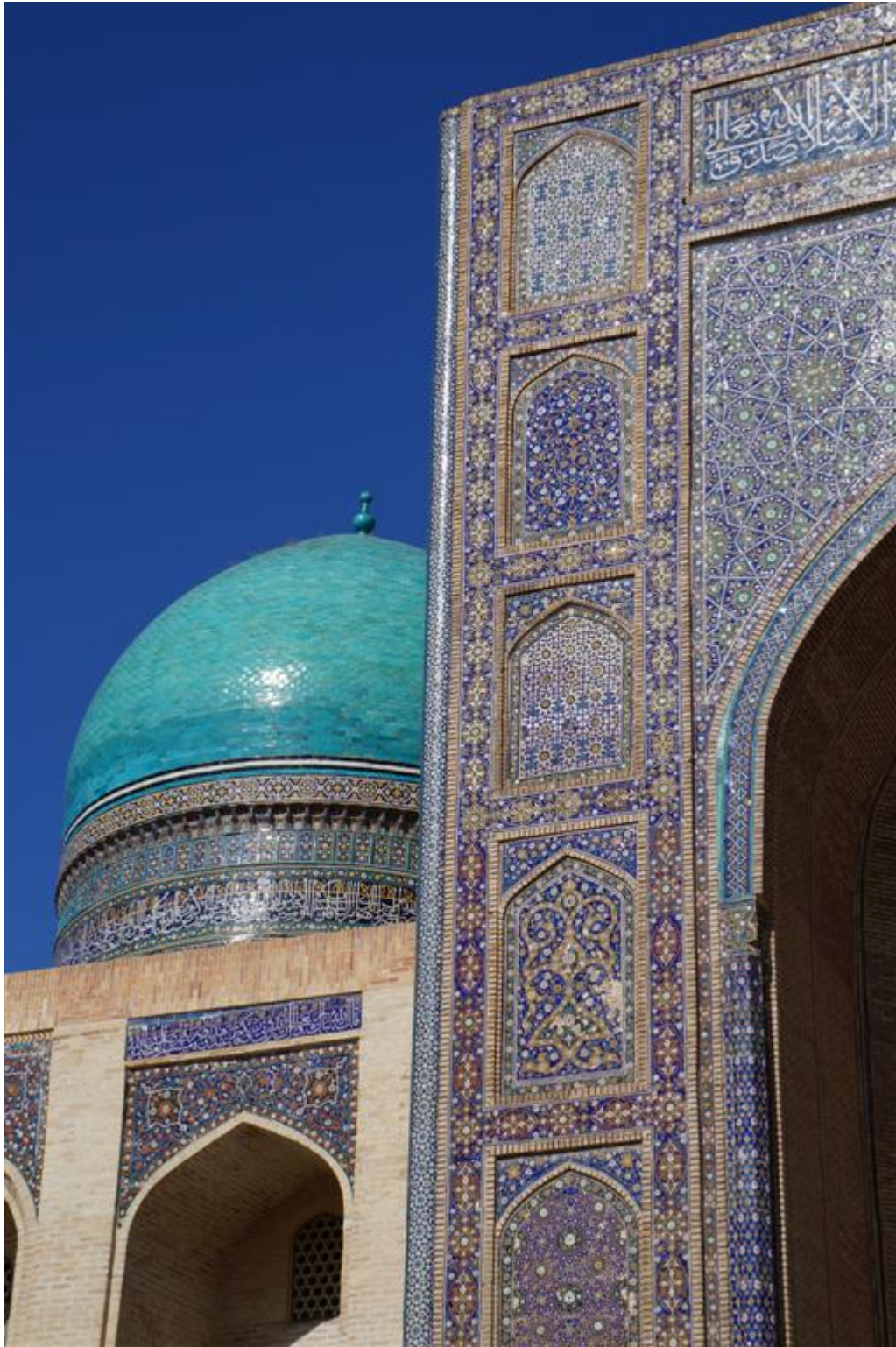


Kalyan Minaret















Char Minor







Friday prayers





Samanid mausoleum (C9-10) – also saved from Ghengis Khan as it was buried under sand.

It's hot work wondering around the town so the following afternoon we head back out on the road and up to a huge reservoir for a refreshing swim, about 40km north of Buchara.

There are a row of cafes alongside the lake so we roll down to one to take a closer look. We're greeted by four men in their

underpants who invite us to join them for a drink. Luckily the state of undress is optional so we're not expected to strip off, at least not until we're ready to swim. The water is cool but not cold and feels great after the hot days of riding from Khiva. The sun begins to set and we climb out to find the cafe owner offering us fresh fish and a bed for the night in the adjacent building. Just what we needed.



### Evening swim

On the other side of the reservoir are some real life, proper hills. I can't remember the last time we saw some of those. We have the road to ourselves for the morning and, apart from a tiny village where we can buy some lunch, we get our last dose of proper desert silence.





Finally some hills emerged out of the flat desert

After climbing a ridge and dropping into the town of Navoi we seek out the Bazaar to buy some fresh fruit. Uzbekistan is famous for its fruit but we're just too early for the popular melon season. Instead we gorge ourselves on sweet cherries, plums and small strawberries. Two bus drivers insist on buying us a drink and also nearly insist on taking me to a barber to have my beard cut off but I manage to persuade them to let me keep it. Only the oldest men have beards so they think I should be clean shaven.



Chaihana Lady

In most towns we've been mobbed whenever we stop with people asking for photos, selfies and in one Chaihana I had to pose with someone's baby. It's highly amusing watching people curiously eyeing up the bike too. After working out how the two sets of cranks turn together they will then usually squeeze the tyres (a thumbs up for being rock solid), look very puzzled at our clip in pedals and finally no-one can



resist giving the horn a squeeze. Whenever we leave the bike we can guarantee to hear a toot from the horn within 3 minutes of walking away.



Everyone loves looking at our map



How does it work?

The wind is strong and favourable for the rest of the day so we make good progress. Just as it gets to campsite spotting time we find ourselves rapidly approaching two other cyclists. It's Peré and Kim who we had met in Bukhara the day before. After a bit more riding we find a spot for three tents alongside a building site with a very friendly foreman who is happy for us to stay. We enjoy a tasty meal of Korean curry provided by Kim, Spanish sausage from Peré and a nice cup of British tea prepared by me and Kirsty.





Korean Kim



Moonlight (and headtorch) dinner with Kim and Pere

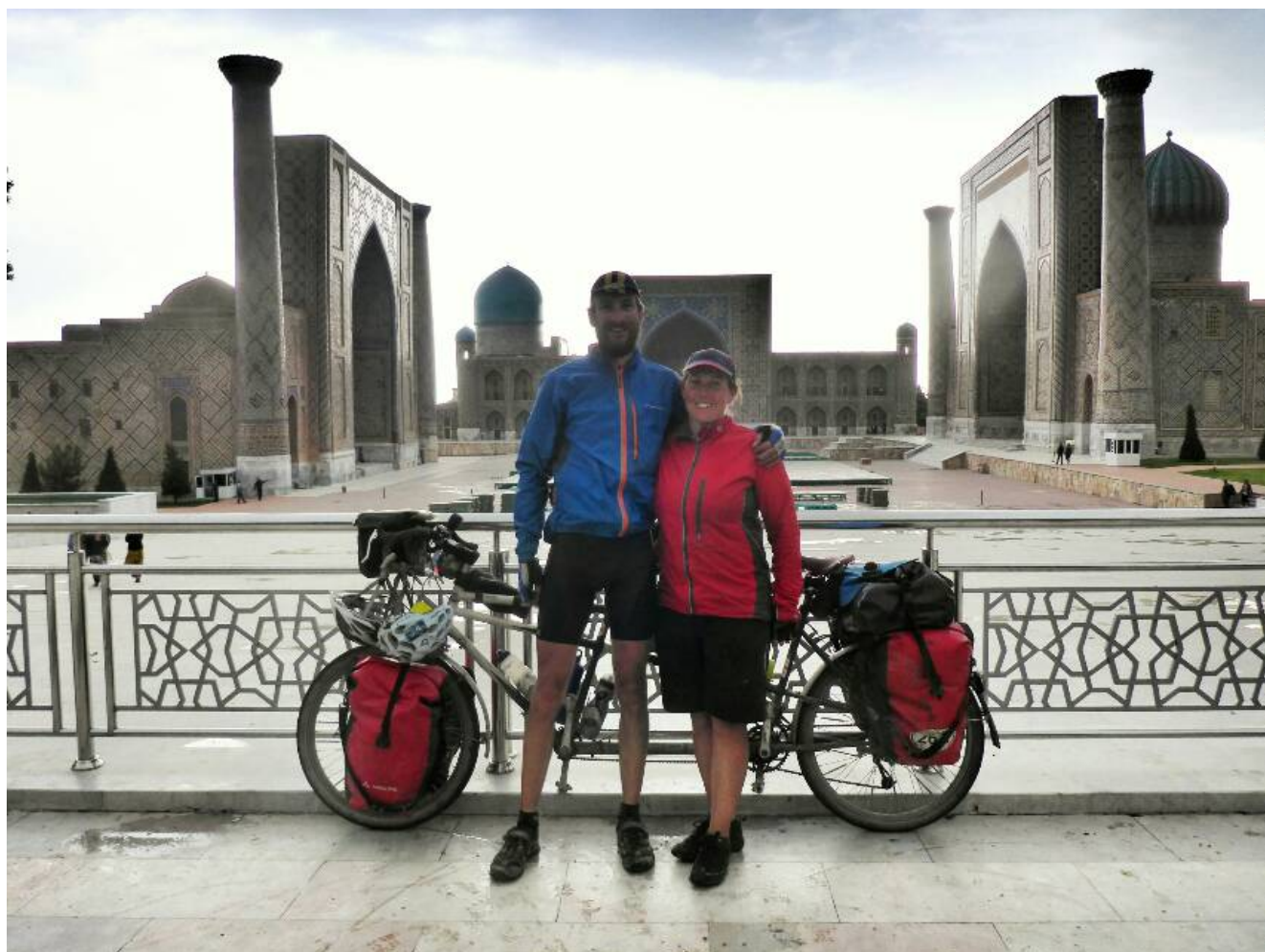
Then we're on the final stretch of the golden road to Samarkand. I had imagined long camel trains, busy road side markets, and all surrounding routes converging on the huge ancient buildings of the city rising up on the horizon.

In reality there was very little that could be called golden about the road, or even silver bronze or tin.



The tail wind has subsided and with it the quality of the road surface has degraded to a cracked and pot holed bone jarrer. To add to the effort needed to keep the bike rolling, there is a slight uphill gradient. Then a storm blows in, soaking us for the first time in several weeks and we have to shelter under a tree during the worst of it.

Samarkand is the third largest city in Uzbekistan and at times was the most important town on the Silk Route. We ride through modern, rain soaked suburbs until we finally turn up a slight incline and pull over to take our first glimpse of one of the most impressive set of buildings in Central Asia: The Registan.



Marcus and Kirsty ride to The Registan

Three enormous medrassas arranged around a large courtyard, each of them ornately decorated with hundreds of thousands of tiles and complete with tall minarets and corrugated,

turquoise domes. Although the sky is grey with rain clouds and we're cold and damp it's a sight worth riding 15,000km to see and a moment we'll always remember.



The Registan













The Registan





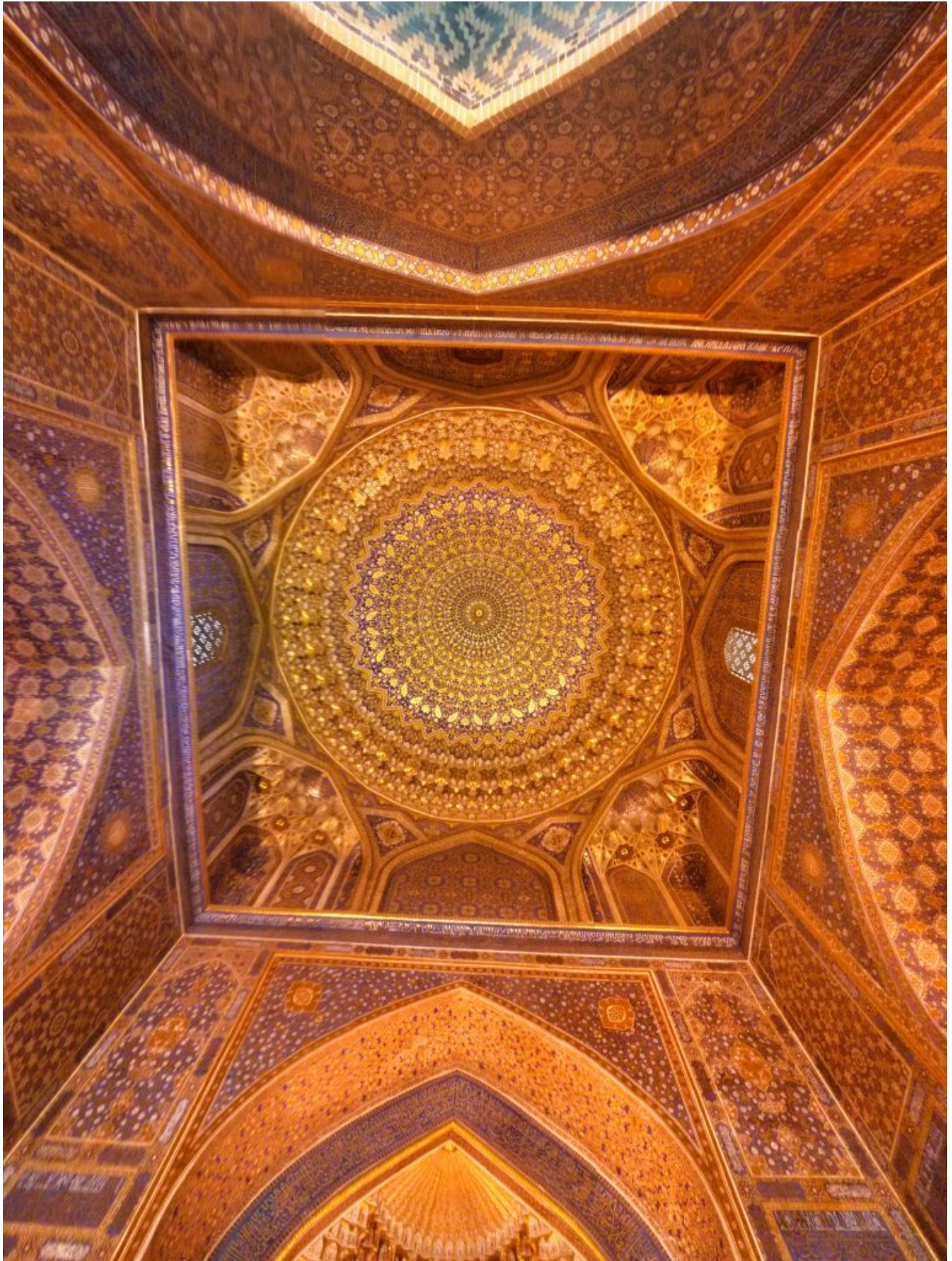
A local youth group turned up and started drumming away. We were tolkd it was an old fashioned version of a flash mob.











Registan Ceiling





### Registan Ceiling

We're tucked up in bed by the time Peré and Kim arrive at the Hotel Abdu. The tandem friendly roads meant that we'd spun along a bit faster so we'd agreed to meet up again at the end of the day. Unfortunately they'd got caught in the storm and sheltered in a cafe to wait for it to pass, then got lost trying to find the hotel. We're all glad to have a couple of nights to rest, recuperate and dry out.

As Buckhara was to Khiva, Samarkand is a step up again in terms of scale and magnificence. The mausoleum for the emperor Timur who built a lot of the ancient city is a suitably vast and ornate domed structure with a gate house nearly as tall as the main building itself. The mosque dedicated to his wife Bibi Khanym is one of the largest in Central Asia.



Gur-e Amir Mausoleum





Gur-e Amir Mausoleum

We have to ignore the fact that most of what we are seeing has been restored, renovated and rebuilt several times so very little is original. We also have to swallow hard when we find that tourist prices for the entry fees are a full 17.5 times higher than the local price (\$4 instead of 20c).

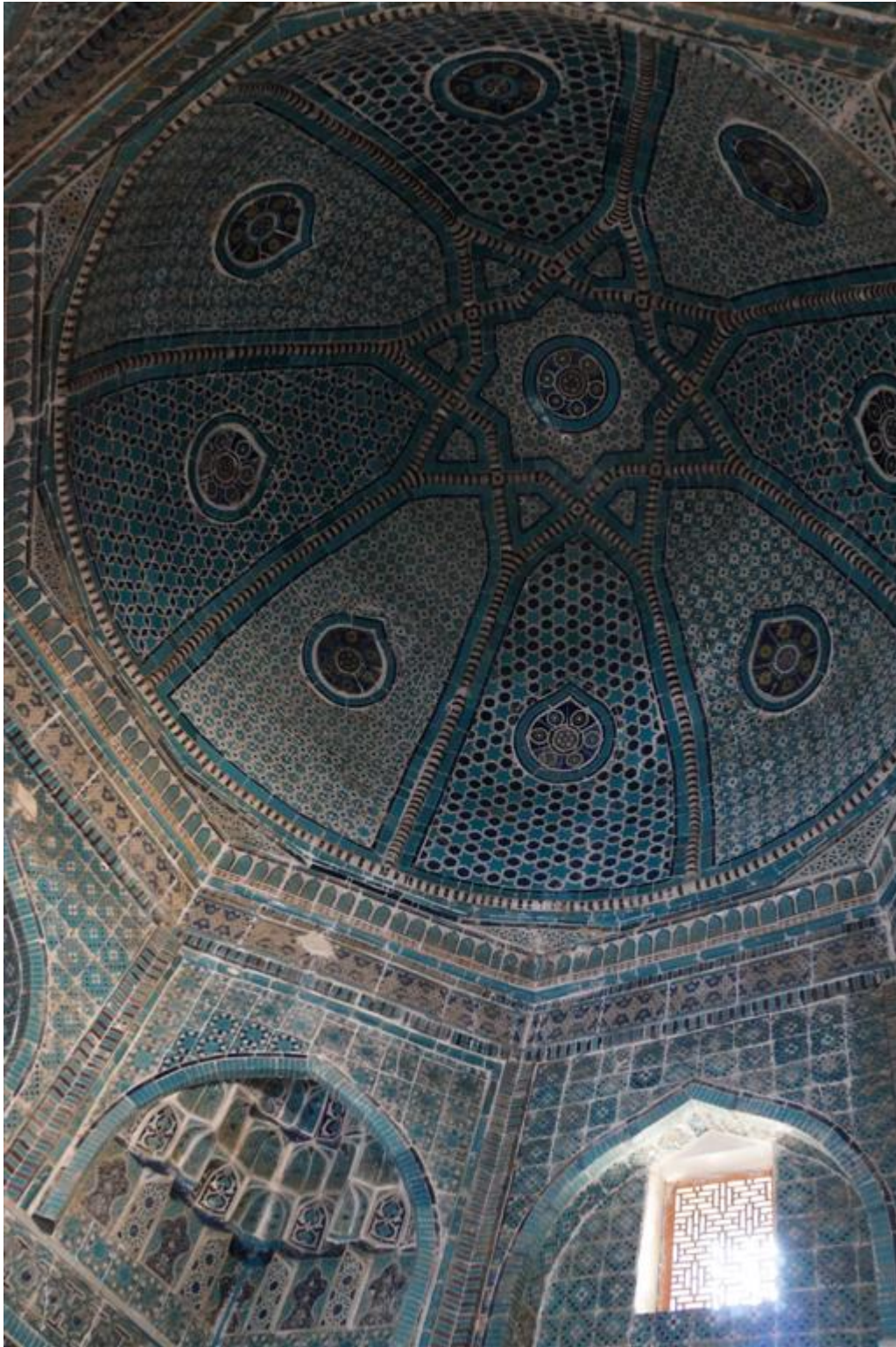


Shah-i-Zinda necropolis





Shah-i-Zinda necropolis



Shah-i-Zinda necropolis





Shah-i-Zinda necropolis







From here we have five days until our Tajik visa kicks in and a convoluted, 400km route to get to the border as the crossing right next to Samarkand has been closed for a few years now. As far as I'm aware there's no poem about this section but we're hoping that the road out of Samarkand is more golden than the road in.



Meeting our first fellow tandem tourers, Alesandro and Stephanie from Italy







A future Khan



Finest quality Uzbek carpets. Could be a good addition to the tent.

---

## Aktau to Nukus

written by Marcus | 5 June, 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  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  and in the height of summer its normal to be in the mid 40s. For most of our ride the temperature stays at  $25^{\circ}$  to  $30^{\circ}$  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