

Season 10 – Part 1. Into China.



Tu 19.7.2016, day 373. First day biking in China (Dongxing - Gangkou, 48 km)

Funny how we tend to have prejudices. I imagined China to be crowded, noisy, dirty, with lots of traffic, aggressive horn honking drivers and ancient trucks belching black sooty smoke. What we experienced on our first day couldn't have been further from this preconceived image. Most of the scooters are electric, traffic is calm and slow, everything is very tidy and clean, for the most part roads are excellent, huge and wide with several lanes, always a lane for bikes and scooters, in towns these lanes are even separated by trees and grass. It was also quite disconcerting for us to see how incomplete Google Maps and Maps Me are, the two map apps we are using most. Many roads are missing on the maps and we biked through big cities that were not even marked on the maps. We had a very slow start to the day, we slept almost 'till 11am and it was past lunch time when we finally biked off. The ride was quiet and it was interesting to see the stark contrast between the city with the apartment blocks and the neon signs and very close by the very rural areas with rice paddies, pig pens and chickens running around all over the place. We bought a delicious watermelon that we ate just outside Gangkou in a small park down by the waterside. There was a bit of wind blowing and I half thought of having a go at kitesurfing, but the wind wasn't quite strong enough and it was not really suitable.

Then we entered the town, that is not even on Maps Me biked around for a bit, found a hotel, enjoyed how people just babbled away in Chinese with us and then, when they realize that we don't understand a word they are saying, they start writing down Chinese symbols, as if this would help!

We found a very nice place for dinner run by very nice girl who spoke a bit of English, had our first dumplings, then moved on to another place for banana shakes and then dropped by a cake shop for a little dessert to munch in bed...













We 20.7.2016, day 374. Skyscrapers, highways & backlanes (Gangkou – Qinzhou, 69 km)

We managed to head off a bit earlier than the day before. We had a strong tailwind, this always means that it will be a tough day for me, as Siria always races ahead at one hell of a pace leaving me panting to keep up. We biked along what seemed to be the old main road that runs more or less parallel to the new highway and is quite poorly maintained with sections without paving that are very dusty and bumpy. Many trucks still use the old main road to avoid paying the highway toll. They kick up clouds of dust leaving us coughing in their wake. We made good time to Qinzhou, basically riding with only one short stop for some fruit at the roadside. Qinzhou is also a huge city and we were both quite impressed by how prosperous it is with huge air-conditioned malls, restaurants, coffee shops, hotels and lots and lots of the usual apartment blocks. In fact this city feels significantly more prosperous than many a medium sized city in the US. We found a restaurant for some noodles and dumplings and were hassled by people who wanted to take photos of us and with us. We are starting to understand how it must feel like to be a celebrity. I was quite worn out from the bike ride and was sticky, sweaty and smelly, I really didn't feel like smiling and posing but I had no choice. Again checking in at the hotel was fun. The three girls at the reception didn't speak a word of English and babbled away, I had no idea what they were saying. First I thought they were saying that the hotel was only for Chinese, but finally it clicked that they wanted to see our passports and our China Visa. We spent a quiet afternoon strolling through the city and ended up in a very nice coffee and cake place. China could be the country where I finally start putting back on some of the weight I have lost on this trip!







Th 21.7.2016, day 375. Slowly getting the hang of things (Qinzhou – Hepu, 85 km)

China in general and biking in China in particular is still surprising us in a very positive way. It is completely different than what we had expected! We had a good start to the day with delicious oatmeal with yogurt and fruit that we bought at Walmarts the day before. This breakfast is by far the best for us. We biked out of town past rows and rows of apartment blocks, most of them half completed or the other mostly half empty. The ride was wonderful along a well paved road with hardly any traffic. No honking, no scooters, no hassle, far more relaxed than in any of the Asian countries we have been to so far. Most of the ride was through eucalyptus plantations. The wood was used to make plywood and we saw rows and rows of plywood sheets out in the sun drying. There seemed to have been a lot of rain during the night and at one point the road was a bit flooded. We also biked into a tropical downpour and were lucky to find a convenient bridge to take shelter under. We had a quick stop on a little bridge for some crackers and fruit for lunch and arrived in Hepu late in the afternoon. We immediately found a nice air-conditioned place for some lemon juice and were immediately bombarded with requests to take selfies. Finding a hotel was again no problem and we found a decent place for 13\$. Then we went for some dinner in what turned out to be a place serving westernized Chinese food. The good thing was that the young waitress spoke a bit of English and we certainly made her day. She asked us if she could take a selfie with us and immediately after she broke the ice, so to speak, we were overrun by requests for selfies, from the staff at the restaurant, from customers, from passers-by. In the end we made a big group picture at the entrance of the restaurant with all the staff. Here they are definitively not used to foreigners.







Fr 22.7.2016, day 376. Through the Chinese Hinterland (Hepu – G35, 88 km)

We didn't do much else all day but cycle. We left relatively late after a really nice long sleep and a great oatmeal and yogurt breakfast. Round lunchtime we passed through a largish village where we stopped for a noodle soup. We reached a town that is not even marked on our maps in the early evening, hunted around for a hotel for a while until we finally found the right part of town. We then took a stroll through town stopping in three different places for dumplings and in one place for a lemon juice.

The funny thing about biking is that even if you don't do much else except bike down dusty roads the day is filled with so many small little images and experiences that are almost too numerous to describe. Little incidents today included a very interesting detour we took hoping to find a short cut, that led us onto tiny dirt roads that weaved past shrimp pond after shrimp pond. We finally decided to give up and head back onto the main road. Biking through the village at lunchtime was quite an experience as well. There was a large market going on and there were live ducks laid out all along the road with their legs tied together. The poor animals were terrified. Also the old factories impress me. Here there are top modern factories like the moon cake factory that we passed, but then there are also old red brick factories that look as if they were forgotten by time. The amazing thing, is that some of these old derelict factories are obviously still producing, judging by the black smoke billowing out of the chimneys. The other thing that is striking is that the smaller rural villages seem almost like ghost towns with lots of deserted crumbling square concrete houses. It seems like there are not many people left who could move to the cities and all the half empty apartment blocks...





Sa 23.7.2016, day 377. Very big day and ride into big city (G35 – Zhanjiang, 121 km)

It was a really big day. We didn't do much else apart from bike along rather large roads that were once more pleasant and quiet. Towards the end of the day the roads got bigger and busier, closer to the city we were on large 6 lane highways. We bumped into a group of racing bike riders who rode with us for a while. Then the sky went black and together we weathered the storm under a highway bridge. We had a bit of a chat, limited by reciprocally lacking language skills.

We slowly entered the city. Again it is a city that is hardly marked on our maps, but I learned that it has about 7.5 million inhabitants (including surroundings) and it really was huge. We biked about 20 km through completely build up areas. Also it was a surprisingly nice city, with some scenic parks, a Miami Beach like ocean (or rather estuary) front, complete with beach and very large and posh Sheraton hotel. We finally ended up in one of the centres of the city, checked in to a very nice hotel, took our bikes up into our room after a very long wait for an empty elevator, freshened up and headed out absolutely starving. Looking for something to eat, we first tried our luck in the mall that was right next door. We ended up in a huge school children's bookstore. It was fascinating. In one room, young kids, all dressed up in long white dresses or glittering suits were performing pieces on various musical instruments. The very Chinese thing about this was that no-one -apart from the parents who were recording the performance with their smartphones- was listening. Everyone was chatting at the top of their voices completely drowning the music.

Driven by our ever increasing hunger, we couldn't resist being sucked into a very nice, but also very expensive place by the smell of freshly baked pizza. We chose one that was not too expensive without

being able to decipher what sort of pizza it actually was. It turned out to be Pizza Hawaii à la Chinoise: A banana – cheese pizza. It was actually quite nice! We then went for a second dinner at a cheaper place, Siria ordered Dumplings (one of the only food we can pronounce), I simply pointed at one of the items on the menu. It turned out to be pork with rice. We were then very much ready for bed.















Su 24.7.2016, day 378. Rest day. (Zhanjiang, 0km)

It feels so incredibly good to have a full day to enjoy without any obligations whatsoever. I think these are exactly the kind of days that are sorely missed in a “normal” working life where the week-ends are usually packed with all the things that didn’t find a timeslot during the week. I went for a short run in the morning and was happy that I had no aches or pains afterwards, then we had a nice breakfast of oats and yogurt in the room, had a little stroll, spent quite some time on the laptops in a café, did our laundry, etc. In the evening after it had cooled a bit, I took a long walk around town and stumble upon several groups of elderly ladies and gentlemen playing traditional Chinese music. It would be a lie to say that I found it nice and pleasing, but it was certainly fascinating and exotic.



Mo 25.7.2016, day 379. Long hunt for hotel (Zhanjiang – Maoming Harbour, 89 km)

We headed off far later than we had wanted to, also due to another very long wait in front of the elevator with our two bikes. We took a ferry across the estuary and then continued biking eastwards towards Macau. Highlight of the day was certainly reaching the mark of 16'000 km biked. I really find it hard to visualize this distance, even if it is exactly the distance I have biked in the last year. This project is really mind bending!

We arrived in Maoming in the early evening, headed downtown and started looking for a place to stay. The very first place we stopped and asked had a room for 20\$. We thought we would easily find a better deal and so started a 2h odyssey that took us all round town, from hotel to hotel. We finally didn't find a better deal and so went back to the very first hotel we had stopped at 2h previously with our tails

tucked in between our legs. We later realized that it was a sex hotel, it even had a list of girls at the reception that could be chosen from.







