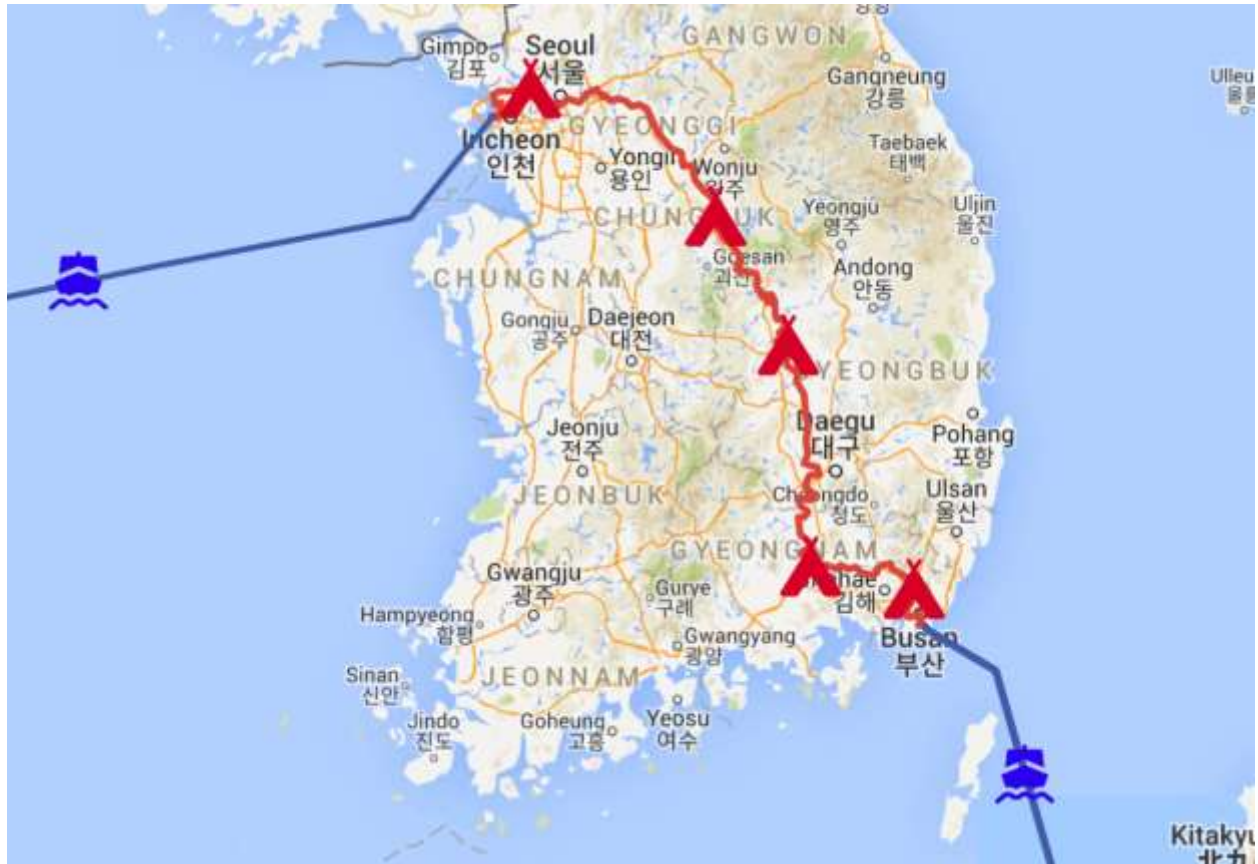


Season 12 – Part 1. South Korea. A mad 700 km dash through the country.



Mo 29.8.2016, day 414. Sending Siria off and ferry to Busan (Fukuoka – Busan, 25 km)

It was going to be a full day. We were up at 6 am, had breakfast of oatmeal and yoghurt in the room and got all our stuff ready. Siria packed all her stuff into my North Face duffel bag that I am quite relieved to get rid of. It is far too heavy and bulky to be schlepping around with me.

I took the subway to the airport taking this duffel bag and the bike box with me, allowing Siria to ride through the city with an unloaded bike. Checking the day before had revealed that it is not possible to take the bike, even if it is in a box, to the airport by public transport.

We arrived at the airport at exactly the same time, in fact I saw Siria peddling up the airport entrance out of the window of the shuttlebus. We were quite efficient at packing up the bike. The box was a bit on the small side and we had to cut a slit in the back and let the rear wheel stick out an inch or two. We also taped plastic onto one corner of the box, an ingenious little trick to make it easy to pull the box behind you, similar to a suitcase with wheels. Soon the time came to say goodbye. I must say it was quite an emotional moment for me. After having been together 24/7 for the last 13 months it really felt as if I was leaving a bit of myself go.

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Then it was time to focus on my travels. I was a bit nervous but once more everything went as smoothly as smooth can smoothly be. I got to the ferry terminal 5 minutes before check in opened. The bike was 10\$ and I could bring it on board myself. I took it up to the second level on the escalator with a worried security guard behind me, who had obviously never seen such a heavy laden bike and trailer go on his escalator.

I got chatting with two young Korean bike tourers who had had a 2 week spin round Japan and also to a Korean surfer dude who had just come back from a competition in Japan. Unfortunately, his English was very limited and the conversation we had was mostly via Google translate.

Going through immigration and onto the ship was unbelievably simple. I could roll my bike all the way onto the ship and tie it to the handrail close by the gangway. After a bit of a stroll around outside enjoying the port activities I bought a 10\$ ticket for the all-you-can-eat lunch buffet that was well worth the price.

As the ship rounded the peninsula sheltering Fukuoka harbour the waves hit us. Typhoon Lionrock was kicking up one hell of a wind and it was a bumpy ride! Accommodation was in large rooms where everyone got a futon like mattress. This was great and I had a nice little nap before enjoying a very nice entry into Busan out on deck, passing under the Diamond Bridge in the evening sun.

Disembarkation and immigration into S Korea was equally simple. I also got chatting to yet another bike tourer, a young guy from New York who was also crossing S Korea on the 4 river bike path.

Soon I was on the streets of Busan. Busan seems like a fantastic city and I was happy to see that there was an abundance of cafés. Fantastic! South Koreans seem to be coffee lovers! It took me a while to find an ATM that accepted the PostFinance PLUS card, but finally also this was sorted and I found a very nice café, had a bagel and cream cheese and started to have a look at the map to see where I was going.

Getting out of the city was quite easy and soon I found myself on the famed 4 Rivers Bike Path. And the bike path truly is fantastic. Perfect surface, mostly painted red, smooth as silk, full of signposts and km markers and completely separated from car traffic. It is no surprise that it is quite well used by all sorts of bikers, young, old, fast slow. I continued on for about 20 km in the dark, found a very nice grassy spot under a couple of trees, cooked the last of the Japanese noodles I still had, pitched the tent and fell asleep almost immediately. I woke up a couple of hours later freezing cold. I was so used the hot temperatures we have had ever since we came to Asia that I didn't even think of using my sleeping bag! Obviously now the sleeping bag time has come again...



































Tu 30.8.2016, day 415. Head wind day! (Busan - Yueomyeon, 125 km)

I was planning to take the ferry from Incheon to Qingdao in China on Saturday, if I miss that boat the next one is 3 days later. As I have to be in Almaty on Tuesday the 20<sup>th</sup> of September to meet Siria at the airport, that only leaves me with 22 days which is not really very much considering the distance of 4500 km as the crow flies! To get to Incheon on time I would have to do about 150 km per day. My feeling was that this should be doable, as it was all bike path along rivers, so I would not lose much time in traffic or navigating through cities, also there shouldn't be too many hills.

What I didn't reckon with was the strong northwest wind that typhoon Lionrock drove down through South Korea as he barrelled into the north of Japan.

I got up nice and early, had a good breakfast of oatmeal and milk and was soon on the bike trail. The wind hammered me in the face all day. I was pushing as hard as I could and could hardly get my speed up to over 14 km/h. Happy bikers going the other way blasted past me waving happily. It seemed no-one was going south to north. The other thing I learnt was that the bike path is not flat, far from it in fact! Little pity was taken on the ridiculously heavily loaded touring bikers who like traveling with kitesurfing equipment when the bike path was constructed. There are lots and lots of extremely steep little ramps or slopes, often only 5 or 10 m up, but the grades are 20% or even more. Such a grade is a real challenge for me, pushing my bike up is virtually impossible as I can't get enough grip on the road with my shoes and riding up gets the lactic acid flowing in no time.

OK, enough complaining. The ride along the bike path is truly amazing. The Koreans have dammed their 4 major rivers for hydroelectric power generation and also for flood control. This is a mind boggling infrastructure project and what is equally mind boggling is that they constructed a 650 km long bike path all along the rivers and over the dams, completely separated from cars with special bridges only for bikes, sometimes the bike path is on stilts out over the river, there are parks and rest areas all along the bike path, it is really amazing! Swiss politicians who think that making a bike path involves painting a couple of yellow lines on the road and putting up some signposts should really take a trip over to South Korea to see what a bike path should REALL look like!

A further issue that severely slowed me down was that South Korea has a wonderful coffee culture, there are lots and lots of fantastic coffee places all along the bike path, nicely designed with tables and chairs or sofas to hang out in, fast WiFi, plug points to charge all the old electronics, clean restrooms, everything the touring biker craves for. I found it really hard to bike past them, but I had no choice, I had to make some head way, so I limited myself to one 30 min cappuccino. I cooked myself a late lunch of pasta salad and made some instant noodles just as it was getting dark. By this time I had only done 100 km so I decided to continue on a bit more. At about 9 pm I decided to call it a day, found a nice sports park with two pagodas under which I planned to pitch the tent. But the wind continued to torment me. The tent was being blown around ridiculously, I first thought of finding some other more sheltered spot, but then decided just to sleep out in the open, there would certainly be no mosquitoes to worry about!

It ended up being quite a restless night, the noise of gust of wind kept waking me up and at about 3 am it started to rain, the wind blowing the rain in under the pagoda. I moved to the most sheltered corner and just hoped the rain wouldn't last too long. It didn't and I finally fell asleep again.













We 31.8.2016, day 416. Side wind day (Yueomyeon - Mungyeong, 155 km)

I got off to a good early start, heading off at about 6:30. The wind was still pretty strong, but it had turned and was now blowing due west, this meant that most of the day I had side wind, sometimes headwind and sometimes tailwind, on average it was about balanced. A major factor was again all the cafés, but again, thanks to sheer willpower, I managed to limit myself to one single coffee with a huge sweet potato bread with rasins. Again there were quite a few brutally steep hills to climb but each one was rewarded by some great views of the river landscape down below and again I continued to be amazed at the dams and weirs and bridges that have been built along the river.

Again, I decided to have a night session and continue biking in the dark after dinner. I soon found myself on a climb and at the top of the hill there was a wonderful pagoda, perfect to pitch the tent. I was feeling quite happy with myself, having done 155 km, catching up 5 of the 25 km I fell short of the day before. I had a nice refreshing shower and even washed my hair squirting water over myself out of my drinking bottle and had a wonderfully peaceful sleep.

































Th 1.9.2016, day 417. Crossing the watershed (Mungyeong - Chungju, 142 km)

I was a bit worried about how far I was going to be able to get today, as I was leaving the river valley I had been following for the last two days and heading out into the mountains. I got off to an early start and it turned out to be a glorious day. The wind had turned even more and now was a light breeze from the south, which made riding so much easier. The landscape was really nice and I also headed into apple country. It was very close to harvest time and I pinched quite a few apples off of trees as I went biking past. I didn't really have a bad conscience as, true to the permaculture principle of "fare share", I think the edges of every crop should be considered as common goods to be shared with the community. In fact all groves or orchards should be planted in such a way, that some of the branches hang out over the fence providing a fruit or two to the peckish bypasser. I was not really sure how I was going to explain this to an irate farmer, so I tried to be as furtive as possible.

Soon the road started climbing up into the hills towards the watershed. The hill turned out to be a walk in the park, it followed an old main road and had a nice and easy 7% grade, no steep ramps. It was a really nice ride up. Soon I was up at the top where I had a little chat with an E-biker who was a captain on a merchant ship and was thinking of a long distance bike tour himself, but with his E-bike. Good idea I think! Right after the big hill there was a second slightly smaller hill that I wasn't really expecting, but also this one was easy. A highlight was a peach that had been forgotten on a recently harvested tree. Here they pack every peach in its own little paper bag to keep the fruit in perfect condition. I unpacked it and it was indeed perfect and tasted absolutely heavenly!

I was making good headway with a good wind in my back when the sky started rumbling and the first raindrops of a thunderstorm started falling. I wasn't really keen on biking in the rain, but also I had to make headway. The rain got heavier and right then I passed another one of those pagodas. They really seem to pop up right when you need them! It was a great decision to stop, the rain started coming down really heavily. I cooked some instant noodles under the roof and sat there eating watching the rain fall. I hadn't ridden very far yet, so when the rain subsided I headed off for another night session and it was a very nice one. I soon went through a city and it was wonderful biking along the bikepath together with all the joggers and other bikers looking out at the colourful lights of the city.

For the night I found a raised pagoda in a riverside park looking out over a very colourfully lit up bridge on the outskirts of the city. I had a little swim in the river to wash off the sweat and again decided not to pitch the tent but just to sleep on my mat under the roof. It was very peaceful, no one was around and I started to fall asleep. Suddenly a car pulled up. Then another and another. I was really wondering what was going on, soon there were six cars parked right below the pagoda. People got out of the cars, all carrying long bags, soon I realized they were fishing rods! Looks as if these guys came out for a little late night fishing! I fell asleep. Around midnight I was woken up again by all the 6 cars roaring off again.





























Fr 2.9.2016, day 418. Fantastic ride down into Seoul (Chungju - Seoul, 185 km)

It rained pretty heavily during the night. It was wonderful to be under the roof of the pagoda not having to worry about the bike and tent and all my stuff getting wet. I was up at about 6 am and just as I had finished packing up the rain stopped. It was a brilliant day's ride. The quality of the bike path was outstanding, as smooth as silk and there was virtually no hill at all. Also I had a nice bit of a tail wind all day and I simply cruised along, stopped for a very nice cream topped Frappuccino at one of the amazing dams and reached the outskirts of Seoul just as the sun started to dip behind the hills. The ride into Seoul was amazing. There is a huge park all along the riverside, the bike path runs all the way through it never once do you have to mingle with the traffic. There is one quite high bridge to cross with a great view from the top, but even here the bike lane is completely separated from the traffic.

Finally, I got into Seoul proper. The number of bicyclists on the path was quite amazing. Most of them dressed up with the latest gear and riding really top class bikes, full suspension mountain bikes, carbon racing bikes often with carbon wheels, but then also strange looking folding bikes, flashy single speed city bikes with matching coloured rims, tires and saddles. Just looking at the bikes was a spectacle in itself! Somewhere in the middle of town there seemed to be some TV show being broadcast and there was a classic orchestra playing. I stopped to have a browse around and as always a bunch of interested people started gathering around my bike. I ended up starting to chat with a close to 60-year-old and ended up riding with him for about 20 km through the city. He was telling me how it is his dream to go long distance bike touring, but now he is old, he isn't strong enough and he simply doesn't have enough courage. He was a very nice guy and I somehow felt he was wondering if he should invite me round to spend the night at his place, he was always asking "where will you spend the night?", "isn't it cold?", "isn't it dangerous?". But I also couldn't go ahead and just ask him: "Hey, is it OK if I come and crash on your sofa?". So finally we stopped for a short break in a park and he turned back. For me it was time to start wondering where to spend the night. It was Friday evening and it was crawling with people everywhere. I pushed on for a bit slowly leaving Seoul behind me, but there seemed to be a seamless transition between Seoul and Incheon, which is also quite a big city. I went past a playground that seemed pretty quiet, surely there would be no kids playing at this time, and it had one of those pagodas. This could be a possibility, but I continued on a bit to see if I found something better. The park I had seen on the map didn't turn out to be any good, also I saw a police car patrolling the bike path and there were no camping signs up. I went back to the pagoda, parked my bike and sat down to see how it felt. The first problem was the mosquitoes that suddenly appeared in swarms around me. I would have to put up the tent. Then a couple arrived at the playground pushing a pram with twins. At this time of night? They started sitting down on the swings and playing. I soon realized that the babies in the pram were only puppets. Then a guy appeared and started jogging round the playground talking loudly to himself. That did it. Definitely too many weird people here to spend the night! I packed up again and headed off. Left the bike path to get away from the crowds and soon found a quite a nice little spot under a highway bridge in good old clochard style, pitched the tent and had a wonderfully peaceful sleep after all, except for one damn mosquito that somehow found his way into the tent and tormented me until I had enough, found my torch and hunted him down.







































Sa 3.9.2016, day 419. Ferry to China (Incheon – Qingdao, 50 km)

I poked my head out of the tent at about 6:30 in the morning and came face to face with an elderly Korean guy. I gave him a cheery hello and we had a little chat. He couldn't believe I just camped there and kept asking me "Did you sleep like this in Korea?".

He stayed and watched every movement of my packing up the tent and loading my bike. I was relieved to finally be off. I continued to follow the 4 rivers bike path, even if it wasn't the shortest route to the ferry terminal. But now that I had come so far, I might as well finish the whole route.

After 25 km I finally reached the end of the road. That was it. The whole cycle path cycled! There were quite a few bicyclists hanging around at the end / beginning of the route and everyone wanted to talk with me, I was more feeling like a bit of peace and quiet and some breakfast, so I soon headed off towards the ferry terminal, another 25 km and found a 7 Eleven where I had a nice breakfast of rice sandwiches, coffee and chocolate. The ride out to the ferry terminal was quite unpleasant. Big roads with lots and lots of truck traffic. There was usually a footpath I could have followed, but there were cars parked on it and it was bumpy and partially under construction. After a long ride I finally arrived at the international ferry terminal no 1. I knew the ferry left from international ferry terminal 2, but I could not find this terminal anywhere on Google or on MapsMe. I figured No 2 should be right next to No 1. It was about 11:30 and I was looking forward to buying the ticket and hanging out for the rest of the day. Soon however I found out that the No 2 ferry terminal was about 10 km back where I had come from. I cursed and retraced my steps, again facing the truck traffic. I got to the terminal just after 12 pm and found the counter for the ferry to be closed for lunch. I waited round until they opened at 1 pm and was relieved



that buying the ticket was no problem and the bike didn't even cost anything. Relieved and with my ticket in my pocket I headed out to get some lunch. I spent a good hour cleaning and oiling my bike and doing some small repairs. A bunch of interested Chinese constantly surrounded me looking at every single thing I was doing and trying to chat with me. We somehow got along, me speaking English and them chattering along in Chinese.

Finally boarding time came and it was a nightmare. All my bags had to come off the bike. Even the frame and saddle bags. Everything was scrutinized by x-ray. I had to unpack my bags, did out the cooking equipment and show the knife that I had in there. The gas bottles for the MSR cooking stove were looked at and I was told I couldn't take them. I finally managed to convince them to empty out the gas that was in them but keep the bottles. Everyone else had long gone when the inspection was finally over. Then I realized that I had to take a bus over to the ferry. I asked if I could ride the bike, they said no. So I somehow squeezed the bike into the bus, got out again and tried to push in the trailer with everyone shuffling around trying to make a bit of space. Finally we were off. At the ferry I first had to lift the bike up some stairs and then onto an elevator. Then I went down again to get the trailer. I was very relieved and drenched in sweat when boarding was finally over and done with.

To celebrate I bought a beer and had a wonderful evening out on deck watching the boat get under way and pass the docks. The evening got even better when I found out that the boat had its own public bath. I had a delicious hot shower, the first one since leaving Japan and an even more delicious soak in the hot bath. It was heavenly!

After some nice strolling around on deck watching the city lights slowly fade and some long chats with a friendly Korean guy, I finally went to bed. Even though I was travelling economy, the bunk bed I got was great and I slept wonderfully.













