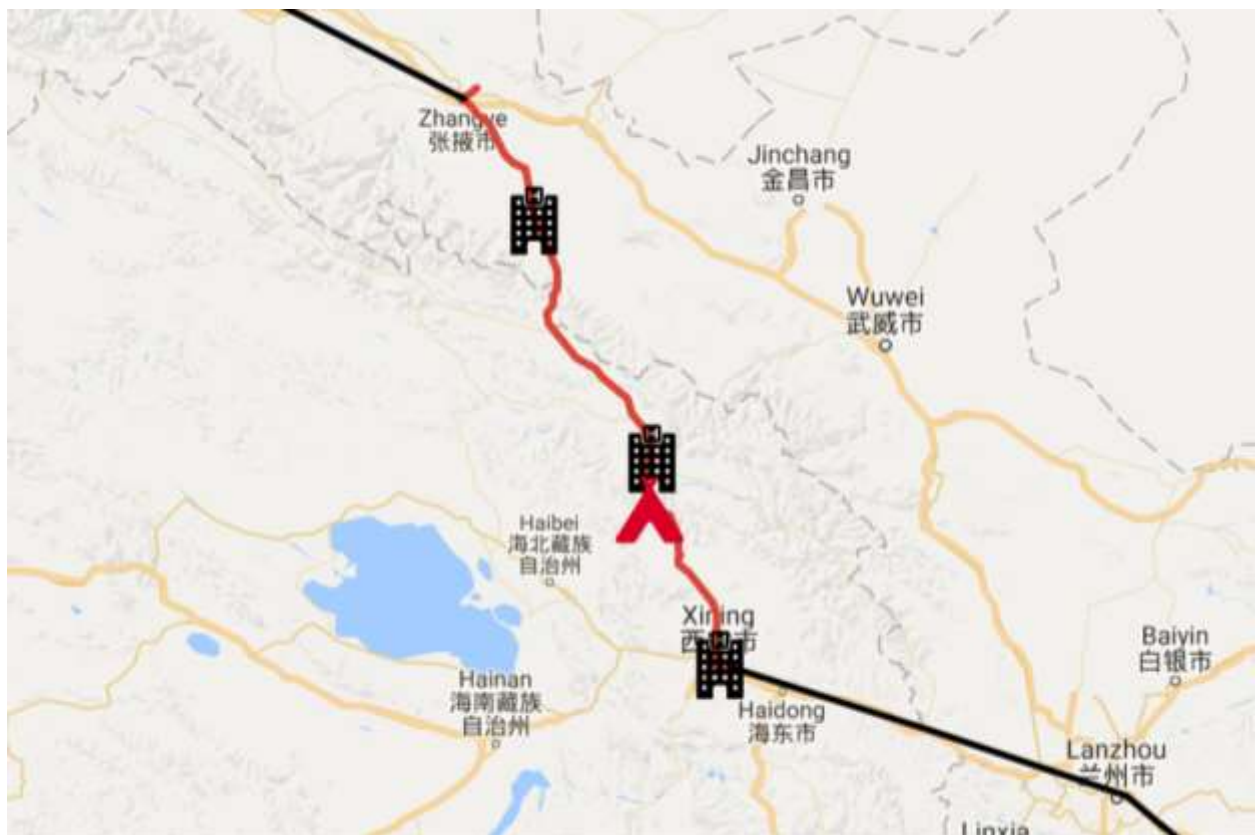


Season 12 – Part 2. China. Through the whole country east to west in 1 week.



Su 4.9.2016, day 420. Into China! (Qingdao, 15 km)

Mr. Lee, the Korean guy I got talking to invited me to have breakfast with him, and all you can eat buffet which is always good for hungry bicyclists, and soon afterwards the ship pulled into Qingdao harbour. Getting off the ferry was significantly less of a hassle than getting on, customs and immigration was a breeze and soon I was outside ready to continue my dash up to Almaty. I said goodbye to the only three other westerners that had been on the boat, an American couple who were backpacking after spending 2 years teaching in Korea and a professional basketball player who was heading for Guangzhou.

It was a short ride to the railway station where I was confronted with huge queues in front of the ticket booths. I simply didn't have the energy to go through all the hassle of queuing and then surely having a big discussion about the bike and trailer, so I first went off in search of a relaxing coffee and internet. But the moment of truth was unavoidably approaching, so finally I stood in line at the booth that had a promising sign up saying "English speaking" with everyone else watching how tempers boiled as people tried to jump the line, one woman started screaming at the guy selling the ticket, it was a rather heated atmosphere. I finally arrived at the ticket counter and things didn't go very well. No, there are no more seats available today, no, the bikes cannot be taken on the train. My heart sank. Was I going to have to take the bus? All the way through China?? "Are there any trains that will take bikes?", I asked. She said maybe the slow trains, I must ask at the baggage counter. I went out to hunt for the baggage counter and the lady there assured me that yes, they would take the bike for me for about 10\$. I would have to be there at 10 am to check it in. Fantastic! How come the lady at the ticket counter didn't know this? So I stood in line again to buy the ticket to Xining. There were only hard seats available and train ride was going to be 30h. But I will be celebrating every kilometre I travel westwards.

I spent a couple of frustrating hours in a café trying to plan certain things like GPS track for the route I was planning to take and elevation profiles. I realized that Garmin and also the elevation calculating webpage relied on Google maps that was blocked in China. I tried the two VPSs that I had downloaded, but also these didn't work. I did however find some interesting blogs by bikers who had taken the route I am thinking of and it sounds very promising. The road passed over a pass of 3800 m, this will be tough, but I want to start acclimatizing to the altitude to be ready for the Pamir highway, if we manage to get that far!

I also booked a hostel for myself and it turned out to be great. First I managed to get all my laundry done, it was high time, I was out of everything, in fact I was seriously over-using my underwear! I met two very nice Germans, Lena and Daniel, she spoke fluent Chinese and he had lived here for half a year, so knew his way around. It was really great hanging out with them, we ate lots and lots of street food, continued in a dumpling place and finished off with a bubble tea. It was really nice to enjoy the city life and to socialize a bit after camping out in the green on my own for the last couple of days. I was so full I rolled into bed and collapsed the moment we got back.

Mo 5.9.2016, day 421. Onto the train (Qingdao – Train, 0 km)

I was quite nervous if everything would go well with shipping the bike and all my stuff with the train. I was down at the luggage place at 10 am. It was a bit of a hassle, but the new system of putting my 4 panniers into the IKEA style bag and wrapping it up with rope works quite well, leaving me with 3 pieces of luggage, the bike, the trailer and the IKEA bag that are quite easy to handle. The kite board finally had to go as a separate piece of luggage and the whole dispatch knocked me back about 50\$. About double

the train fare! But I was relieved when all the documents were stamped and everything disappeared through the x-ray scan. I hope I will see everything again in Xining! I did a bit of sightseeing along the Qingdao beach and wondered at the scores of Chinese tourists that were scrambling over the rocky shore or filling up the small sandy coves taking photographs of everything and anything. I soon snuggled down into a café to relax a bit. Getting into the railway station was like getting to the gate at an airport with numerous checks and baggage scans. I hid the oil and WD40, that I was not allowed to check in with my bike and bags, as well as I could and was relieved that it wasn't spotted. The station was packed with people and I was amazed how many people were taking the train to Xining. But everything was quite well organized with the train numbers well signposted and soon I was flowing along with the river of people boarding the train. The hard seat I had booked was not as bad as I had feared, but the train was really full. It was going to be a tedious ride! On the dot at 14:47 the doors closed and the train pulled out of the station past attendants that were standing to attention on the platform saluting.

For about the first hour I had two seats to myself, but then the train seriously filled up and every seat was occupied. A lady with a young baby had the seat next to me, at least she wanted to exchange her window seat with my aisle seat which suited me perfectly. Also the aisle of the train filled up with people who didn't have a booked seat. There was a cacophony of screaming babies, chattering people, phones ringing, the tones of video games or movies been played at full volume. There was a constant scuffle to fit one additional bag on the already completely full overhead luggage rack. Once a severe quarrel flared up between one tough looking middle aged lady and a bald headed guy. There was screaming and shouting and cursing, the train attendants came and tried to calm things down. This was by far not the only row there would be but it was the most severe. Stayed cuddled in my tiny corner, not being able to move much, listened to one podcast after the next and looked out at the passing Chinese landscape in amazement. The sky was a milky haze and we passed one industrial complex after the next. In Jinan we passed a colossal dinosaur of a steel plant that brought back memories of my past life. We passed hundreds, probably even thousands of massive apartment blocks, as everywhere in China, many were still under construction and most seemed to be completely empty or at best partly occupied. This incredible surplus of apartments that they have in China is a complete mystery to me. My guess is that some politically well-connected construction company gets loans from the bank to build blocks of flats, building begins, lots of money disappears into various pockets, then the renting out or selling of the finished apartments slowly starts. By that time whichever tycoon was responsible for the construction is over the hills and far away constructing more superfluous blocks of flats somewhere else and the bank ends up having a crappy almost empty block of flats as security against a very dodgy loan. For me this is the biggest and most blatantly obvious real estate bubble I have ever seen. I hope I will be safely back in Switzerland as self-sufficient as possible with a nice root crop basement, earth sheltered greenhouse, a couple of chickens, large vegetable garden and good stock of spaghetti and some bags of rice, when the bubble bursts!







Tu 6.9.2016, day 422. Arrival in the middle of China! (Xining, 0 km)

Amazingly I managed to get a couple of hours of sleep with my head flat against the small table in front of me. I had a bit of a stiff neck and back and also my legs were a bit swollen after hours of poor circulation. I took a bit of a stroll up and down the train, found the diner car, that was sadly already packed. Got back to my seat and chased away the guy that had immediately occupied it while I was gone. Ate a whole pack of digestive biscuits I had brought along and listened to some more podcasts. When we arrived in Xian a lot of people got off and finally the train was a bit emptier. I bought a lunch box for about 1\$ that was surprisingly good. In Lanzhou even more people got off and the train became pleasantly empty. Also the landscape, after hours and hours of flat featureless farmland, became hilly and a bit more interesting. The farmland we had passed was however also quite interesting. It seems the farming in China is done more smartly than in the USA. The fields are relatively small and there are lots and lots of little patches of trees left standing, probably as wildlife refuges and as wind breaks. There were lots and lots of greenhouses and I was interested to see that they were all earth sheltered, being backed by a thick mound of earth and having thick earth walls on either side. Probably half the area was given over to corn fields, but in the cornfields there were lots and lots of rather small vegetable gardens growing cabbage, beans, onions, etc... Very different from the colossal monocultures we saw in the Midwest of the USA.

When I got out in Xining I was greeted by cool crisp air. Xining is at 2300 m altitude and I had a bit of an altitude headache (or was it a 30h-on-a-train-headache?) and was noticeably short of breath. I had a bit of an odyssey finding my bike. The luggage collection was about a 2km walk away from the station. I was there before the stuff arrived and had a good time joking with the luggage handlers. When the bike and trailer and stuff arrived I had even a better time. They were absolutely amazed and couldn't stop taking photos with their smartphones. I rode out through the city towards the hostel I had foolishly booked (as if the hostel would be booked out in a place like Xining!). Whenever I stopped I was immediately surrounded by crowds of people inspecting the bike and the trailer and all the little flags on the flagstaff of the trailer. It was fun, but also quite tiring. The hostel I had booked seemed to be on the second floor of a block of flats in a gated residential area. Entrance was through a very dark back door and flight of stairs. There was no marking of any hostel on the door and no place to keep my bike. I decided to find another place. Soon I found a very colourful hostel and got an 8 bed dorm all to myself for 6\$. I went out for a very delicious meal of lamb skewers with spicy grilled flat bread. The people here seem to be mostly Hui Muslims and the atmosphere is already slightly central Asian.

I was invited to join a bit of beer campei-ing in a shop where wanted to buy some water and dessert. After two cups I apologized and dragged myself away from the jolly circle of red faced, bad toothed, potbellied gentlemen.

Back at the hostel there was quite a gathering of young Chinese who invited me to join them for some melon. One girl spoke quite good English, I had a bit of a chat, but soon headed for bed and a delicious 12h sleep in the cool room.

We 7.9.2016, day 423. Relaxing and acclimatizing (Xining, 0 km)

I slept incredibly well and spent until early afternoon on the internet in front of muffins and coffee planning my onward journey, meticulously marking places where I will be able to find food and water.

Things are looking do-able but I certainly have exciting days ahead of me! I wonder how biking over the 3800 m high pass that awaits me will feel like?

I spent a long time walking around Xining. It was really fascinating how the very western style shopping malls, Han Chinese eateries and markets are mixed up with very Central Asian Muslim quarters with mosques, Muslim markets with halal butchers and the typical flat bread. I bought myself a new pair of running shoes for 20\$, not a western brand, I wonder what the quality will be like. They seem very good to me. By chance I also found exactly the screw I need to attach the horn to my handlebar properly. I got the screw for free, when the amazed lady found out that I really only want one single screw. I also stocked up on food. I'm not sure what I will find once I leave Xining.

I got back to the hostel relatively early and decided to turn in early. By 8 pm I was already more or less asleep.

Th 8.9.2016, day 424. Into the Chinese Hinterland (Xining – G227, 101 km)

I got off to quite an early start, stopped for some very nice tofu and fried bread that knocked me back less than 1\$. I navigated my way out of Xining without problems and soon found myself on the rather busy G227 heading northwards. The road climbed ever so gently and I had a bit of a tail wind allowing me to make very good progress. The first 30 or 40 km were rather ugly, passing through industrial wasteland, power plants, factories and huge housing projects with posters displaying a very optimistic outlook as to what it should look like once completed.

I had a delicious lunch of various flatbreads, sweet and savoury in Datang, the last town of notable size according to my maps.

A couple of kilometres further I stopped at a gas station to fill up by cooking gas bottles and was waved over by a group of car mechanics. The usual Chinglish conversation ensued and soon I found myself seated down with them and the next thing I knew I was enjoying a delicious noodle stew with them. Afterwards everyone got to have a go at riding my bike followed by a selfie taking marathon.

I was really really full and happy to start burning off the calories. The road started to climb a bit more steeply and some switchbacks took me up to the top of a hydroelectric dam. It was past 5 pm and the sky grew darker and darker as rain clouds rolled in. I was starting to think about where to spend the night looking out for suitable camping spots. In the distance I saw rain curtains. I was now rather close to the very last settlement before the road would climb up over the mountains. Just then I felt the first raindrops. I sped up as much as I could, wondering if I should push on to the village and try my luck there or if I should find a little hiding spot away from civilization. I decided to push on as the rain grew stronger. Just before becoming seriously drenched I arrived at the village that consisted of a couple of houses and 2 or 3 little stores and took shelter under the roof of a no longer operational gas station. I was really wondering how I should spend the night. It was quite cold and windy and the rain had the nasty feeling of being persistent. Then I spotted a couple of orange clad men in a building right across the road, that looked somewhat like a school. I went over to them, showed them a photograph of me camping and asked if I could put up the tent in the yard somewhere. "Yes, yes, no problem!". I was very relieved and went back to collect my bike. Everyone gathered round for the usual inspection and wonderment. The next thing they offered me was a garage, where the tent would be in the dry. This was getting better and better! Then they beckoned me in and before I knew what was going on I was sitting

at a round table with a big bowl of steaming rice and a stew in front of me having dinner with the lads. Finally, they offered me a spot on the floor of an office of sorts. This place was absolutely perfect! Except that it was right next to their Mahjong room... Soon the game was in full swing. The table was fully automatic and after every round, the centre of the table opened up, all the tiles were pushed inside, and magically a new set of tiles rose up in front of each player.

I watched the game for a while, took a stroll around, went to buy some cookies, offering them to the lads when I got back, but they refused. The game had now become more serious and money started passing hands after every round. The room was thick with cigarette smoke. I retired to my little corner and quickly fell asleep despite the considerable noise of the game next door. I woke up at about midnight. The Mahjong was still noisily going on next door. My room was reeking with cigarette smoke that was seeping in through the gap under the door. I opened the window. That helped somewhat, but the noise of the game kept me awake. 1 am came and went then 2 am. Finally I fell asleep again and woke up at about 6:30 am. The Mahjong room was still thick with smoke and there were piles of cigarette butts on the floor. I was packed up and on the road by 7 am. There was no sign of any of the lads...













Fr 9.9.2016, day 425. Magic ride over the mountains (G227 – Qingshizui, 45 km)

The sky had cleared overnight and I was greeted with crisp sub-zero air and a brilliant blue sky. The first sunlight was bathing the distant snow powdered hills in brilliant light. It was a simply magic ride up the pass. The road had a perfect surface and a fairly constant grade of somewhere below 10%. There was a bit of traffic, mainly trucks. The trucks seemed to have a sort of DIY water cooling of their brakes. Each truck coming down the hill was followed by a cloud of steam. Also along the road there were pull-outs where locals were earning themselves a buck or two by hosing down the trucks brakes.

I stopped at a nice spot at the river just as the sun appeared to cook breakfast: spaghetti with sesame seeds and almonds. Soon a shepherd appeared to find out what was going on. I offered him some spaghetti, he refused, but gratefully took a hand full of almonds and we had a nice little discussion without understanding each other, as usual.

At about 3800 m there was a toll booth, where I asked the girl behind the counter how much bikes cost. She simply stared at me, mouth wide open in disbelief for what felt like ages. Finally, she just shook her head, waved her hand and opened the barrier. There was a 1.5 km long tunnel at 3750 m elevation, but I was feeling quite good and decided to take the old gravel road over the top of the pass at somewhat over 4000 m elevation. It was a great decision. The view from the top was simply breath taking!

I shot down the other side of the mountain down to Qingshizui. Headed straight for some new complex at the edge of town where I hoped to find internet. It turned out that the complex also housed a hotel that looked very expensive. They offered me a room for about 25\$. I asked if 15\$ is also OK and to my surprise they said yes! It was a fantastic hotel, hot shower, spotless flush toilet, huge bed, wonderful view straight out to the mountains. What luxury! I enjoyed every second of my stay, sitting in front of the window looking out to the mountains enjoying a cup of coffee. It was great!

I found a blog on the net (<http://www.bikechina.com/ct-bw-3.php>) of a guy who did the exact same route as I did back in 2006. Reading his recount and comparing it with what I experienced shows me how much China has advance in the past 10 years.











































Sa 10.9.2016, day 426. Monster day with snow storm, wind and hills (Qingshizui - Minle, 146 km)

I knew it was going to be a tough day, as the weather forecast said there would be quite stiff headwinds. I still had over 200 km to go to Zhangye and so I headed out quite early telling myself that every kilometre counts. I hadn't gone far when a car stopped in front of me and the driver held out a warm sugar bun out of the window for me. I snatched it as I passed and started eating, without stopping. I don't think this is what the guy in the car was expecting. Soon he overtook me, got out and stopped me. The usual "Where are you from? Where are you going? Can I take a photo?" ensued.

The road headed straight out over the plains towards the mountain range to the north. It had a constant grade of about 2 or 3% and the wind blew straight in my face. I pushed as hard as I could but could hardly maintain a pace of more than 10 km/h. Soon I was panting in the thin air. After only about 10 km I had to stop to take a break and I munched on the selection of breads that I had bought for breakfast and half-heartedly chatted to the guy who had appeared seemingly from nowhere.

Then I continued, kept my head down and pushed into the pedals. Slowly I climbed higher and higher and the mountain range to the north, that I would have to cross slowly opened itself out in front of me. I finally arrived at the foot of the first pass of the day when I felt the first raindrops being hurled at my face by the icy wind. Right then a pick-up truck pulled up in front of me and offered to give me a lift up the hill. Usually I would have refused out of vanity, but I was really having a hard time, so I gratefully accepted. It was only about 5 km up the hill and the ride was less than 5 minutes, but it saved me probably about 1h of hard riding, also the rain squall had subsided by the time we reached the top. There was quite an interesting collection of Tibetan flags at the top of the hill, I wandered around a bit exploring, drinking the Redbull that I had been given by the guy who gave me the lift.

I rode down into the next valley and was struck by the number of Chinese tourists. They were everywhere, hopping out of their cars taking photos of the scenery, of the yaks, of the Tibetan flags, and of course of me. This would annoy me today more than other days. I can never just have a moment to myself to relax. Every single time I stop, immediately a car would stop, watch every move I make, ask to take a photo, talk to me in Chinese.

As I slowly started to climb towards the second pass of the day the weather started to turn very fowl. The sky grew dark and threatening and soon the mountains were shrouded in curtains of rain or snow. Soon I found myself in a full blown blizzard. The snowflakes stung my face as I fought against the wind, the trailer making my bike have a bit of a life of its own.

The blizzard was gone as quickly as it had come. Soon I found myself biking in brilliant sunshine. I arrived at the small village of Ebao, accompanied by a young Mongolian looking guy on his motorbike. He rode alongside me for at least 5 km, constantly asking me something. I had no idea what he was on about. The village was a bit of a tourist attraction with some ruins of an ancient city and a pagoda up on a hill. There was massive construction under way, no doubt in a year or two there will be hotels, restaurants, malls, souvenir shops, you name it. There still won't be many more tourists though... I was half thinking of spending the night here, but that would have left me with a whopping 140 km ride to Zhangye the next day and I was planning on taking the train, so I wanted to arrive in Zhangye as early as possible. So I had a quick noodle soup and climbed up the last pass separating me from Zhangye. It topped at close to 3700 m and Zhangye was down at 1700 m, so a long downhill ride lay ahead of me. The first part of the

ride was down a spectacular narrow valley through the mountains. There had recently been flooding and the road was pretty bad at times. But the scenery was spectacular! The bad road slowed me down and it started getting later and later in the day, the valley was now mostly in shadows. I was wondering if I should camp somewhere in the mountains or if I should push on the additional 50 km or so to the first town where I would certainly find a hotel. I decided to push on as I didn't much fancy the thought of a 20h train ride after having camped out in the wild somewhere. Gradually the valley opened up and I found myself in farming country. I now had a very slight tailwind and the road continued to drop slightly. I simply flew along averaging about 40 km/h, mostly freewheeling, for kilometre after kilometre. I have never experienced anything like it!

I very quickly arrived in Minle, had a bit of trouble finding a hotel, but after 2 failed attempts finally found a small place smack in the centre of town for about 14\$. A bit expensive, but I didn't care. I went out for something to eat and every head in the place turned as I walked in. I ordered by pointing at something someone else was having and sat down. Soon I was surrounded by a crowd of young kids who were pointing at me and laughing at me. They came up and touched me, pulled at my shirt, tugged at my wallet that was in my pocket. It was quite unnerving. I ignored them. Then two girls came and sat at the table with me. One spoke a bit of English. Turned out she was the manager of one of the hotels and asked me if I could give her staff an English course. I chatted a bit, explained that an English class would knock her back 100\$ per hour. I was very relieved to be back in the peace and quiet of my hotel room.















































Su 11.9.2016, day 427. Into the valley and onto the train (Minle - Zhangye, 87 km)

I got off around 8:30, much later than I had wanted to. I bought some sweet breads and soon was on the main road down into the valley. I made extremely quick progress, averaging well over 30 km/h for the first 50 km or so until the road levelled out. The whole distance the road was lined with trees, sometimes willows, sometimes poplars or birches several rows deep. Beyond the trees was farmland.

I arrived in Zhangye about at lunch time and headed straight for the railway station that was about 10 km out of town. I have learnt from the first time taking a train and so headed straight for the luggage office and asked if I could take my bike to Urumqi. "No problem" apparently, so I stood in line to buy the ticket. There is big Chinese holiday coming up and I was really hoping there would still be sleepers available. I didn't much fancy another night with on a seat with my face on the table in front of me, or worse still, no seat whatsoever! I was much relieved that there were sleepers available and also surprised that I could take the train at 14:51, in less than 2h! I bought the ticket and went back to the luggage office where a very strict lady did everything exactly the way she wanted it done and so I ended up with all my bags wrapped in sacks, the bag on the trailer came off and the empty trailer went separately. I was very relieved that everything -once again!- went so smoothly and soon found myself in the second class sleeper of train bound for Urumqi. Not very luxurious, but certainly better than a seat! This trip would take me very much closer to Kazakhstan and Almaty where the next leg of this journey will begin. And so I sat there looking out at the desert sweeping past me. This would certainly have been a boring bike ride!













Mo 12.9.2016, day 428. Off one train and onto another (Urumqi – Yining, 0 km)

I slept surprisingly well, even though I once again had the bad luck to be in the compartment with the screaming child. In Urumqi I got off the train and soon found myself in a maze of security fences and security check points. It took me quite while to find the ticket office, where I got two bits of bad news. First, apparently there is no longer a direct train to Khorgos, the border town with Kazakhstan, only to Yiling, about 100 km away from the border and, second, there were no more seats left on the train. So I bought a “standing” ticket and went to see about my bike and bags. I showed the slip, the lady disappeared for a while, came back, talked in Chinese and gave me back the slip. No bike, no bags. Finally I understood that I should come back at 3 pm. I thus had a couple of hours to explore the city. Urumqi has always intrigued me. It is the city farthest away from any ocean, and -in fact- it is really far away from anything and everything. I was expecting a bustling historic city with a colourful mixture of flashy Han Chinese skyscrapers, mixed with old bazars and mosques. It is none of that. The bazar is a modern fake affair full of Chinese tourists taking photos, the skyscrapers are not flashy at all but nasty and crumbling, it is virtually impossible to walk anywhere as the city is a maze of crumbling concrete highways and flyovers. Then there is the problem of the security checks. EVERY restaurant, hotel, market, mall, etc... has a scanner, metal detector and 2 or 3 security guards who open all bags and search you. I was hiking around with my small orange backpack, the guitar with the flag pole poking out the top and the kite surf board wrapped in the now very tatty protection cloth. Everyone gave me funny looks and I could feel heads turning wherever I went. I couldn't really go in anywhere as the hassle of putting everything on the belt, opening my guitar and backpack, was just too much. Soon I went back direction railway, dodging cars as I crossed 6-lane highways. Luckily I found a small bakery, that even had internet and coffee of sorts. I killed the time until 3 pm, then I went back through the maze of security fences and checkpoints to the baggage claims. I was very relieved that everything had arrived one train later. I collected everything and went straight over to baggage check-in for the next train. I wondered if I could have checked everything all the way through to Yining? I don't know...

I also checked in the kite board, determined to give the city another chance. I took the BRT bus no 1 (a bus that is supposed to have a lane of its own so it is not slowed down by traffic, of course all the expensive black SUVs also pull out onto the bus lane, so the concept doesn't really work) and took a long ride all through the city. The city is quite spread out with several centres, but my first impression was confirmed. There is nothing charming or interesting about the place. So I did what I already had done in the morning: sat in a bakery and had a coffee. At about 9 pm I went back to the station. The waiting hall was packed and got fuller by the minute. I went to the toilet and could hardly see the urinal as the place was so foggy with cigarette smoke. I had to laugh out loud when I saw the huge “No Smoking!” sign. At about 10 pm the train was announced and a mass panic almost broke out, people started running towards the close gates, started climbing over the dividers, the station attendants started screaming into their megaphones. I got swept forwards by the mass of people pushing from behind. Then the gates opened and everyone ran towards the platform. I got on the train when my carriage was still half empty with space on the luggage racks. I sat down on a random seat hoping it would be free until the next station. But soon the lucky guy with the booked seat arrived. Seat 66 was still free and I tried my luck again, this time I WAS lucky, at least for the first 1.5 h I had a place to sit while people without seats crammed into any space available anywhere else in the carriage. At midnight the train stopped and the guy with seat 66 displaced me. Now I was also one of the many on the lookout for any spot to stay more or less comfortably. For an hour or two I stood next to a group of kids who were playing cards, this was



not very comfortable, but entertaining. Then I stood in line for what felt like ages to go to the toilet. The first guy was in there for at least 30 minutes. I really wonder what he was doing! The second toilet seemed out of order as it was always locked. When I came out I managed to get a spot sitting on the dustbin next to the sink. Next to me an elderly gentleman was sleeping sitting inside the sink. It wasn't a bad spot, I stayed there for a good couple of hours and I even managed to sleep for a couple of winks. Finally, at about 5 am, the train started getting emptier and I got a seat again. Before long a child was placed on my lap. It was still a step up from the dustbin.

This memorable train ride had one final hilarious incident left in store for me. When the train had stopped and people were getting off, the attendant wrapped sharply on the door of the toilet that had been locked all night. No answer. He called and knocked again. No answer. Then he unlocked the door. There was a guy in there sleeping on the bog! He had spent the whole night there! I couldn't believe it! I laughed so hard that tears came to my eyes!











Tu 13.9.2016, day 429. A day in a luxury hotel (Yining, 0 km)

It was 8 am and still dark when the train arrived (China has only one time zone, this means that daylight and time of day are ridiculously out of sync in the Easternmost provinces). After wandering around and going through security twice, I finally found the luggage claims office. It only opened at 9:30, so I lay down on the floor and managed to get another bit of valuable sleep.



I was still hoping to make the 100 km ride to the border. However; this plan soon went out the window when I learnt that the bike had arrived, but the bags would only arrive at 1 pm. I decided to find a place to stay in Yining and bike to the border the next day. Yining didn't impress me at all. The same ridiculous security checks all over the place and very little character. I went to one hotel after the other. They all refused to give me a room. Only Chinese allowed. I went looking for a youth hostel that was on booking.com, so must be open to foreigners. I found myself in the middle of an Uigur residential area and soon a lady dragged her daughter out of the house so she could speak English with me. Soon a couple of kids on bikes arrived and wanted to take selfies. I asked if anyone knew the hostel, according to the map it should have been right there somewhere. One of the young kids said he knew it and would bring me there and soon I was biking hard trying to keep up with him and his pal sitting on the back of the bike as he dodged the traffic. Proudly he brought me to the place. Unfortunately it was no where near the Hostel and also had a completely different name. And also here: no foreigners.

Finally I got a very nice room in one of the luxury hotels in the new development area close to the railway station. I managed to haggle the price down from 400Y to 200Y (about 25\$). I am starting to get used to nice hotels!

At 1 I went to pick up my bags, took another tour around town, had a delicious Uigur style mutton and rice meal, did some shopping for supplies and returned to the hotel watching in awe as a dust storm / thunderstorm approached. Maybe a good thing I didn't try biking to Kazakhstan. It would have been a nightmare to be caught in this storm!

The "New Development Area" in which I was staying was also a thing. A huge built up area with actually rather nice oriental style future malls, future hotels, future residential area. It was even mostly completed. But utterly empty and deserted, except for some few hotels, restaurants and a couple of convenience shops. Who in the name of Zarquon to they think is ever going to move here! All these buildings are now in the books of some bank as security against a loan to some local politicians and real estate tycoons and are quietly crumbling away. Once again I just saw the colossal real estate bubble, perilously wobbling, soon to burst. I had a great walk around the place right before the storm really hit.







