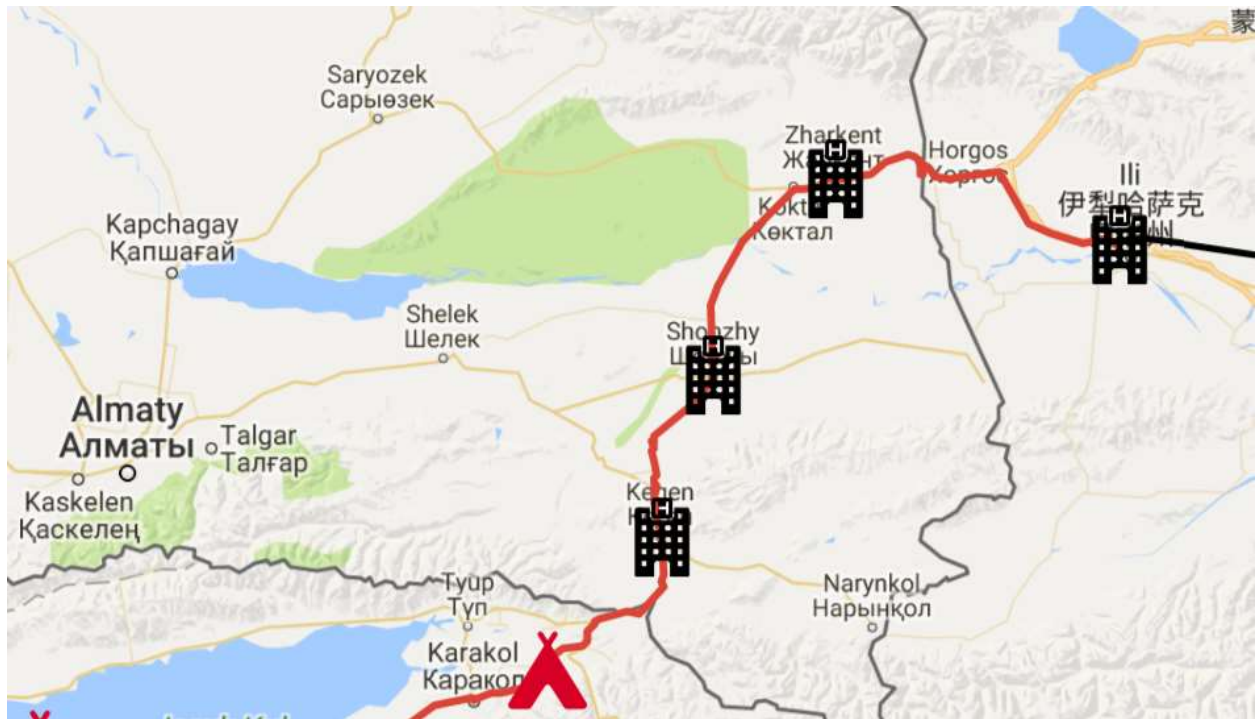


Season 12 – Part 3. Kazakhstan. Through wide open praries.



We 14.9.2016, day 430. Border crossing. A perfect day! (Yining – Zharkent, 146 km)

I left Yining later than I had wanted to. I was a bit nervous about what the day would bring. It was the last day before a big Chinese 4 day holiday and I had heard rumours that the border would close during this holiday. This meant that if -for whatever reason- I could not cross the border today I would be stuck in China until Monday. I was happy to be biking. The road was not scenic, but well paved and I made good headway. After about 25 km I started thinking of changing money and how many Chinese RMB I still had. Then it struck me. I had forgotten to collect the whopping deposit of 350 RMB at the hotel! I cursed. What to do? I would lose too much time and not make it to the border at a safe time if I turned back. Just then I passed a bunch of taxis. I stopped, negotiated a price to go to Yining and back, hopped into the taxi leaving my bike under the CCTV camera of a bank where I hoped it would be safe. The taxi driver was on the mobile phone all the time haggling with his wife or girlfriend and smoked one cigarette after the next. Yep, I have definitely have no pity whatsoever on the taxi drivers who are being displaced by Uber and who will soon be completely obsolete when we all will ride in driverless cars. They are my least liked group of people world over.

At the hotel they saw me coming and had the cash out immediately. I was wondering if they were secretly cursing that I appeared and ruined the binge they were planning with my money.

Soon I was back safely on my bike. The landscape turned rather beautiful with fields of lavender amidst poplar trees and rolling hills in the background. It reminded me very much of images of Tuscany or Provence in France.

Then I arrived at the border and was surprised by the size of the city. On the map Huerguosi looked tiny. There were lots of tourists taking photos of the border, even some horse drawn carriages. I asked for directions to Kazakhstan and the officials directed me over to another large building. There were lots of people going that was as well, so I went with the flow, came to a security checkpoint. I asked "Kazakhstan?" the security guys said "Yes, yes!" and I took off all my bags and put them through the scanner. On the other side I asked again, "Kazakhstan?", there they said "No, no, no!" and directed me out back where I had come from. I was totally confused but they were very firm and soon I was out again. Then one guy called out to me to follow him. I was sceptical as he didn't look official at all. He went to get his scooter and I followed him. I was back where I was right at the beginning amongst all the tourists. The guy directed me in to a small little barbed wire enclosure with a couple of scruffy shops. At one corner there was a tiny locked gate in the barbed wire. On the other side a guy was sitting on a chair. When he saw me he unlocked the gate and let me in. Now I was on the other side of the fence looking out at all the tourists and I was completely alone. There was some military standing round but they all ignored me. I went into a smallish building which turned out to be the customs. Still I was completely alone, not another tourist or traveller in sight. I put all my stuff through the x-ray scanner and started chatting to the girl in charge who spoke quite good English. She said not many people cross the border here. Stating the obvious! I asked about bicyclists and she said during summer there were about 5-10 per week, mostly from Europe going both directions. Seeing them made her want to go bicycle touring as well. I went to passport control, again I was alone, again interested customs agents knowingly inspected my bike. It was obvious they were used to touring bicyclists, probably the only people that ever crossed this border apart from the occasional bus or truck.

The crossing was equally bizarre the other side when I got out. I found myself in front of a large no mans land with a bit of construction going on here and there. I asked where to and the military just vaguely directed me along the main road. I started biking. It was a large road with barbed wire either side. I was alone. From time to time there was a watchtower with huge spotlights on top. The road looped round a distance of 10 km finally bringing me to the Kazakhstan customs. I went into the building. There was a girls sleeping at the customs counter. I said "Hello!" and she woke up and slowly raised her head. 5 minutes later the entry card was filled out, my passport was stamped and I was in Kazakhstan!

I was filled with joy. I really felt I had made a large step homewards. I biked along a completely deserted road through rolling grasslands. Found a wonderful spot under two trees to have a late lunchbreak of oatmeal with water, a pack of Oreos and some banana chips. Delicious! To my surprise my clock had switched back by 2 hours. A land border with a 2h time difference! That was a new one for me.

The day continued to be perfect. People were extremely friendly, everyone waved and said hello. Even the puncture in the tire of my trailer didn't bother me and I enjoyed fooling round with the kids who appeared out of nowhere the moment I stopped.

The cherry on the cake was the hotel in Zharkent. It was a lovely little place, sparklingly clean, with good internet and a hot shower. Finally I could get on FB, Instagram and Google again and also my WhatsApp messages were finally were sent! The days of internet censorship were over!

I strolled through town, got some cash from the ATM without problem, had a delicious meal of noodles and a peperoni and meat sauce. Went shopping for desert afterwards The small supermarket felt very western with stuff like pasta, gherkins, butter, milk, yoghurt, cheese, all in familiar sort of packaging. I certainly felt like I was slowly getting closer to home...













Th 15.9.2016, day 431. Long straight roads and meeting up with touring couple (Zharkent – Chundzha, 104 km)

I had ordered breakfast at 7 am to force me to get up early. I then did a bit of administration work and planning. It was close to 10 am when I finally headed off. I stocked up on pasta and cookies in the supermarket and hit the road. The ride wasn't very interesting. Mostly long straight roads through very empty and totally flat grass landscapes. I wasn't very motivated and the road was quite bumpy. The cars were quite reckless and I spent most of the time riding on the gravel shoulder, so I didn't make very good progress. I really wasn't feeling energetic but I kept at it, stopping only after I had done 50 km. I found a nice shady tree and ate a whole loaf of bread with a whole pot of honey followed by some cookies. A curious donkey came to visit me and see what was going on.

The second half of the day I found even harder than the first as the road started climbing ever so slightly and a slight head wind developed. I stopped several times, once to bath my feet in a wonderfully cold stream. Before long I had a bunch of fish nibbling at my toes. I was quite exhausted when I arrived at the only hotel MapsMe shows and was quite surprised to see two touring bikes in the hallway! It turned out they belonged to an Israeli couple who had biked from Georgia and were heading for China. It was great chatting to them getting a heads up on what lay ahead of me. Finally we went out for dinner together, some great mutton skewers with bring-your-own salad and chips from the shop next door.











Fr 16.9.2016, day 432. Up into the hills towards Kyrgyzstan (Chundzha – Kegen, 83 km)

Breakfast was a small bowl of porridge, it was going to be a big day so I asked for seconds and also mixed up a large portion of my oatmeal stock with a whole litre of milk. This good breakfast did the trick and riding went very well through the wide open expanse of grassland that Kazakhstan is known for. After 30 km I had a break for 2 Snickers and a bit of guitar playing in the shadow of a beautiful solitary tree. The road continued to climb gently, after about 40 km I had already climbed about 300 m and was still feeling full of energy. The road then dipped into a deep ravine and I lost over 100 m of altitude, then it climbed steeply up the other side. After I had exited the ravine I cooked some instant noodles that I stretched with a handful of Chinese noodles I was still carrying.

What struck me all day was the lovely smell of the place. Where I had lunch it was full of wild rosemary and their lovely smell came wafting on the breeze. As I climbed into the hills this smell was replaced by a very strong smell of peppermint. The road climbed up steeper and steeper. At one point I was passed by a truck that was creeping up the hill only barely faster than I was. There were about 5 guys in the cab and they opened the door and shouted out and indicated that I should grab hold of the truck. So I did and so had my first experience of truck-surfing that apparently is quite popular among touring cyclists. I hung on as long as I could my arm getting longer and longer. After about half a kilometre I had to give up, but it was fun!

I soon reached the top of the pass and got a first glimpse of the towering mountains on the other side of the wide valley that lay before me. I also saw storm clouds and curtains of rain sweeping in. It was a

magical view. The storm clouds however also decided the question as to how I should spend the night. I decided to bike on to Kegen where I knew there was a hotel of sorts marked “Inside OK” on MapsMe.

The “hotel” was certainly a fun place. The outside was completely dilapidated, but “Inside OK”. I was shown in by a young kid who also took the cash. I was informed that there was no water, so no shower. There was a restaurant / bar adjoined with purple curtains on all the walls and Arabian or Turkish electronic dance music playing. It felt very much like a brothel. But the noodle with meat and peperoni sauce (this seems to be the staple here and is called Lagman) was quite good.

After dinner I wanted to take a stroll round town and maybe buy dessert. It turned out to be quite a scary adventure. At night dogs rule Kegen. Right outside the hotel there was a pack of about 10 dogs that snarled and growled at me. There were no street lamps, so I could only see their shadows moving. I picked up a couple of rocks so at least I could put up a fight if it should come to a show-down. I made it to the shops and back to the hotel unscathed. However as I lay in bed, I could hear the incessant barking, growling and snarling as the various packs of dogs that roamed the streets fought their nightly battles.













