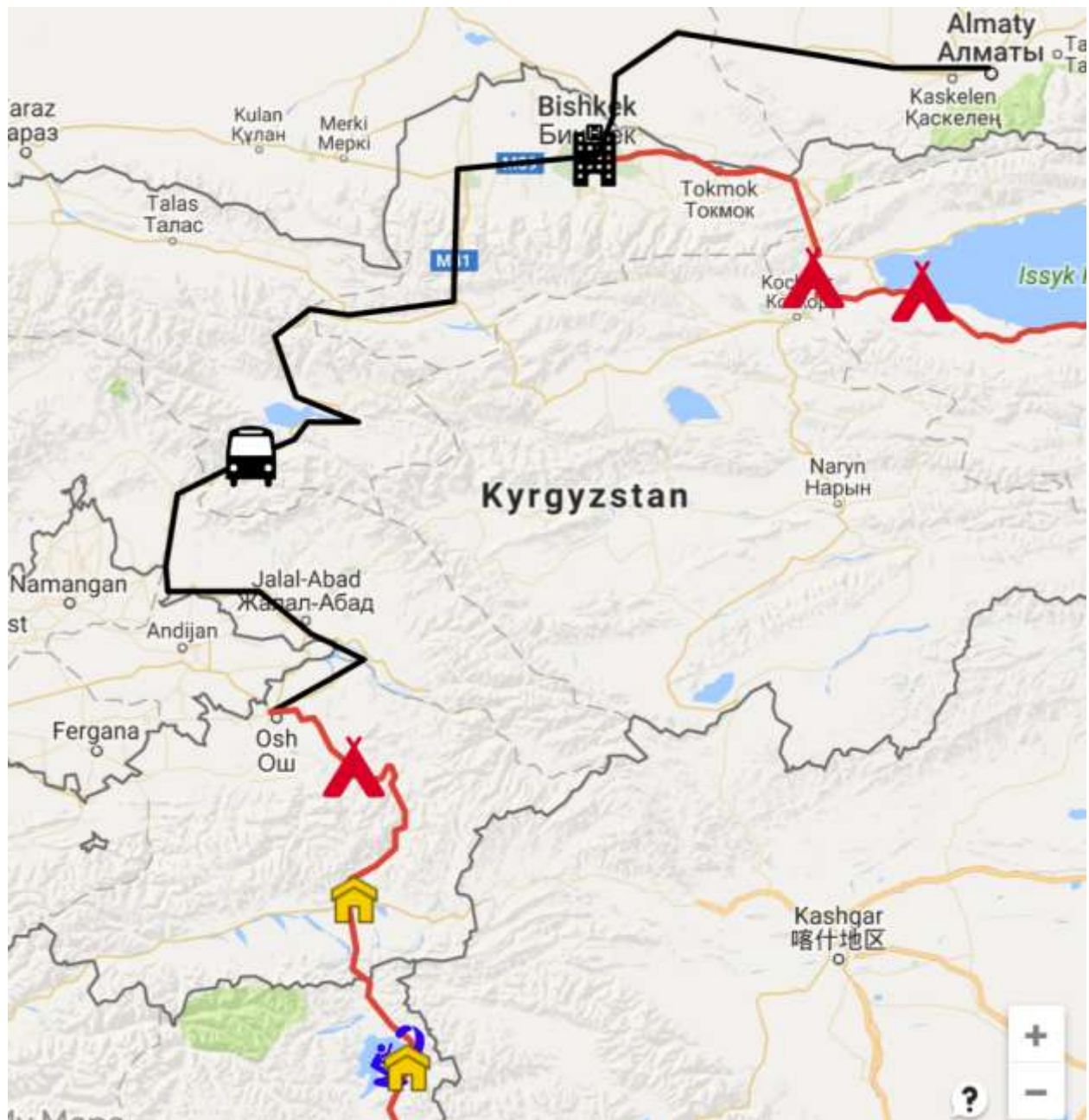


## Season 13 – Part 1. Kyrgyzstan. Towards Tajikistan.



Th 22.9.2016, day 408. Recovery day (Bishkek, 0 km)

There were 5 young Belgian hitch hikers staying at the hostel and they were having a great party right outside the window of the dorm I was sleeping in. I couldn't sleep, but also didn't want to be the grumpy old complaining guy, so finally I got up and played around on the computer updating the map. Soon the guys invited me over to join them and quickly my enemies became friends. They were great guys! It turned into a very late night and this led to a late rise the next day.

I finally managed to crawl out of bed and went for an aimless wander around Bishkek. I had no map and no idea where I was going, but the city, with its grid type Zarist architecture of broad avenues lined with trees and irrigation canals is very easy to navigate. The large angular marble clad buildings housing state institutions, the leafy parks with monuments and statues of some hero or other and the very sad looking crumbling apartment blocks make you feel as if you are right back in the era of the Soviet Union.

I found some good nibbles here and there for breakfast and just as I was feeling like a nice sit down for coffee I stumbled upon a place that looked very nice indeed. I was very disappointed to find it was closed, but then, like magic, the blinds went up and the door was unlocked. It was definitively my day!

I finally didn't get any of the things done that I wanted to, which was to figure out how I was going to get to the airport next morning to pick up Siria and to see if there was any way of getting a shared taxi to Osh with two bikes and a trailer.

I ended up hanging out with the Belgian gang and a couple of Israelis (Kyrgyzstan seems to be a favourite Israeli holiday destination. They are everywhere!) making a lot of noise until late into the night, annoying the grumpy old guys who wanted to sleep.







Fr 23.9.2016, day 409. Picking up Siria in Almati (Bishkek, 0 km)

I was up at 6:30 and on my way to the bus station at 7. I took one of the Marshurtka vans (old Mercedes Sprinters) that are the main form of public transport in Kyrgyzstan. They were all packed beyond belief, but still people squeezed in, so I followed suit. I immediately found the Marshurtka to Almati at the bus station, learnt that the shuttle from Bishkek to Almati airport that I had read about somewhere was indeed a myth, bought my ticket for around 8\$ and got on board. I was happy things were going so efficiently and already saw myself relaxing at the airport with plenty of time to spare. Buy it was not to be. The bus stayed put until the very last seat was occupied. Finally, after about 1 h of waiting and shouting "Almati, Almati!" a ticket for the last seat was sold and we were off. Crossing the border was no hassle and we arrived in Almati bus station at about 11:30. Still 3h before the flight, plenty of time I thought. I soon found out there was no direct bus to the airport. This surprised me a bit, after all it was the main bus station. I ignored all the taxis haggling me and went over to the street to try my luck with the public busses. There were lots of busses, but no stops showing any numbers, no maps, no signs, so I got on a random bus and told the ticket collector "airport!". He shook his head, but at least indicated which stop I should go to. So I hopped off again, went to the stop and asked the driver of the first bus that came "airport? Number?". "Ja ni znaju!", I don't know. What? Not even the bus driver knows which bus goes to the airport? Luckily a lady heard me asking and said: "106". Perfect! I hopped off the bus and waited for nr. 106. Finally I was on the right bus, but unfortunately going in the wrong direction. So again I jumped off, crossed the street and finally finally I found myself on the right bus. Still more than 2 h before the flight and the ticket collector said it would take 1h. We slowly crept through abysmal traffic. Cars blocking every intersection, trying to squeeze in in front of the bus, thinking they could still cross the road in spite of the red light and ending up blocking the whole road, cars double parking and blocking the road, cars trying to do U-turns and getting stuck. It was incredible. 1h came and went, the bus crept on, still nowhere near the airport. I started getting nervous. At 2:30, finally we turned into the road leading to the airport. Then the bus stopped at a gas station to fill up with fuel. I couldn't believe it! The bus also didn't go all the way to the airport but stopped in the middle of nowhere about 1 km away. I ran the last kilometer arriving after 3pm. Siria had been waiting for me for 20 minutes and was completely cool about it and radiantly beautiful. It was wonderful to see her! I was so happy I almost cried. It had been a long and intense 3.5 weeks for me.

I cringed at the thought of taking bus 106 back to the bus station, so we decided to take one of the unofficial taxis. We negotiated a price (10\$), the bike went half into the trunk the other half was left sticking out and we were off. I then asked how much it would be to go all the way to Bishkek? We finally decided to splash out the 70\$ we managed to agree on and enjoy a comfy ride all the way to Bishkek without all the pain and lost time of taking the Marshurtka. It was a very nice ride, we stopped just as the sun was setting a dinner of a huge pile of mutton with bread. At the border a nasty surprise. The taxi wouldn't take us across. He even had the nerve to ask for some more money. We ignored him and got off. It was hard work dragging the bike through customs, but the hard plastic we had stuck onto one corner worked very well allowing me to pull the bike almost like a trolley suitcase.

Customs was again no hassle whatsoever and on the Kyrgyz side we took another taxi for 10\$ straight to the hostel, settled in and went for a very nice little walk around town before turning in. Unfortunately, the Belgians had left; so there was no party, but at least it was quiet.

Sa 24.9.2016, day 410. Onto the bus towards Osh (Bishkek - Osh, Bus, 0 km)

We had a wonderfully peaceful night's sleep now that the Belgian gang had left. We took the morning nice and slowly, wandered to the city center, eating some street-food as we went (Samsas, pastry filled with mutton). We found a cozy cafe to sit down in. Great coffee, unfortunately nothing much else, so we shared a chicken sandwich. We then took the bus down to Osh Bazar, where we heard that shared taxis to Osh could be found. At first we didn't find any transport, so we pottered around the market a bit, which was fun. Then we saw a parking lot with a bunch of drivers lingering around their cars and vans. I asked "Osh?" and sure enough, we had found the place. The first guy we asked only had a small car, no chance to take the bikes, but soon we found a guy with a mini-van and a roof rack. Only problem was, he was leaving at 5pm, in about 3 hours... Should we relax one more day in Bishkek or should we go the tough way and spend a night in a mini-van through the Kyrgyz mountains? Tough as we are, we decided to go for it. We went back to the hostel, packed

up and checked out. I helped Siria load her boxed bike onto a trolleybus while I rode my bike through town to the Osh Bazar where the van was waiting for us. Siria went to get some food for the ride while I helped the driver load our bikes onto the roof rack. Soon everything was packed up and we were ready for take-off.

There was a strict hierarchy in the van. We, the VIPs, sat in front, a very elegant lady dressed in red and another woman with a child sat in the second row, at the back there were three guys.

The driver was a very cheerful joking sort of guy, we didn't understand much of what he was saying, but it was clear everyone was making fun of us. Soon we also got ourselves our nick names: "Hey, bicycle, where are you from?". And so we headed out of Bishkek along dusty roads, slowly leaving the city traffic behind us.

Su 25.9.2016, day 411. On the road again towards the Pamir (Osh – M41, 35 km)

The night's drive wasn't too bad, we stopped for a dinner of mutton soup, that was quite tasty, then headed off into the mountains crossing a 3300m high pass with a very narrow exhaust filled tunnel at the top. It was fascinating looking ahead up the mountain and seeing the headlights of the cars snaking up the mountain. On the other side of the pass the road followed rivers through narrow valleys and went past a huge lake. It would have been a lovely ride during the day... We somehow even managed to snooze for an hour or two.

Then the van stopped next to some taxis and a park of sorts. It was still pitch dark. Nobody made any signs of getting out, so neither did we. After a while the driver said: "Osh!" and indicated that we should get out. Everyone laughed at Bicycle. So there we were in the dark park with a pile of bags and a boxed bike. Slowly we started assembling the bike and packing everything away into our panniers. Siria had ordered top of the range Schwalbe tires from our bike shop VeloPlus back in Switzerland to replace our very worn tires. When I set about mounting then I realized that they had given us the wrong size! This was quite a fuck-up. Here we were, about to head off to cross the Pamir Highway with totally worn out tires!

Dawn came and finally we were all set. Our first stop was to bring the bike box to a hostel, Siria had promised to give it to a Dutch cyclist coming the other way. Next challenge was to try and find a place to buy a spare tire. It would have been foolish to head out with no spare. There is no bike shop in Osh, but we learned from the tourist information (I was absolutely amazed that there was a tourist information! It was one guy in an empty room on the second floor of a nondescript office building. Amazing!) that we would find something at the Bazar. Siria guarded the bikes while I dived into the mayhem of the Bazar. This was quite an experience. I went past rusty piles of car spare parts, piles of meat engulfed in clouds of flies, stalls packed with cheap colorful plastic rubbish from China. Soon I found the bike corner. All the tires I saw were rubbish. They were about 2\$ each, and wouldn't last a day. In my broken Russian I tried asking for a better tire. Then at last the guy understood and reached down under his desk and conjured up his prize possession. A Kenda tire for 7 \$, by far the best one I'd seen so far for Still a very cheap and low quality tire, but it would have to do.

We were both sorely in need of a quiet place to relax for a while and we also badly needed internet to plan. Finally, we found quite a good place that ticked all the boxes: decent coffee, WiFi and even some food of sorts.

We decided to go for the ambitious plan and start biking direction Pamir highway without spending a night in Osh. The Kite Regatta on Lake Karakul was approaching and we had a 3000m climb ahead of us, so every km counted. So off we went... we did about 30km, stopping on the way to stock up on food and water, before stopping to camp under a solitary tree down in the broad river valley.











Mo 26.9.2016, day 412. Hitch Hike up the hill (M41 – Sari Tash, 80 km)

The tree we had slept under seemed to have been some oil tree of sorts. Our bikes and bags were covered with oily drops and this also seemed to be the explanation why the rocks and stones under the tree seemed wet and shiny, in fact they were covered by a thin coating of oil coming from the tree.

After a great breakfast of the Müsli Siria had brought from Switzerland we headed off. I was incredibly fit from the 3.5 weeks I had been racing through Korea, China and Kyrgyzstan. Siria on the other hand was not really very fit, and so we advanced slowly up the hill. We met a Canadian bicyclist on the way up coming from Paris ([www.lebonmonde.com](http://www.lebonmonde.com)) and then close to the top of the first pass a car stopped ahead of us and a bunch of people jumped out and asked if we were kite surfers. It turned out that they were the Kyrgyz delegation travelling to the Roof of the World Regatta. It was great seeing them, especially because I could give them a big heavy bag full of kitesurfing gear significantly lightening the load I had to haul up the hill. As we were there chatting we met two more cyclists coming the other way, a German guy and a girl from Holland.

After saying our good byes we soon reached the top of the pass and raced down the other side, did some shopping in the small village (instant noodles and snickers, pretty much the only thing the shops here sell) and started climbing the next big hill towards Sari Tash. I was convinced we could ride all the way to Karakul arriving Thursday evening in time for the Regatta, but Siria had her mind fixed on hitching a ride. Grudgingly I agreed to try and catch a ride, secretly hoping no-one would stop. And so we waved our hands at passing trucks and to my astonishment the very first truck stopped! I lugged the



bikes and the trailer onto the flatbed taking care not to step on the large pile of poop dropped by the huge shepherd's dog who was snoozing innocently in one corner.

The guy who stopped for us was a shepherd who was returning to his yurt and his 500 sheep after spending two days in the city. We had quite a conversation, in spite of my pathetic Russian. Just under 100 km later he dropped us off at the top of a 3700 m high pass. We asked if we should pay and he simply said "No. But if you meet Kyrgyz people in Switzerland, give them a hug from me!". What a wonderful answer!

I was still a bit grumpy, I really would have loved to bike up the pass, or at least I would have liked to have given it a try. But anyway, here we were, everything had gone well and we had a thrilling ride down to Sari Tash ahead of us. There a young local on a pink bike started chatting to us asking if we need a place to stay, and soon we were at his place. His name was Shamurat and he had a great homestay, cooked great food for us, spoke perfect English and was a mountain and ski guide. He was really interested in snow kiting. This could be one of my next projects: snow kiting in Sari Tash with Shamurat?

There was also a very interesting Ukrainian guy staying at the homestay, Denis. It turns out that until recently he had been the Ukrainian minister for transport. Apparently right now he was out of a job and so he decided to go travelling a bit and intended to hitch hike the Pamir highway to Uzbekistan and then somehow find a way to get back home again.























Tu 27.9.2016, day 413. Into the Pamirs (Sari Tash – Kizil Art Pass, 50 km)

We were estimating that it would take us two small days to reach Karakul. I was a bit concerned about how Siria would deal with the altitude. I guessed that I would be OK, as I had spent quite a while above 2000 m in China and Kyrgyzstan but Siria had come straight from Switzerland. I was also really interested in seeing what the road would be like. I had heard so many stories of how difficult and bad the road was and I personally was of the opinion that it was all a massive exaggeration by people wanting to inflate their achievements.

The ride was absolutely magical, perfect weather, almost no wind. We met two Dutch cyclists coming all the way from Holland and later a Swiss couple in a huge 4x4 truck. At first the road was perfectly paved. As we slowly approached the pass it turned into a dirt road. Still perfectly rideable and most of the time nicely graded. Only short stretches were a bit steep and slippery. I had no problem at all riding up the hill in spite of the trailer, but Siria was fighting with the altitude.

We camped by the side of the road close to the top of the first pass at about 4000 m altitude and cooked noodles with sweet corn. Once the sun disappeared the temperature dropped sharply, so we crawled off to bed nice and early into our cosy warm sleeping bags.

























We 28.9.2016, day 444. Arriving at the world's highest Lake (Kizil Art – Karakul, 80 km)

It was really cold in the morning but once the sun came out the temperature rose quickly. I went down to the half frozen stream to get some water wondering at the green pebbles that made up the river bed. After a nice coffee and big bowl of Müsli we were off slowly slowly climbing up the pass. Again I was bursting with energy, but Siria was having a lot of trouble with the altitude.

Crossing the border into Tajikistan was again no problem whatsoever, no hassle, no bags searched, just a very friendly "Welcome to Tajikistan!". I found it funny that right next to the custom's house, up at 4100 m altitude, they had a very nicely maintained volleyball field.

We stopped for lunch in the valley before the second pass leading over to lake Karakul. We used filtered water to cook the instant noodles. From that moment onwards my stomach started to feel a bit strange.

Our first sight of Lake Karakul was absolutely stunning: deep blue with a backdrop of snow-capped mountains. A strong tailwind blew us down the perfectly straight road towards the lake.

In Karakul we immediately found the homestay where the whole Regatta team was staying and we soon got to know the whole crew: Matthias who was working for a German NGO, was the man in charge, his Dad Klaus had come over from Germany to visit him. Then there was Eve, Ken and Mark from Canada, who were working for Pamir Energy and the Aga Khan foundation. The Kyrgyz delegation consisted of English teacher Maria, translator / organizer Azamat and the photographer Rostam, Safina and Malika from Tajikistan were representing Pamir tourism as were Rustam, Tim and Ronya from Germany, who were doing a practical. Even local Tajik TV was present with cameraman Alizar.



It really was a great bunch of very interesting people. The homestay was bursting, but mats were laid out on the floor for us and we were shown the deliciously hot baña where we could take a bucket shower. I was not feeling well at all and immediately went to lie down. Later that night I had to vomit, after which I felt significantly better. Siria was also not feeling too well, but didn't have to get sick. Later we guessed that the most probable cause for me getting sick was that the water we used for cooking had come from a very mineral rich creek and probably had a cocktail of salts in it that are of course not removed by filtering and also not by boiling.



















































