

Season 13 – Part 4. Khorog and on down the Panj River Valley.

Sa 8.10.2016, day 454. Homestay with new found friends in Chorog (M41 - Khorog, 50 km)

The ride was similar to the day before, the road following the river valley and the wind was still in our faces. We arrived at a lake that I first thought was made by a recently finished hydraulic dam. There were trees sticking out of the lake, powerlines disappeared down into the lake and reappeared the other side. Also some houses were immersed in water up to their roofs. There was a newly constructed gravel road cut into the cliff face, as also the original paved road disappeared down into the lake. Only as we reached the head of the lake did we realized that the lake had been caused by a massive landslide that they were busily bulldozing away in order to drain the lake in a controlled manner in order to avoid an uncontrolled collapse of the dam that would cause a catastrophe downstream. Apparently further up the Pamir there is another huge lake, Lake Sarez, that was also formed by a landslide. This lake is 200 m deep on average and has a volume of many cubic kilometres. If this natural dam ever collapses, it would cause epic flooding throughout much of Central Asia. For this reason, the lake is out of bounds requiring an extra special permit to visit. A terrorist attack for example would be devastating. Recently there was an earthquake and one huge rock developed a crack. If this rock would have fallen into the lake the surge of water could well have caused the dam to break unleashing a catastrophe.

After a last climb just outside of Khorog we finally found ourselves back in civilization. It was before noon and we had arranged to meet up with Eve, Ken and Mark, who we had met during the Regatta in Karakul, in the afternoon, so we had plenty of time to kill. We installed ourselves in the Indian restaurant that has a good reputation amongst travellers and also found an ATM that worked just across the road from the Indian. In the evening we met up with the guys and walked over to their place. Our bikes where whisked down a flight of stairs and locked up behind steel bars by a lady who seemed to be the capo of the neighbourhood. We were sure she would be guarding our bikes with hawk's eyes. They would be as safe as a bar of chocolate in a Swiss bank's safe.

The guys put on a real feast for us and invited Tim, Rustam and Ronya around. They all are really wonderful people and I really hope we can stay in touch and maybe meet up again somewhere, somewhen.











Su 9.10.2016, day 455. A quiet day. (Khorog, 0 km)

It was a wonderful day, most of which we spent eating. After breakfast, we were invited around to Eve, Ken and Mark's landlady for "chai". The chai included a huge pot of delicious Osh Pilav and salads fresh out of her garden along with all sorts of other goodies.

At first she didn't want to sit down with us, but later she joined and with Rustam translating we got a very interesting insight into life in Khorog during the Soviet times and also the turmoil that followed after Perestroika and Glasnost.

After an interesting tour of her garden we went over to the birthday party of Sarah, a girl from Los Angeles who was working in Khorog as a social worker, down at a restaurant right on the river's edge just opposite the PECTA tourist office where Rustam and Tim were working. The feeding frenzy continued and vodka was secretly slurped out of teapots.







Mo 10.10.2016, day 456. One more day of relaxing (Khorog, 0 km)

We decided to hang out in Khorog one more day. It really is quite a pleasant place and it was wonderful spending time with the guys. In the evening we prepared Swiss Älpler Maggrone, that turned out quite OK even though we had to do a bit of improvisation with the ingredients. Ken brought home a lady from Germany, Anette, who had biked here from Freiburg on her trike. She had suffered a stroke two years ago and was partially paralyzed on one side making it impossible for her to ride a normal bicycle. Her brakes had failed and Ken tried to fix them for her but didn't have the right tools. We were all really impressed by her story, guts and spirit. One more amazing encounter.

Tu 11.10.2016, day 457. Down the Panj River valley (Chorog – Rushan, 60 km)

So the time finally came to say good-bye and we headed off. The road was not really great for the most part slowing us down quite a bit. The river we were following was now the border with Afganistan and it was interesting to look over the river and observe the life on the other side. On the Afgan side there was also a road following the river. For some stretches the road was wide enough for cars to pass, but every now and then the road disappeared and was replaced by a narrow footpath cut into the sheer cliff face, sometimes including vertical climbs and very dangerous looking foot bridges. Where the road was replaced by these stretches of foot paths there seemed to be people waiting who would unload goods from the cars and carry them in backpacks across to the next stretch of road that was OK for cars.

As we were having lunch an Australian guy, Cameron, caught up with us who was heading for Dubai. We had a quick chat and then he was off ahead of us.

We continued at a more leisurely pace and at dusk found a great spot to camp right at the river's edge.











We 12.10.2016, day 458. Down the Panj River valley (Rushan – M41, 75 km)

After breakfast we biked a short distance to the next village to buy some food. I plugged my phone into the solar cells I had mounted on the trailer to charge and then we continued to bump along the very bumpy road down the river valley. After about 20 km we stopped for a short break and I went to check my phone. It was gone! It had obviously bounced out of the trailer and fallen on the road somewhere. The second time I lost my phone in just a couple of days! I Decided to unpack my bike and bike back to see if I could find it while Siria stayed to watch the bags. So back I went but it seemed like a hopeless mission. I had almost biked back all the way to the shop when a local on a bike came towards me. I stopped him and asked if he had seen a phone. No, he hadn't. Opposite a bunch of workers were just having tea and they beckoned me over for some chai. I also asked them about the phone and again to my amazement one of them went inside and reappeared with my phone! Incredible! Apparently he had found it right outside the shop. I stayed for chai and was also given deep fried hot dogs and deep fried potato patties, thanked them all profusely and raced back to join Siria.

We stopped for lunch at a road side restaurant and there we finally met up with "The Australian Family", Mel, Mark, Ezra, Sia and Reine, who everyone we had met coming the other way had been talking about. The five of them had biked on their two tandems all the way from Mongolia and were heading for Iran. After a short chat they biked on ahead and we stayed for lunch.

However, we caught up with them again by evening and so we pitched our tent next to theirs on a sandy spot next to the river and spent a wonderful evening together. They were the most wonderful people and we -like everyone before us- were absolutely amazed by their adventure.













Th 13.10.2016, day 459. Down the Panj River valley (M41 – M41, 80 km)

After spending a wonderful morning with this wonderful family we decided to bike on ahead. Again it was a very nice ride in spite of the road conditions that were at times pretty bad. We got chatting to a very cheerful bunch of truck drivers for lunch and after lunch bumped into a lone Japanese touring cyclist who was heading up into the Pamir. He was an incredible chap who has been on the road for seven years now. After biking from Alaska to Patagonia and up again to Buenos Aires, he flew over to Paris, biked around most of Europe, headed down to South Africa along the West Coast and up again along the East coast before heading Eastwards towards Central Asia. What a life!













d











Fr 14.10.2016, day 460. Arriving back in civilization (M41 – Qalay Khum, 70 km)

We got off to a reasonably early start and only about 1 km beyond the spot where we had camped we saw another tent partially hidden behind a large rock. It was Cameron, the Australian guy who was obviously still sleeping.

Sometime after lunch a black pickup overtook us and a young girl poked her head out of the window and shouted “Hello!” at us and gave us a cheery wave. She looked all the world like Sia. Did the Australian Family hitch a lift? Could two tandems have possibly fitted into the pickup truck?

Later during the day as we were stopped at a checkpoint the mystery was resolved. The day before, just after we had left them, Mark wrecked the valve of his last spare tube so they were stuck. He hitch-hiked to Qalay Khum to try and find a spare tube with his eldest daughter Sia and now was on his way back. The tube he found was not quite the right size, so I gave him one of my spare 16’ tubes just in case.

We arrived in Qalay Khum at dusk and headed for the hostel recommended by Lonely Planet. We asked about how much it would cost to get a ride to Dushanbe and the guy running the hostel offered us a price of 50\$. We decided to accept to avoid the hassle of going to the shared taxi stand the next morning and haggle for the best price. Then we had a bit of a walk around town enjoying some shopping at a really excellently stocked supermarket and had dinner in a restaurant with no sign out front hidden down at the river’s bank. At first we weren’t even sure it was a restaurant at all.

When we got back, Siria caught the youngest boy of the family rummaging around in my frame-bag. He immediately ran away when he saw her coming. I went to check if anything was missing and sure enough the brand new Topeak tool was missing along with a number of tyre patches. Could we have forgotten the tool last time we used it? We really didn’t want to accuse the boy of theft without being 100% sure. Nevertheless, I decided to go and tell the kids not to rummage around in my stuff. Soon afterwards we heard their mother giving the kids an earful and soon after that the father knocked at our door and apologized. We were half hoping he would hand us back our Topeak tool, but he didn’t.









