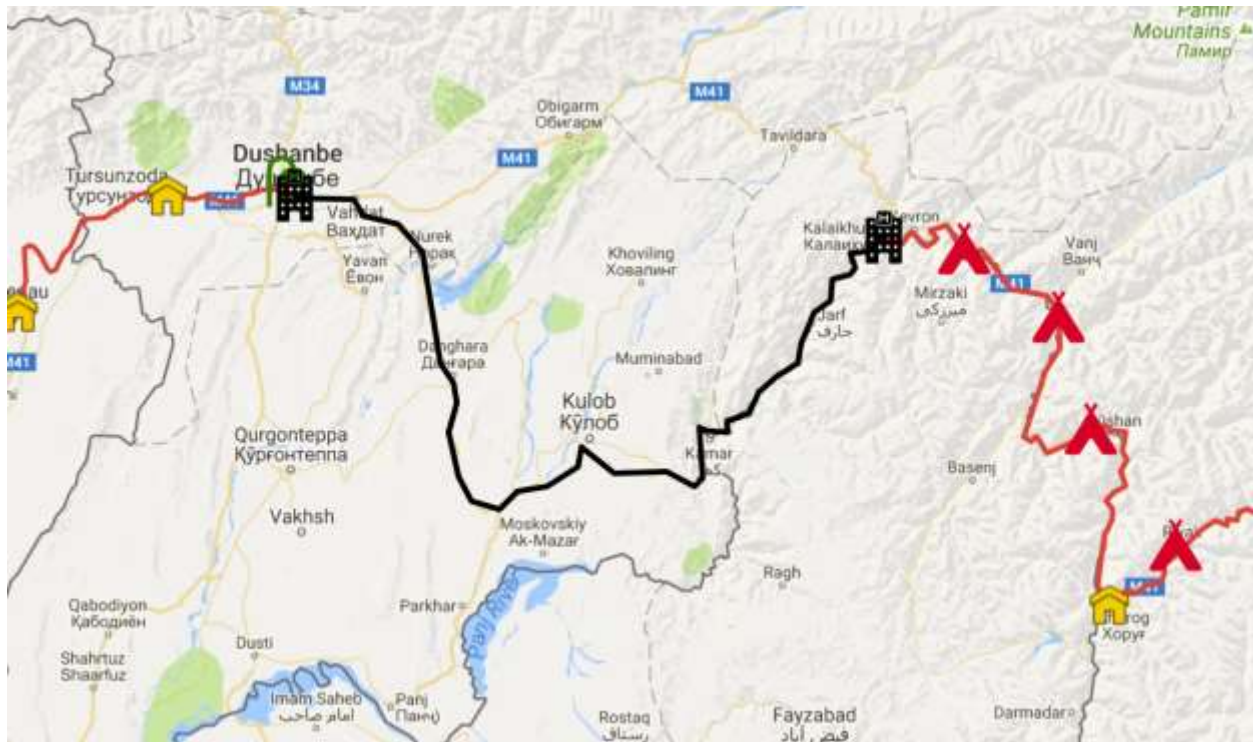


Season 13 – Part 5. Waiting for Visas in Dushanbe



Sa 15.10.2016, day 461. Car to Dushanbe (Qalay Khum – Dushanbe, 0 km)

We were up at 7am for breakfast that was a lack-lustre affair of fried eggs, rubbery bread and some tea. Siria went to check my frame bag again and sure enough, reappeared with my Topeak Multitool. So the kid had indeed opened up my zippers and nicked the shiny new tool. His parents either found it in his room or he owned up to his parents and put it back. Either way, I was at once rather pissed off that it had been stolen but also very relieved to have it back. We could have soon found ourselves stuck without it.

Then the car arrived, it was a small Opel Astra with a roofrack. We were informed that the terminal for shared Taxis was closed on Saturday so it would only be the two of us and the price would be 80\$ instead of the 50\$ we were promised the night before. Grudgingly we accepted. I started preparing the bikes to go on the roof, then dismantled the trailer so it would fit in the boot, while Siria went to get some provisions for the 10h drive. On her way to the shop she found out that the Taxi terminal was not closed at all and she had been offered rides for as little as 20\$ per person. Now we were really pissed off having had stuff stolen from us, having been overcharged for the ride to Dushanbe and also been lied to. The owner of the hostel then even had the cheek to say that we should also pay for petrol! Still, the thought of taking the bikes and all our stuff off the car again was too much for us, so we haggled the price down a bit and soon we were off. The driver ran errands around Qalay Khum for about 1h before we were really on the road.

I didn't really enjoy the ride too much. I couldn't shake off the thought that we should at least have tried to bike to Dushanbe, it would have been 280 km along the northern, 380 km along the southern route.

However I also had to admit that at least along the southern route, the route that we took by car, a lot of the ride would have been pretty shitty along dusty gravel roads with heavy truck traffic, some diabolical tunnels and a pretty unpleasant construction site close to the pass.

One very interesting thing to observe during the ride was how we were constantly being pulled over by the police. Each time the driver would put 3-5 Somoni (a bit less than 1\$) into his purse together with his driving license. The police would check his driving license, take the bribe and we would be on the road again. We were stopped at least 10 times. That's all the police ever seemed to do. Simply wave over random cars and collect the bribe. I have never experienced such blatant corruption.

We were dropped off in a dusty lane close to one of the bus terminals in Dushanbe. As we assembled and packed our bikes a crowd of gaffers soon gathered around us, watching our every move. I was relieved when we were finally on the road. We had a bit of trouble finding Vero's place, the Warm Shower we were staying at, as both our phones were out of battery. But we finally found the place with the help of some local kids. I was still quite grumpy when we arrived. But my mood soon brightened. Véro and her son Gabriel are Warm Shower legends, hosting close to 200 cyclists every year. She has a fantastic garden where people pitch their tent. The ground floor of the house she lives in is open to all, with free use of the kitchen, bathroom, shower and dining / living room. When we arrived there was quite a crowd camping at her place. Sonya and Gabriel from Lausanne, on the road for 2.5 years through South America and Asia, now slowly on their way home, Val and Pif from Belgium coming from New Zealand on their Pino, who we already had met in Myanmar, Romain and Emily from France, who had made a large circle through Scandinavia, Russia, Japan, China and SE Asia during the last 1.5 years and were now heading for Iran and Turkey, Andrei and Kate from Poland who were heading back to Poland coming from Australia, through SE Asia, China and Tibet, Yolanda from Spain who had travelled by herself through India and up through China and then the Pamir. Cheung from South Korea, who was heading for Europe. The only two who were not on some truly epic journey were Pauline and Germain, who were "only" on the road for 3 months and were "only" doing the Stans and the Pamir. The Australian family, Mel, Mark, Sia, Ezra and Reine, who were biking from Mongolia to Iran on their tandems were due to arrive the next day. It was really inspiring meeting all these incredible people.

When we arrived we were seated straight down for Gabriel and Sonya's tart extravaganza: stunning quiches for main course followed by a truly legendary lemon pie.



Su 16.10.2016, day 462. Preparation day (Dushanbe, 0 km)

Vero's place really is touring bicyclist's paradise. After a nice breakfast with all the other guys we headed off in search of some café for quiet, internet and planning. At the first place we went to I had an excellent coffee, Siria had an ice coffee. It was probably that ice coffee that had something nasty in it, as from that moment onwards it was downhill all the way for Siria, ending up lying flat in the tent with a plastic bag right next to her...

What was doubly unfortunate for poor old Siria was that she missed Val, Pif and Yolanda's crêpe party.



Mo 17.10.2016, day 463. Embassy day. (Dushanbe, 0 km)

Siria had had a terrible night. Finally, after having vomited, she was able to sleep, but she certainly was not yet fit enough to join me for the excursion to the Uzbek embassy.

I headed down there early at 8 am, as I had heard that it was quite a chaotic process. Sure enough, already one hour before opening time there were about 50 people milling around. Nobody stood in queue, it was simply a large crowd in front of the main entrance. I pushed my way as close to the counter next to the entrance as I could and held my ground. Sometime before 9 am the counter opened and after about 20 minutes of pushing and shoving it was my turn. I was informed I would have to go to the office next to the embassy where they would fill out the forms in Russian for me. So over I went, payed my 30 Som and about 20 minutes later I was back in the mob outside the embassy that now had swollen to maybe 100 people. Luckily tourists enjoy positive discrimination and the security guard waved me in, so I again pushed my way through the crowd and soon was inside a little room filled with people pushing and shoving their way forwards to the counter. So I again joined the pushing game, luckily all of the people were at least one head shorter than me and many were aged overweight ladies, so quite nice and soft, but they were fierce pushers and shovers and were all armed with handbags. Finally I arrived at the desk, handed in the forms, and was told it would take 1 week, so I should come back Monday. I pointed out that I had applied for express visa, so he said then it should be ready Thursday or Friday. We will see!

I went back for a quick lunch and then headed off to the Azerbaijan embassy. The contrast with the Uzbekistan embassy could not have been more stark. I was shown in through a large iron gate and welcomed at the door by the consul. He showed me into his posh office and seated me down on a sofa. The formalities were soon done and copies of our passports faxed off to Baku and I was given an appointment for Thursday 10am to pick up the visas. After that we spent at least half an hour chatting about this and that. No queues, no pushing, no hassle and only 20\$ per person for 15 days, 70\$ less than for the Uzbekistan visa.

Evening meal back at Véro's place was a Pot Luck buffet and ended up being one huge feast. Everyone was there, over 20 people. Our contribution was a bottle of vodka and some carrot salad I had bought at the market. Pif had also brought a bottle of vodka and with the help of the Polish couple and the Korean guy both bottles were soon emptied.

Tu 18.10.2016, day 464. Cooking day (Dushanbe, 0 km)

I was very happy to see that Siria was almost back to her usual self after having had a pretty bad day the day before. The big event of the day for us was that we were in charge of the evening feast. We were planning to make burgers (vegie and meat) with country fries and an apple crumble for desert. There were 20 people to feed, so quite a challenge. We were thrilled that Mel offered to give us a hand so instead of us blundering around, stressed out trying to follow a recipe, it turned into a wonderful afternoon of relaxed and happy chopping, baking and cooking, simply following Mel's instructions.

There was one new face at Véro's place. The first thing he told me was that we wouldn't be staying. I found it a bit funny as a first thing to say but I didn't think much of it. It was interesting talking to him and listening to his stories of previous travels, such as crossing the Gulf of Mexico from Cancun to Florida in a completely un-seaworthy boat, running out of food and water half way across. I also found it

funny that he offered to help but ended up chopping one single apple during the whole time he spent in the kitchen. Also he definitively didn't have a feeling of when to talk and when to stop talking. He somehow seemed to talk all the time.

The dinner was again a wonderful affair, all 20 of us crowded around the table.

After dinner the new guy left and I soon learned that many of the bikers already had their experience with him. Apparently he leached onto them, continually ate their food never offering anything in exchange, never wanted to talk to any of the locals and just generally was quite a nuisance. I guess even in the bicycling community there are some bad eggs!

We 19.10.2016, day 465. Bike maintenance day (Dushanbe, 0km)

After having done pretty well the day before, Siria was unfortunately again pretty much out of action. She had had a pretty rough night on the toilet and spent most of the day sleeping.

I spent most of the day happily cleaning and fixing the bikes and running some errands, like paying the 20+20\$ for the Azerbaijan visa. The bikes certainly had had a bit of a battering on the Pamir and the maintenance was well overdue. It was really satisfying getting it done finally.

The dinner in the evening was again a huge party. Marcel and Sonya made a wonderful pizza and Mel and the kids mad scones and homemade strawberry jam. It was delicious! I threw in a potato gratin that turned out surprisingly well (probably mainly thanks to Mel and Emily's supervision).

Th 20.10.2016, day 466. The day the Computer came back to life! (Dushanbe, 0 km)

After a quick dash down to the print shop to print out the hotel booking confirmation of Baku we were off to the Azerbaijan embassy arriving there on the dot at 10:00. Got to represent Switzerland well! The consul was not looking too good, his hands shaking a bit and rings under his eyes. He confessed that he had a late night watching Champions League football the night before, during which probably ample amounts of vodka had flowed. But we got the visa without problem, so that's one done, now only Uzbekistan is still left to do and that will be the end of getting visas!

In the afternoon Siria went off to the hospital to get a check-up as she had not been doing too well the last couple of days, ever since eating a coffee ice cream. Many other bicyclists staying with us were also not doing too well, some had worm, parasites, amoeba, and most had a little bag of medicine that they were taking. It really is quite amazing how many people seem to get sick here. I am really lucky that so far I have had nothing at all.

Then the moment finally came when I tried to start up my lap top again after not being able to use it due to the Bit Locker story. I opened it up, entered the 48-digit code and was very surprised indeed that it started up! I was thrilled! Now, after that scare, I will have to make sure to take more care with data backups. It really would be a pity if we would lose pictures and videos of this trip.



Fr 21.10.2016, day 467. (Computer day, Dushanbe, 0 km)

It was a very quiet day. I spent most of the day on the computer, Siria most of the day in bed. I went to the Uzbek embassy to check if the visa was ready. It was not. So much for paying 15\$ extra per visa for express service!

It was fun staying at the hostel. The whole touring bicyclist gang who stayed at Vero's place were now at the hostel. It was like one big happy family.

Sa 22.10.2016, day 468. Sick day (Dushanbe, 0 km)

So finally some bug also got me. I woke up in the middle of the night feeling sick and with stomach cramps. I spent quite some time on the toilet then managed to doze a little bit. I felt pretty bad all day and spent most of it in bed. Siria was also not doing too well, so we kept each other company in our bunk beds. However, by the evening I was already feeling significantly better and managed to get down a bowl of rice with some stewed apples.

I also spent some time playing chess with Ezra, the 6 year old middle daughter of Mel and Mark. I was absolutely amazed how quickly she picked up the game and how concentrated she played. I had to watch my moves to make sure I wouldn't loose.



Su 23.10.2016, day 469. Recovery day (Dushanbe, 0 km)

Again we didn't do much. But we were not alone. Everyone was only in Dushanbe because they were waiting for some visa or other. At least we were now both feeling pretty much OK and ready to hopefully head off towards Uzbekistan the next day.



Mo 24.10.2016, day 470. Visa collection day (Dushanbe – Border, 50 km)

So today, after hanging out in Dushanbe for 8 days, was to be the day when we finally were supposed to hit the road again. But somehow we both were not really highly motivated and so the day started very slowly. We finally decided to pack everything up and head off. Siria stayed in the Abstrakt Bar where there was good internet with all the baggage and I headed off -once again- to the Uzbek embassy. Again I was in with all the old ladies pushing and shoving my way to the counter. Again I asked myself why there seemed to be only elderly ladies applying for Uzbek visas. I handed the guy our passports, he told me to wait outside and listen to the loudspeaker announcements. After about 30 minutes the loudspeakers blurted “Shvezaria”, Switzerland. And so I got our Visas for 105\$ each. 90\$ for the visa and 15\$ for express service. I was a bit pissed off at having to pay the extra 15\$ even though we didn’t get the visas any quicker than with regular service and had a bit of a heated argument with the guy, but of course to no avail.

Back at the Abstrakt we both decided we were feeling a bit peckish and we were very late anyway, so why not indulge in a nice lunch. It was almost 2 pm when we finally were on the road with our bikes fully packed. We quickly stopped to stock up on some supplies for the road when we bumped into Pif and learned that he and his wife Val and Pauline were also about to hit the road. So of course we teamed up and the five of us biked off towards the border. At about 4:30 we decided to find a place to camp and so we took a little lane off to the right. There were some people working in a field and we asked if it would be OK to pitch our tent. Soon afterwards we were all seated down in the guestroom of what seemed to be the residence of an extended farming family being served tea, bread, Khaki jam, apples, walnuts and sweets. One last time we were overwhelmed by the Tajik hospitality. Communication was difficult as

always and we were pretty much left alone in our room except for one of the kids, we were soon calling her Francine, who was not shy whatsoever. She sat down with us tearing up the bread with her incredibly dirty hands and cracking open the nuts with her teeth with snoot oozing out of her nose. We were all wondering what our stomachs would be like the next day.





