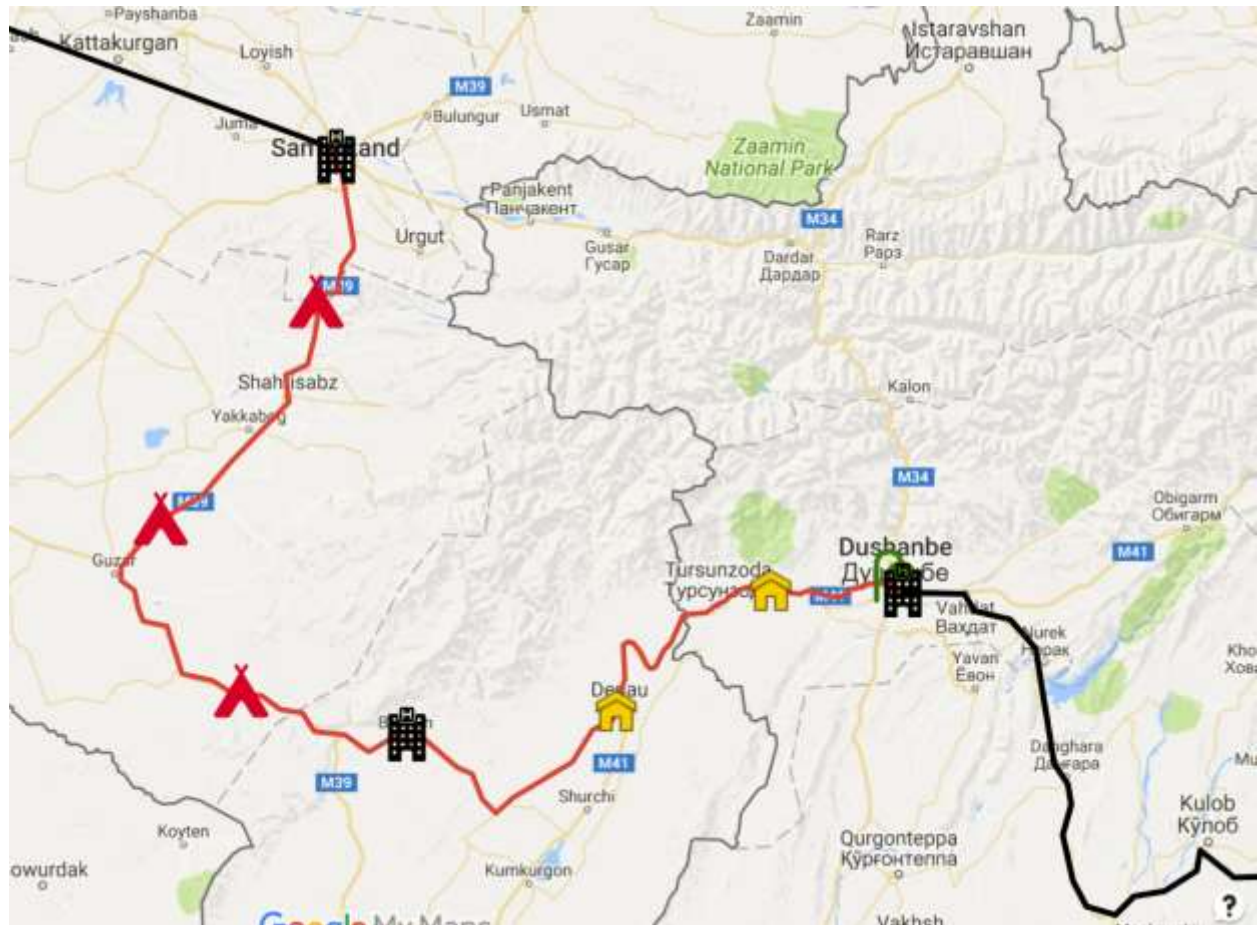


Season 13 – Part 6. Into Uzbekistan and Samarkand



Tu 25.10.2016, day 471. Into Uzbekistan (Uzbek Border - Denov, 80 km)

We had heard horror stories about the Uzbek border and we were a bit worried as we had about 6 USB sticks full of data, currency from about 15 different countries and were carrying 5 passports (2x Swiss, 1x Irish, 1x UK and 1x Italian). I was half thinking of hiding some of the cash and the memory sticks in the bike somewhere, but decided against it as we were not doing anything illegal. I did however dump a large wad of Vietnamese and Burmese banknotes worth maybe 2\$, under a rock behind a bus station.

Then -as so often- things turned out significantly easier than expected. We passed three Tajik checkpoints, they asked us for a registration that we had never heard about and it turned out to be no problem that we didn't have it. Pif and Val had paid 15\$ for their registration and were quite pissed off when they found out that it was not required.

We then got to the Uzbek checkpoint. The guards were very interested in our bikes and the atmosphere was very relaxed and jovial. We queued up to get our passport checked, then we went into the next room to fill out the immigration form. The next room was where all the bags were checked and so we went back to our bikes and soon a huge pile of bags was being run through the scanner. The guy checking my bags asked me to show him my guitar and he also went through all the photos on the camera. He seemed to be enjoying the photos and when he got to the kitesurfing photos on lake Karakul

he was thrilled and he asked me all about it finally understanding what the kite surf board was for. He also found the 6 memory sticks and told me he would have to search them. I said fine and wondered how many hours that would take. I think he was asking himself the same question and finally he simply asked me to promise that there was no religious or political data on the sticks. I did and that was the end of it. I was the last being checked and the others had simply carried my bags along with theirs out down to our bikes and so most of my bags were not even searched. So finally the five of us had crossed the border in only 1.5 h. No problems, no horror stories, no hassle.

We were thrilled to be in a new country and ceremoniously mounted flag number 22, the Uzbek flag on the flagstaff of the trailer. We also changed money. It turned out that the decision to change money after the border was the good one. We got a rate of 6300 Som per dollar as opposed to 3000 on the Tajik side. We changed 100\$ and got a huge wad of 100 5000 Som bills and 130 1000 Som bills, 5000 being the largest bill available. I started counting the bills, they seemed to be short by 2 or 3 but I couldn't be bothered counting again. In any case the guy who had taken my 100 \$ was nowhere to be seen.

We crossed the largish town of Baynau early in the evening and stumbled upon the bazar. We stopped to buy some fruit and were swamped by curious locals. Riding away through the crowd that had gathered felt a bit like what it must feel like for the Tour de France riders reaching the summit of Alp d'Huez.

As we were leaving the town, Pauline got chatting with an elderly gentleman on his bike who had been to the market to buy some melons. It soon turned out that he had invited us round to stay at his place. It turned out to be a fabulous experience. We were seated down in the guest room and one by one his 5 sons, three daughters and three grandchildren joined the feast. Bread, yoghurt, sweets, biscuits, fruit, nuts and tea were served. More and more food appeared. Soon also two bottles of Vodka materialized. There was no electricity and so when the sun disappeared we were soon eating by the light of home-made torches. I first couldn't believe that the father had made the torches himself and had a close look at them. He must have scavenged the LED and the battery from some discarded electronic device, the reflector seemed to have been made out of a can of Coca Cola. I was fascinated. He then took me outside and demonstrated the stove he had constructed that used sawdust as fuel. It was truly ingenious, as was the drainpipe constructed out of empty water bottles that fed the water off the roof over to one of his khaki trees. I also saw all the women of the house labouring away in the kitchen.

We were all already completely stuffed when finally, the main course arrived: a delicious Osh Pilav. When the men had finished eating and said a little prayer the women and girls, who had been sitting with us but hadn't touched the food, immediately grabbed the plates with the leftovers and started eating. I was very relieved I hadn't finished off all the Osh Pilav!

We were shown to our sleeping quarters, men and women in separate rooms. I was really tired and looking forward to snuggling down into my sleeping when the sons who were sleeping in the room with us pulled out a huge pile of family photographs and started going through them, showing us every photo, one by one. My eyes were drooping and I was very relieved when we finally got down to the last photo...



















We 26.10.2016, day 472. Tough bike day through the steppe (Denov - Boysun, 90 km)

We got off to a relatively early start after a nice breakfast. The father of the family accompanied us to the main road where we said our good byes. I admired his bike that he had upgraded with nice little touches: the stand was home-made and resembled my wooden one, the carrier was also homemade and the chain guard was shaped out of what looked like a chopped open paint tin.

Biking was very nice in the group. Riding was very structured, a first brake after 25 km. Lunch at 12:30 sharp. We made Pain Perdue (Bread dunked in an egg milk and sugar mix and fried) on our stove using up all the old bread we were carrying for lunch. We were aiming to reach Boysun as we wanted to get our first registration (in Uzbekistan you are required to register every 72h. This can be done at most hotels. A night train also counts as registration. Registering at a police station apparently is also possible but more complicated). Boysun was at the top of a hill and it was a tough ride up. By the end of the day we had climbed a respectable 1200 m altitude up. It was already dark when we finally arrived at the Hotel Ferdavs, very reasonably priced at 10\$ per person, where we got a very friendly welcome from the manager. To our surprise Cheung the Korean guy we met in Dushanbe was also staying at the hotel. Unfortunately, he was not doing too good health wise and planning to take a taxi to Samarkand.

The hotel manager offered to give us a ride down to a restaurant of a friend of his. Of course we knew there was a bit of a risk of being ripped off, but we decided to go along all the same and it turned out to

be the perfect decision. We had great fun at the restaurant, managed to somehow communicate in Russian and even make jokes with the hotel manager. Food was great: a pile of meat, salads, fermented cabbage (something they eat a lot here, very similar to Korean Kimchi), delicious mutton soup, yoghurt, fresh bread and of course pots and pots of chai. And we were definitely not ripped off.















Th 27.10.2016, day 473. A slow day (Boysun – M39, 70 km)

We started the day very very slowly, everyone was quite tired from the day before. We went to the Bazaar to stock up on food for the next 1-2 days. As usual I stayed to look after the bikes while Siria did the hunting and gathering. Soon -as usual- I was surrounded by a crowd of curious locals, all asking where we were from, where we were going, etc....

It was almost 11 am when we finally got going. Again riding was very structured. Break after 25 km, lunch, another break and stopping for camping at 4:30 on the dot. We found quite a nice spot hidden by some hills in a dry river bed. We were all in bed at 8 pm. I fell asleep immediately.



















Fr 28.10.2016, day 474. Camping in the military zone (M39 - Qamashi, 100 km)

We still had quite some distance to go until Samarkand so we had to get a move on if we wanted to arrive by Sunday. The wind and the road were on our side, it was mostly flat and nice tarmac and we had a good tail wind most of the day and so we gobbled up the kilometres. I was again amused to see with what regularity we took breaks. The first one after about 25 km, lunch at 12:30 sharp, then another break and on the dot at 4:30 eyes were being peeled to find a camping spot.

There was quite a nice spot away from the road, a clearing with a little pond and some large piles of hay. A guy was living there in a tiny hut and we asked him if it was OK to pitch our tents. He said OK but pointed over towards the road to a patch of tarmac, saying "Eta Zona", this is the "zone". We didn't really understand what he meant by "zone" and finally pitched our tents on a patch of grass towards the back of the clearing.

We were celebrating Pauline's 3000th kilometre on the road so the evening meal was a bit of a party consisting of 500g of spaghetti with sweet corn and tuna for the two of us (Pif and Val gave us some funny looks when they saw the quantities of food we knocked back, for Pauline on the other hand 500 g of pasta for two was more or less normal) washed down with a bottle of beer and followed by a large melon for dessert. The sun did its bit, by putting on a great sunset for us.

At 8 pm we were all in bed. Then suddenly a car's headlight lit up the tent. We heard car doors slamming and voices coming towards us. Did this mean trouble? I quickly pulled on my trousers. Soon someone was calling out "Einen Moment bitte" in German. I went out and there were 4 men, 2 of them in military uniform. The guy speaking German had no uniform, nor had the guy who seemed to be in charge. At first I was a bit worried, especially as the guy in charge was obviously quite drunk. But it was just a friendly chat to find out who we were and to inform us that we were camping in the military zone and that we should have a nice peaceful sleep, but had to leave by the morning. So that was what was meant by "Zone"! Also they warned us that there were lots of snakes around. Fantastic! I was relieved and so we did have a nice peaceful sleep.











Sa 29.10.2016, day 475. Up the pass towards Samarkand (Qamashi – Ming Chinor Pass, 80 km)

Again we wanted to get off to an early start as we had quite a day ahead of us, but again we were slow off the mark. First we had a nice chat with the guy living in the hut who appeared wearing the traditional Uzbek hat and a long dark blue, pretty heavy and warm looking gown that men here often wear. Then Pif and Val's Pino had a ripped front tire that they had to fix with a bit of duc-tape. Then the restaurant just before Sharisabz that we stopped at for lunch (salads, grilled chicken, shashlik, lagman soups and of course lots of chai), proved to be too good to stay for just a quick bite to eat. We had hoped to leave Sharisabz at noon, but it ended up being 1:30 pm giving us just 3.5h of daylight to climb the pass. The mountain we had to climb soon loomed ahead of us and we saw the road leading up to the pass cut into the rock face way up above us. Pauline is a very strong cyclist and also Siria was in quite good shape, managing to just about keep up with Pauline's pace. I had to fight to keep up with the two of them. The Pino however soon dropped way behind and out of sight. The sun slowly dipped behind clouds that were brewing and dusk started to creep in. We stopped to discuss if we should wait for the Pino, but quickly decided that we had to push on, as it was very probable that Pif and Val would try and hitch a lift up the hill. If we stayed put and waited, we would not manage to climb the hill.

I really enjoyed the ride up. The valley below slowly opened up and we were going at a very good pace. We passed lots and lots of little roadside stalls selling chai and Tandir Kebab. I would have loved to have stopped, but there was no time.

The pass was one of those where you think you see the top, but then you turn the corner and realize that the road continues to climb. It was already quite dark when we finally did reach the top. Just before the summit we took a gravel road to the right and followed it a few hundred meters arriving at a magic camping spot with what was probably a fantastic view down the valley, if only there would have been light to see. We only saw the headlights of cars winding their way up the mountain.

We were delighted that we had reached the top. I boiled some water so we could take a bucket shower to wash off the sweat then we feasted on instant noodles, the rest of the melon and various cookies and chocolate that we had floating around.

The night was quite a restless one. First I heard the whinnying of horses quite close by that made me think of Pauline's horror story of how she and her boyfriend were attacked in the middle of the night in Kyrgyzstan by a horseman who chased them out of their tent, then tried to snatch the tent with all their money and passports still in it and ride off with it. Luckily it got tangled up in the bushes and he had to let go of it, but he continued to attack them. Quite an incredible story!

Then the wind picked up as storm clouds blew in and it started to rain forcing me out of the tent to bring all the bags into the shelter of the tent.











Su 30.10.2016, day 476. Vodka for breakfast (Ming Chinor Pass - Samarkand, 60 km)

We woke up to miserable weather. The wind was whistling around the tent blowing rain squally down over us. We packed up inside the tent, put on our waterproof jacket and trousers and waited for a break in the rain to dash outside and pack up the tent as quickly as possible.

So again we didn't get to enjoy the view as it was foggy and hazy. Still the downhill ride was great fun and my clothes kept me nice and cosy. Our plan was to find a place to sit inside out of the rain and have a nice chai and wait for the Pino to arrive. We kept asking the locals for a place for chai. The first guy said "3 km!". Then, three km later some ladies again said "3 km!". We finally arrived at quite a run-down place and 3 old ladies selling apples by the roadside just opposite told us we should knock. We did. No answer. The ladies indicated we should knock louder. So we did. Finally, a very sleepy face appeared. We asked: "chai?". He shook his head and closed the door in our faces. I'm sure the three ladies were chuckling to themselves! The next people we asked for chai told us 5 km. Chai was getting farther and farther away! Finally, just after a checkpoint we did find a place. We parked our bikes by the roadside so the Pino would see them and went inside. To our surprise the whole place was being decorated for a huge wedding with at least 400 people. We were seated down at a table in the corner and soon some bread and a pot of chai appeared while the tables around us were loaded with cakes, salads, bottles of pop, bottles of vodka and decorations. Soon a plate of meat appeared in front of us, then another, then a place of almonds, then some sausages, some fresh cheese, then a huge wedding cake, we tried to say stop, but the food just piled up. We also learned that we were invited and didn't have to pay for anything. Then a bottle of vodka appeared. In spite of our best efforts to refuse, we soon ourselves Na strovje-ing with some guy who we first thought was the father of the groom, but in fact was just one of

the caterers. One glass followed the next, soon the bottle was empty and another one appeared. It was time to escape and we said good-bye and dashed outside and rode off around the corner and out of sight to wait for the Pino that soon arrived.

About 20 km outside of Samarkand we crossed two touring bicyclists with long beards. It turned out they were Swiss from Lausanne and had been on the road since April coming from Germany, Austria, the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Iran. They were planning to cross the Pamir and finish their trip in Bishkek around Christmas. Pretty cool, literally! I hope they have warm clothes.

By the time we reached Samarkand I had more or less sobered up. We went straight to the Ragestan and I was absolutely stunned by its grandeur and beauty.

We decided to stay at Bahodir Hostel that apparently is the place where all bicyclists stay. It is fantastically located next to the Ragestan and one of the cheapest places in town at 10\$ per person. The rooms are not fantastic, nor is the toilet and shower, but the place has a nice atmosphere and nice courtyard to hang out in and WiFi that sometimes works.

To our surprise we bumped into our friend Cheung, who unfortunately was not doing well at all and had decided to book a flight back home to Korea to go to a hospital. Also we learned that Romain and Emilie were also staying at the Bahodir. So it is confirmed. ALL the touring bicyclists stay at Bahodir!

We spent a wonderful afternoon sightseeing and went out for dinner all together for shashliks and Chorba.

















Mo 31.10.2016, day 477. Chilling in Samarkand (Samarkand, 0 km)

Breakfast at the Bahodir was surprisingly good. We got our laundry done, that came back not smelling much better than when we had handed it in. Bought train tickets for Khiva, leaving the next day around midnight. We decided to splash out and go for the luxury tickets: 30\$ for a private room with 2 beds for the 12 h trip.

The rest of the day was again spent sightseeing, especially the mausoleum was well worth the visit. In the evening we decided to cook pumpkin soup together to celebrate Halloween. We also had a great apéro with chips and bread, salads and finished off with a delicious chocolate fondue. It was a wonderful evening with wonderful people, a bumper bottle of beer, 3 bottles of wine and half a bottle of vodka were also drained.













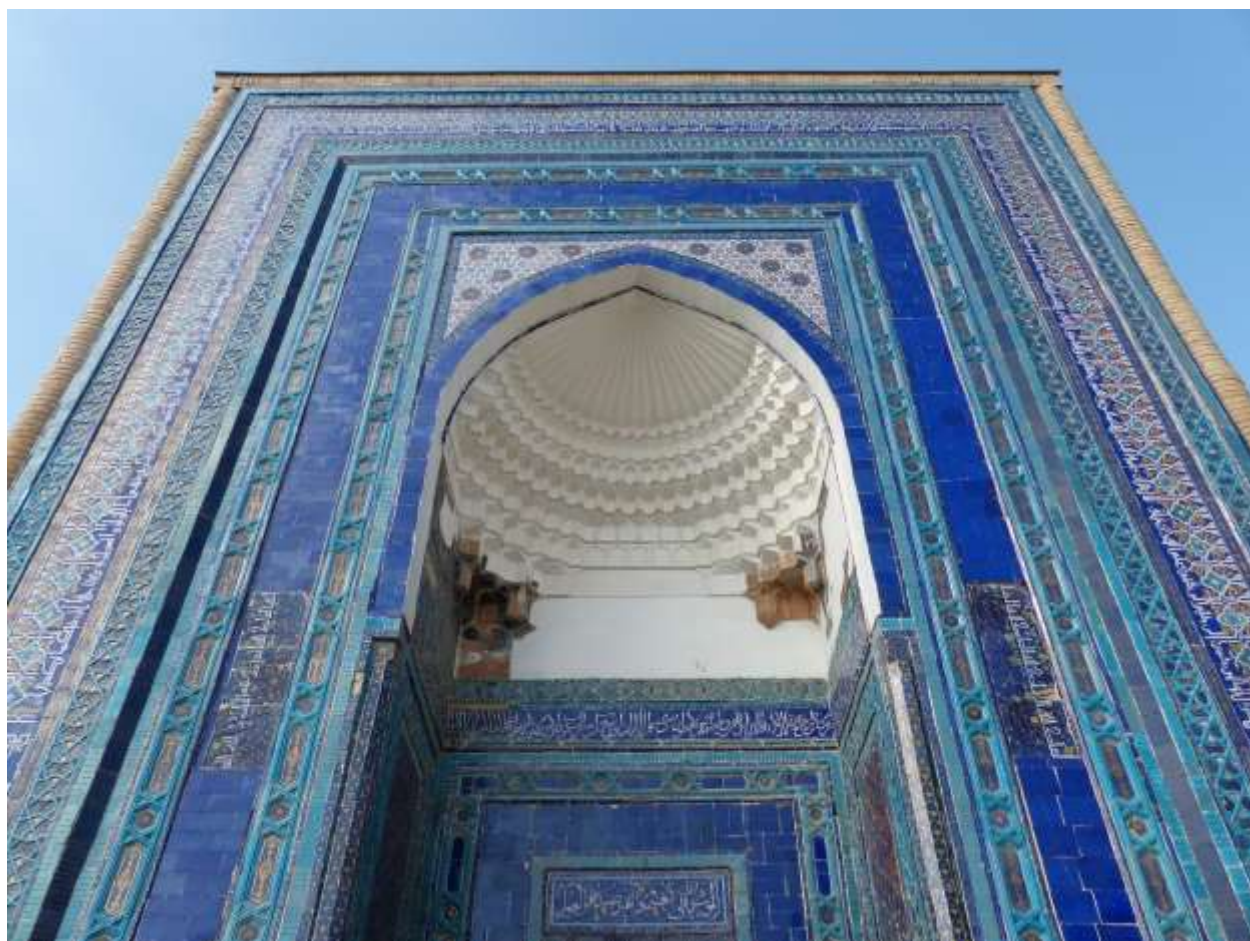






















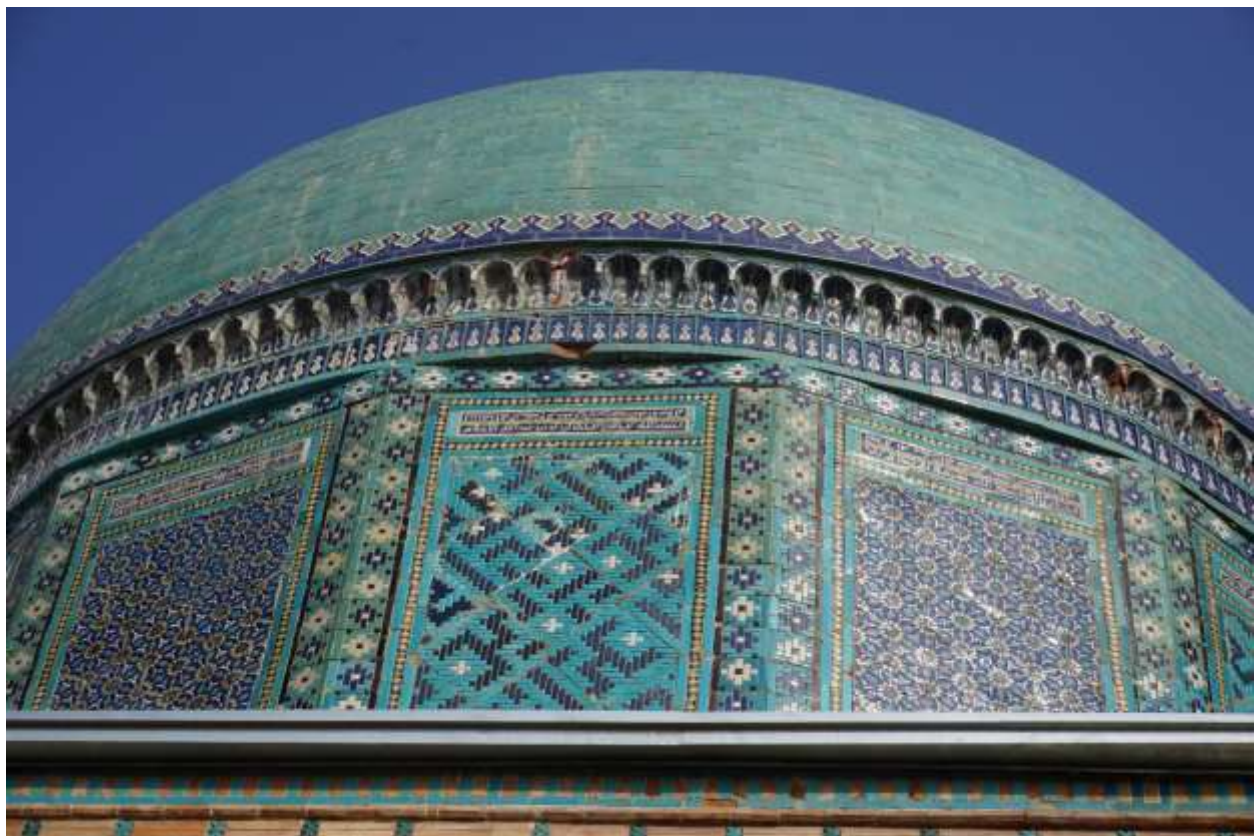






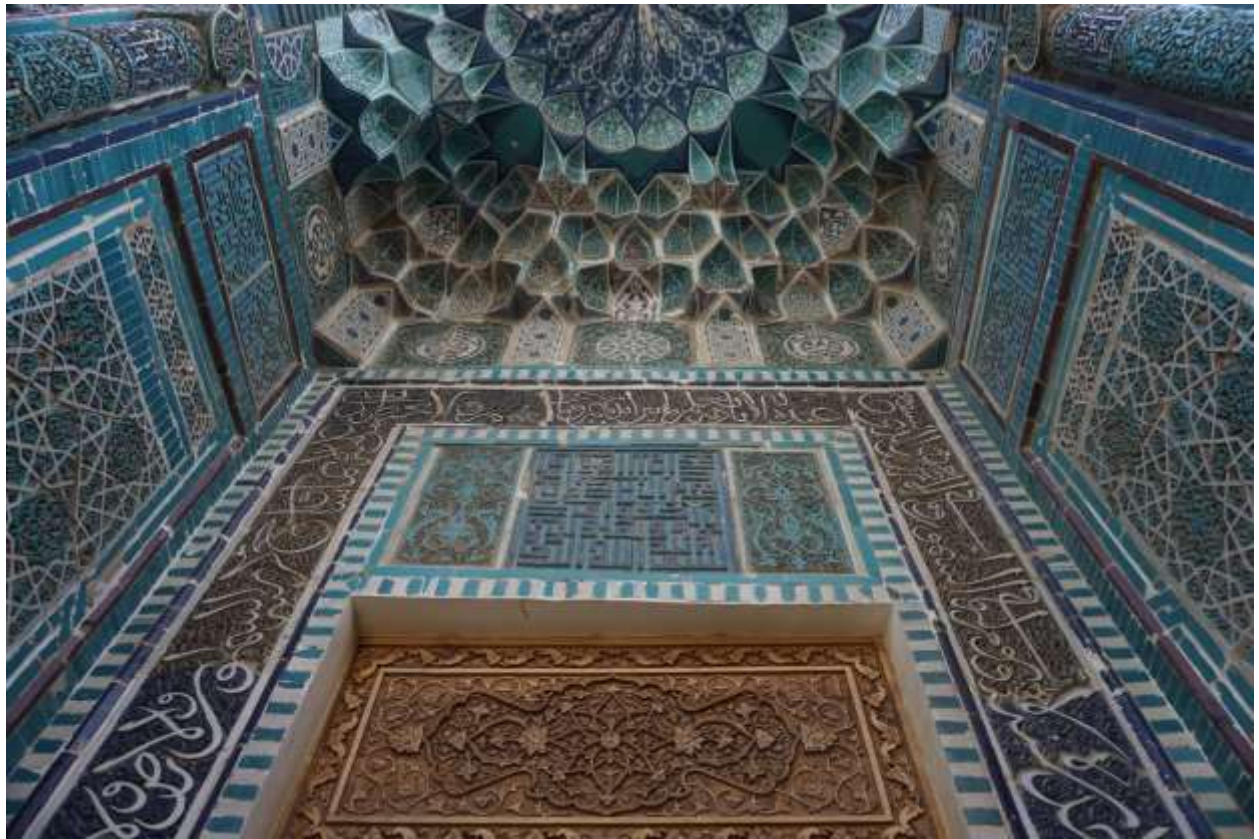














Mo 1.11.2016, day 478. Off on the train, ever westwards! (Samarkand - train, 0 km)

We spent one more very relaxing day in Samarkand, visited some more tourist sights, spent quite some time having coffee in front of the computer in some café with WiFi and eat quite a few Samsas, Shashliks and other goodies from the various markets.

In the evening we again cooked together and spent one more evening with all the gang. At 11 pm we left the hostel with our fully packed bikes direction railway station. The staff at the station was very friendly and they even carried our bikes over to the platform for us. But then, as we wanted to board the train we got a nasty surprise. They refused to take our bikes. Heated discussions started. There was no way I was not getting on the train and so I started to take off all the panniers and carry them into the train. I was even willing to take our bikes into the compartment with us if I had to. I lugged the bike into the train ignoring all the protests and finally they allowed us to strap the bikes up against the door of the next carriage. Funny how we had never heard of anyone having problems taking the bikes on trains in Uzbekistan.

I was really glad we had spent the extra cash to get a private compartment. It was completely packed with all our stuff, it would have been a real headache if there had been other people in there with us.

And so the train pulled out of Samarkand with us and our bikes safely on board. Soon we were both fast asleep.





