

Season 13 – Part 7. Out of Uzbekistan towards the Caspian Sea.

We 2.11.2016, day 479. A day in the museum town (train – Khiva, 35 km)

I had a great night's sleep and only woke up completely at about 10 am. We had a breakfast of almonds and crackers while looking out at the desert landscape passing by our window. It really would have been quite a long and monotonous ride by bike.

We arrived in Urgench at about 1 pm, unloaded all our bags and the bikes and started packing them up on the platform. We took our time and I didn't even notice that one of my panniers was missing. Luckily it was the terminus of the train and one of the guys cleaning the train found it and brought it out to us. It really is quite amazing that during this whole trip we have lost nothing really important, except the odd power adapter, underpants or a single sock here or there...

The ride to Khiva was nothing special. A large busy straight road through farmland crossing several irrigation canals. What I found quite remarkable is that there is a trolley bus running all the way from Urgench to Khiva, a 35 km stretch with overhead power cables all the way.

Khiva itself is like one big museum and very touristic. We checked into Alibek Hostel, that was recommended to us by the other bicyclists. We got a double room with private toilet and shower for 10\$ per person, really good value for Uzbekistan. Then we had a bit of a walk around the old town inside the fortress walls, ate dinner at the Art Café, the place where all tourists go, and turned in for an early night. On the way back we met Matthias, a touring cyclist who had left Vero's place in Dushanbe just a day or two before we arrived. Really funny how in this part of the world you meet up with all the touring cyclists on the road.





















Th 3.11.2016, day 480. Storm. (Khiva, 0 km)

The weather forecast had announced cold temperatures, rain and one hell of a wind in the wrong direction. We decided to start the day slowly and see how the weather developed. It was really nasty. Just a couple of degrees above freezing, a persistent drizzle and also -as predicted- a howling wind coming from exactly the direction we were headed. So we did the only reasonable thing we could do under these circumstances: We went to bed straight after breakfast and stayed there most of the day. It was a good chance to get ahead of all the administrative stuff, like finally updating our homepage a little bit.

Fr 4.11.2016, day 481. Getting an unexpected ride (Khiva – Kungrad, 98 km)

It had been the perfect decision not to head out the day before. Today the sky was blue and we had a nice wind in our backs. The temperature was however quite chilly, just below freezing. We bought some more or less fresh bread and some apples at the market in Khiva and headed off direction Nukus where we were planning to take a train towards Kazakhstan and Aktau on the Caspian Sea. We had about 180 km ahead of us and we knew we couldn't make it in one day. We were thinking of three options. 1) Ride 100 km to the next town and either stay with the locals or check into a guest house 2) Ride towards Nukus until dusk and camp somewhere 3) Try and hitch a ride. We made good progress averaging well over 20 km/h. After about 60 km we stopped for lunch under a nice little pergola at the road side. Then we rode on. We arrived at a checkpoint where we had to show our passports together with a Russian van. Just after we had left the checkpoint, the van stopped just ahead of us and the driver, Timu, asked us if we wanted a ride to Kazakhstan, he was heading all the way up to Moscow. Option 3 had just appeared out of nowhere! We said "Yes!" and soon our bikes and stuff were all packed up in his trailer. Turns out he was driving 6 migrant workers from Urgench all the way up to a town just outside of Moscow and still had two seats free in his van. And so we headed off together. We decided to ask him if he could take us as far as Kungrad, where there is a direct train going all the way to Aktau on the Caspian Sea. And so we passed Nukus without ever seeing it, which is a pity really. Apparently the city is now half empty and decaying as people had to leave after the Aral Sea started drying up putting an end to the fishing and all the other industries the sea used to support. Also, apparently Nukus boasts a great Russian avant-gardist arts museum. What a place to for such a museum, I would certainly have gone to have a look!

We stopped at a little fish restaurant right on the Amu-Darya river, that runs into the Aral Sea but is now a shadow of itself as all of its water is being used to irrigate the cotton plantations in Uzbekistan resulting in the drying up of the Aral Sea. Timu was obviously a fish lover and the restaurant was one of his regular stops on his route from Uzbekistan to Moscow. He ordered two kilos of fresh catfish, straight out of the river. It was delicious and we were invited.

Stuffed we got back into the car and continued our drive through the absolutely flat desert of Karakalpakstan, the western province of Uzbekistan, while the sun slowly set. Timu dropped us off at the turning into Kungrad. It was pitch dark and bitterly cold. We said our goodbyes, shot a couple of selfies and soon found ourselves alone with our huge pile of bags. We biked the 10 km into the town that was really dark and uninviting. We headed for the railway station, that turned out to be closed off by a barrier. Luckily a friendly local pointed us towards an unofficial guesthouse right next to the railway station. We pushed our bikes up the lane towards the place through thick mud. The location of the

guesthouse was perfect, but we were ripped off. We paid 10\$ per person. In retrospect we should have haggled. We then went over to buy the tickets, which was also quite an experience. The girl at the counter was not the brightest candle in the chandelier, but we somehow managed to explain to her what we wanted, but found we could not pay with dollars. So we went over to the shop on the other side of the road and haggled for an exchange rate of 5500 Som to the dollar and returned to the ticket office with a huge pile of 500 and 1000 Som bills to pay the fare of 364'000 Som, about 35\$. Money in this country is really ridiculous. Everyone walks around with bags full of cash and everyone is a real expert at counting money. I always feel like a drug dealer whenever I have to pay anything.

Back at the hostel we had two soups and some tea and bread for which the girl asked a ridiculous 30'000 Som. We finally only paid 20'000, still way too much.





Sa 5.11.2016, day 482. Train day (Kungrad - train, 0 km)

I was really worried what the day would bring after almost having been refused to board the train in Samarkand and also after having almost had all my memory sticks searched for porn or whatever coming into Uzbekistan. Searching all the stuff I have on memory sticks would take hours. Would the train wait? I decided to hide the memory sticks in the handlebar of the bike.

We were up at 7 am, had a quick breakfast of fried eggs and bread and headed for the railway station that was right next door. We cleaned the bike tires that were packed with mud from the night before as best we could, but they were still really dirty. There were lots of people mulling around the railway station, but we got in through the ticket checkpoint very quickly and the guy at the security check didn't bother to ask us to remove all our bags and scan them, so we simply walked right through. So far so good. Soon we were standing on the platform in the icy morning waiting for the train, just as the sun appeared above the horizon. Here they have the interesting concept of reshuffling trains at every station. The train we got on basically came from Nukus, but the carriages that went to Aktau were only attached in Kungrad. The rest of the train would head for some different city.

I now knew where the bikes would go, so I stood at the right place waiting for the conductor to open the door. This time everything was no problem whatsoever, the guy was extremely friendly and helpful. Soon the bikes were tied up exactly the same way as on the train from Samarkand, the tires leaving ugly mud patches on the floor and on the walls. We had two lower bunks in the open sleeper wagon. The train was blissfully empty and we had a very comfortable ride, snoozing most of the time, disturbed only by a myriad of ladies who were rushing through the train selling all sorts of goodies.

Soon also my second worry was dispersed. The border crossing took place in the train and involved first handing in our passports to be checked. Then two military officers came and sat down with us in our compartment, a guy and a lady who seemed to be the translator. The check involved a long and pleasant chat about our trip, how many children we had, what were our favourite countries, what did we like most about Uzbekistan, what we thought of the food, where we still wanted to travel to, etc... Not a single bag was opened, nor memory stick checked! The Kazakh border that followed about 1h later was even less of a hassle. The only problem was that at both borders the train stopped for quite a long time. After the borders the train seriously filled up, but we had our bunks and soon were snuggling down for a nice peaceful sleep.





Su 6.11.2016, day 483. (Aktau, 40 km)

We woke up truly rested to watch a magnificent sunrise over the incredibly flat and featureless desert passing by outside the window. The train arrived in Aktau ahead of time and again we soon found ourselves standing on the platform with our two bikes and a huge pile of bags attracting quite some attention from the locals.

The ride into town was surprisingly long and Aktau surprisingly big. We stopped on the way to buy two freshly baked Samsas for breakfast. A friendly local stopped and started chatting with us, soon he invited us to two huge bowls of fermented camel's milk and he also bought us a bag full of dried camel's milk yoghurt. Really quite interesting tastes!

In Aktau we had a nice sit down in Island Coffee with internet and delicious cappuccino before heading out on an expedition to find the offices where we hoped to buy tickets for the ferry to Baku. We had two addresses that we found on www.caravanistan.com. Google showed a wrong building for the first address and I ended up in the office of a guy who was founder and CEO of a small IT business. He was very friendly, offered me coffee and wanted to give me a huge paperweight as present. It was about 2 kg heavy and I had to kindly turn his offer down. He also directed us towards the correct building. When we got there we found no office, but there was a shop and the girl seemed to say that there was an office in the building somewhere, but it would only be open on Monday. We then went to the other ticket office that was also indicated in Lonely Planet. We arrived at a very dilapidated housing complex. There was no office whatsoever to be seen and some friendly locals, one of which was obviously stone drunk, seemed to be telling us that the office has been closed for one year now and we should buy the tickets down at the port, about 10 km away. So off we went southwards along the coast past quite a nice beach towards the harbour, where we found quite a few very friendly Turkish truckers waiting for the ferry to Baku who gave us the excellent news that a ferry was supposed to be running in the evening of the following day. We also found some harbour officials who clearly told us that the ticket office was in town, microrayon 5, building 29, apartment 1. So back we biked.

Mo 7.11.2016, day 482. Onto the ferry? (Aktau, 0 km)

The hotel we were staying at (Caspian Shore Hotel, right next to the Lido on the waterfront) was surprisingly good value at 10\$ per person. Location was great and the best thing about it was that check-out was 24h after check-in. This meant we could leave our stuff in the room all day. We bought breakfast at the hotel and afterwards headed straight for the ticket office. I was surprised how well I could communicate with the lady with my few words of Russian. The news was that there was no news and we should come back at lunchtime. So we had 3 h to kill and have a nice coffee. At 12 sharp I was back at the ferry office. After a few telephone calls I was informed the ferry would arrive at 10 pm and leave after unloading and loading. She proceeded to write out our tickets, I could pay with credit card, 80\$ per person and 10\$ for the bikes. Fantastic! It looked as if we might be on a ferry to Baku sometime soon! We had a great lunch down by the water's edge. There was quite a bit of wind, but it was off-shore – unfortunately! It would have been a great kite spot!

I also dropped by my new found friend, the CEO of the internet business, for a very nice chat, tea and biscuits, a photoshoot with his staff and he even gave me a couple of small gifts!

We checked out at 6 pm, enjoyed the sun set on the beach and then withdrew to the Coffee Island wondering what the rest of the evening had in store for us...



