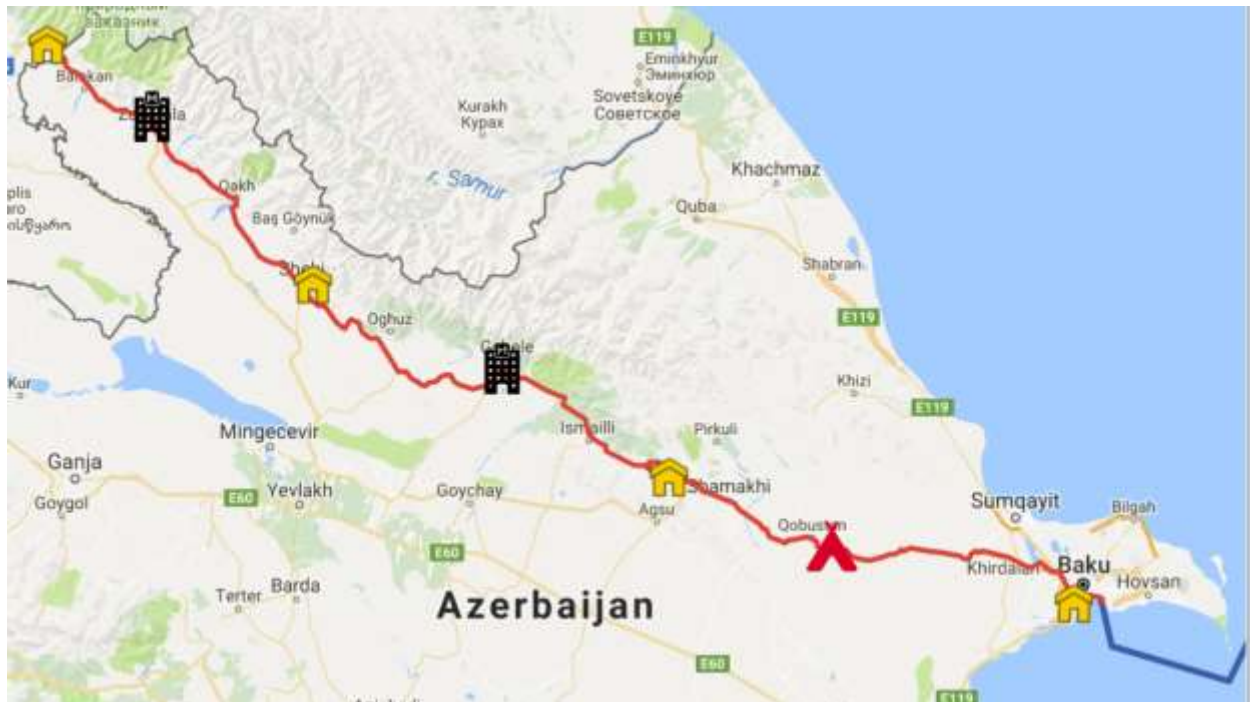


Season 14 – Part 2. Through Azerbaijan.



Fr 11.11.2016, day 488. On the road again (Baku - Qobustan, 90 km)

I woke up feeling pretty battered after the short night's sleep I'd had. I asked Siria how she had slept. She was surprised to hear about the party and the snoring. She hadn't noticed or heard anything. What a gift!

After stocking up on freshly baked bread and some fruit we headed out of town. I decided to take the large roads so we could make good progress, but it was a shit ride. There was not much of a shoulder and traffic was very heavy. Also the cars here belch out terrible exhaust fumes, the result of poor quality petrol, zero engine maintenance and lots of very old Soviet era Ladas and similar populating the streets. Soon the road we were on turned into a highway, still with no shoulder. Siria was not having any more of it and so we left the highway and tried to navigate our way along the secondary roads. Unfortunately, the secondary roads turned out to be bumpy dirt roads along the back yards of the derelict crumbling suburban houses. Our speed dropped to virtually walking pace, but somehow it was fun to bike these back lanes. After a couple of kilometres, we were back on the highway as now there was no alternative route. But here, outside of the city, the highway was fine to ride on and soon we found ourselves biking through lovely green rolling landscape, that reminded me very much of Ireland, except for the mud volcanoes that rose up beside the road every now and then. We had a bit of a headwind, but we made good progress. Riding on the highway got even better as there was major construction underway to expand the highway from 2- to 4-lanes. The two lanes they were adding were almost finished and paved with a beautiful smooth and dark asphalt, but were still closed to traffic. We of course ducked under the barrier and had the two lanes all to ourselves.

We made good progress despite the head wind and despite the fact that the road was slowly climbing up from sea level to 500 m. After about 90 km the sun started setting and we decided to call it a day and pitched our tent beside the highway, hidden behind a little hill.









Sa 12.11.2016, day 489. Tough hilly ride (Qobustan – Baskal, 60 km)

I sleep incredibly well in the tent and of course, as there is nothing much to do in the evening, I get to bed really early. I must have fallen asleep well before 8 pm the evening before and woke up as the dawn was breaking at about 7 am. I felt worlds better than the day before.

The ride was once again beautiful. One of the funny things I noticed was that rivers mostly marked the top of a climb as the rivers here form huge alluvial fans and the road climbs up over these fans. Today there was one exception to this rule however. In the late afternoon we reached the top of a climb only to find that the road dropped steeply down into a river valley way below and climbed equally steeply up the other side. It had been a very tiring bike day and we were ready to call it a day. We came to a little cabin that was serving chai that was being boiled on a wood fire by the roadside. We got chatting to a couple of guys that were having a chai there and after a while I asked if it would be OK to pitch our tent somewhere behind the hut. “Of course it would be OK!” came the answer and so we were soon relaxing with a steaming pot of chai in front of us. The guy running the place then let us stay in a tiny little hut out back in the forest. The weather was very humid and we were glad we didn’t have to pitch the tent. And so we laid out our mattresses on the floor of the hut and slept pretty well, in spite of being woken up numerous times by the two dogs that roamed the place and barked at every car that came passing by.















Su 13.11.2016, day 490. (Baskal – Qebele, 80 km)

The humidity was quite incredible. Water was running down the window and even dripping off the walls. Our sleeping bags were damp on the outside as were all our clothes that we had carefully hung up the night before to dry. It was quite unpleasant crawling out of the cosy sleeping bag and putting on the cold damp clothes. Luckily our chai-man was already up and had the fire going in his little saloon and we soon dried off and warmed up, sipping hot and sweet chai.

The sun came out and we were off. There were several chai places lining the road as it climbed. Also, there were very picturesque roadside markets selling fruit and honey. We lashed out and bought a ½ kg glass jar of honey. Not the best thing to carry on a touring bike...

It was again a very scenic ride. The road was lined with oak and maple forests. The ground was thick with colourful autumn leaves. Sometimes a gust of wind would blow clouds of leaves off the trees and they came raining down on us. The region seems to be a favourite getaway for the city dwellers as there were a lot of expensive cars on the road. Every so often the cars would stop and smartly dressed city folks would gingerly take a couple of steps into the autumn forest to take selfies with their smart-phones.

It was a tough ride to Gebele, especially for Siria, because of the incessant headwind that blew in our faces all the way. I somehow don't mind the headwind so much. We arrived in town at about 4:30 and headed straight for the first best hotel, Hotel Karvan and negotiated a price of 25\$. I went for a 5 km run, in an attempt to get my body used to some exercise other than biking. I would feel my muscles the next day for sure!

I enjoyed a long hot shower, rinsed out all my underwear and felt quite re-born afterwards. We were lazy and had dinner in the restaurant right next to the hotel, not even bothering to walk into the centre to see what was going on.















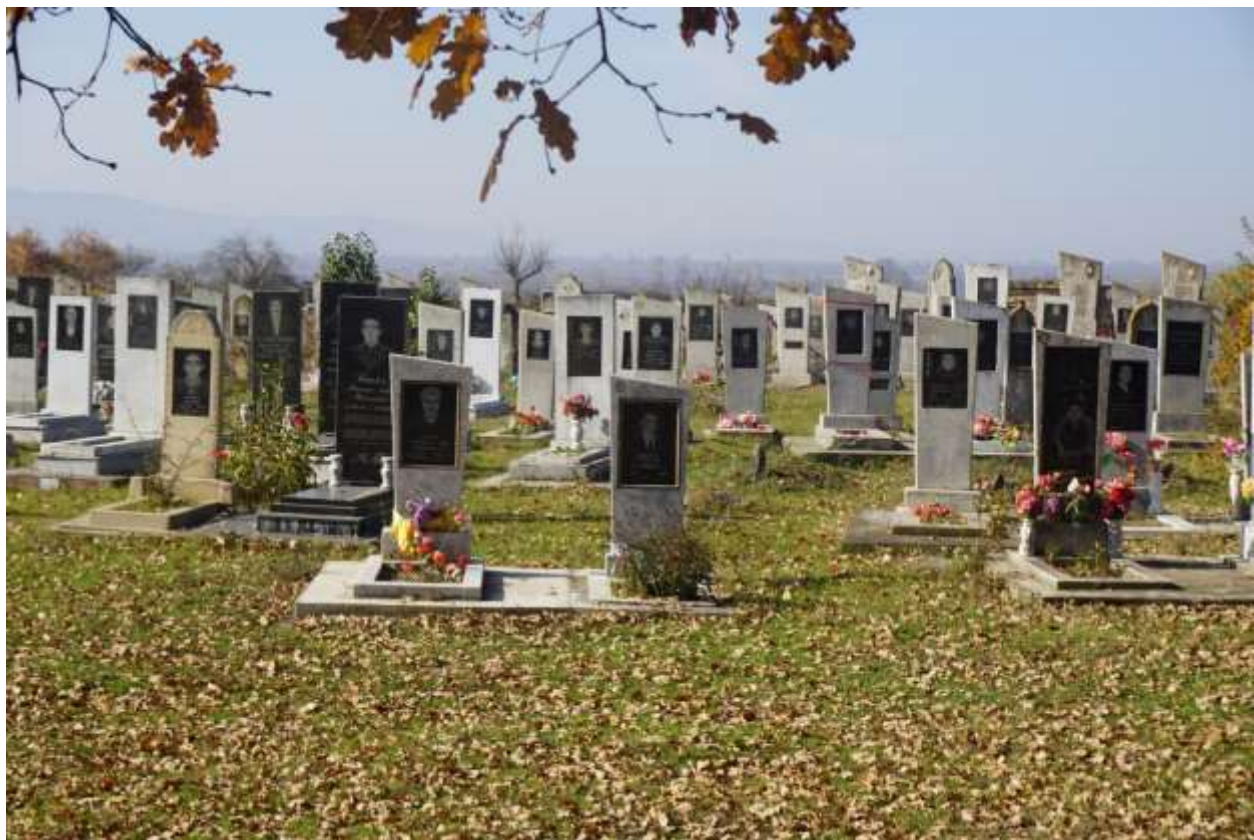
Mo 14.11.2016, day 491. Fog, then brilliant sunshine (Qebele – Sheki, 90 km)

It felt good to sleep freshly washed and wake up with warm and dry clothes to put on. We made a delicious Müsli in the hotel room with pears, apples and my new favourite fruit: Pomegranate (I wonder if they grow in earth sheltered greenhouses in Switzerland?). The first 30 km of the ride were mostly downhill. We headed out in brilliant sunshine, but as we dropped down into the valley we disappeared into clammy fog and it turned icily cold. But we made good progress averaging well over 20 km/h until lunchtime. By midmorning the sun burnt away the fog and it turned into a lovely and mostly flat ride with views of the snow-capped Caucasus mountains to our right. We stopped at a gas station for lunch where we had a surprisingly tasty soup and chat with the locals. Directly after the gas station we headed down “bread alley” where one wood fired bread baking place after the other lined the road. Of course we bought a loaf of steaming hot bread fresh out of the oven. Then the road started to climb mercilessly and our trusted friend Mr. Headwind kicked in. The last 30 km or so into Sheki were quite tough. We stopped for a chai in the evening sun at the outskirts of the town. This was maybe not such a good idea, as the part of town where the hostels were located was a very steep ride up cobble stone streets. It was pitch dark by the time we got there and the hostels that were marked on MapsMe were nowhere to be found. Luckily the locals were quick to spot the two lost tourists and soon the guy running one of the hostels came down the dark road to meet us.

We had a delicious meal of Piti, the local speciality, at restaurant Gagarin and walking back home we were greeted by a magnificent full moon (it was super-moon time with the moon being at its closest to the earth).













Tu 15.11.2016, day 492. Trailergate #2! (Sheki - Zagatala, 80 km)

We had a lengthy chat with the guy running the homestay, Ilhan, while having breakfast, mostly about his 16 chickens, but also about the history of Georgia and how he started his homestay after spending time with a LonelyPlanet author who was researching the area.

We then bounced back down the steep cobble stone streets past the stone houses that were built in the 18th century to relocate all the inhabitants of the old town of Sheki after it was destroyed by a landslide, stopping to buy some Sheki Halva, an incredibly sweet baklava like local pastry, on the way.

Again it was foggy and cold in the morning, but for once we had a welcomed tailwind that got stronger as the day wore on. We decided to follow the shorter more northern road to Qakh. We soon realized why none of the road signs were pointing towards this road. It was an unpaved, very bumpy and dusty gravel road. But it was OK for biking with lovely scenery, huge impressive old trees lining the road and very little traffic. This more than compensated for the poor road condition. Soon the sun came out and I was starting to thoroughly enjoy myself. Then after a particularly big bump I heard a sickening crack coming from the trailer. I immediately stopped to investigate and saw with horror, that the yoke had broken again. This was the second time this had happened. The first time was in China.

Luckily I had not thrown away the steel bar that my welder friend had constructed for me in Guangzhou and so after a bit of chopping with my Leatherman, I was able to cobble together the yoke using this steel bar and the camera strap while Siria prepared lunch. I was quite pleased with the fix and in fact I am confident that the trailer will make it all the way to Switzerland. However; I should go to a workshop to bolt everything together more securely and also to get a second steel bar made in case the other arm

of the yoke should snap. Touring with Aluminium gear really is a bit of a problem as, unlike steel, it cannot be easily welded.

Sadly, after having fixed the trailer I seem to have left my beloved Leatherman in the grass somewhere. It is nowhere to be found.

We got to Zagatala in good time and went straight into the hotel Zagatala and were pleasantly surprised that the room we got was brand newly refurbished and we paid only 25 Manat (about 17\$).

A funny thing about Azerbaijan is that Adolf Hitler seems to be quite popular. On the road, we were once greeted by a friendly "Hail Hitler". This shocked us a bit, but it didn't seem to have been malicious. Also, the little Hitler-moustache is very popular here: the receptionist at the hotel had a fine specimen, complete with matching side crest hair do.











