

Season 14 – Part 4. Turkey to Albania.



Tu 22.11.2016, day 499. Into Turkey! (Batumi – Ardesen, 95 km)

It was still pitch dark when we arrived in Batumi. After unloading all our stuff out of the train, we bumped our bikes down the stairs into the underpass wondering, yet again, how people in a wheelchair were supposed to get around.

Outside we were greeted by the skyline of Batumi rising up above the pitch-black expanse of the Black Sea. It was an impressive glittery colourful skyline and we were quite surprised by it. We certainly hadn't expected Batumi to be so big and modern. It is obviously a bit of a gambling Mekka with casinos and glittery hotels, like a micro Las Vegas.

We biked along the coast towards Batumi as the sky slowly changed colour from black to a very dark blue. It was about 8 am when we arrived in the city centre. Everything was completely dead, not a soul was on the streets and everything was closed. We biked through the centre towards the coast. There was a promenade along the coast through an immaculate park. There was even a bike lane! We were hungry and yearning for a quiet sit down, but the only thing we found that was open was a McDonald. We hesitated, wondering if we should go in, but we decided to boycott it and hit the road towards Turkey. Finally the sun rose above the snow-capped mountains to the left of us. In the next town we also found a place for breakfast and before we knew it we were at the Turkish border. We still had some Turkish Lire to burn, so we stocked up on essentials like chocolate bars and water. We also had some utterly delicious pastries. To me they seemed like a cross between scones and baklava.

The border crossing was again no problem whatsoever, we simply rode our bikes through the car lane, our bags were not checked by the Georgians nor the Turks.

And so we found ourselves in Turkey, country number 26 of our bike trip and a big step homewards! The bike ride was along a dual carriageway that hugged the coast. There was a broad shoulder, not so much traffic and it was utterly flat, so we made good progress. We were certainly glad we were not biking the

other direction, as that lane was away from the sea and passed through many tunnels. If biking the other way, it would be advisable to bike against the traffic on the west-bound lane.

We stopped in Ardesen, found a chai place with internet to plan our night's stay. We were both a bit shaken up from the night's bus ride and looking forward to a warm bed and shower. The cheapest place around were some bungalows that belonged to a river rafting place that was -according to MapsMe- about 3 km out of town. It turned out to be more like 6 km as the location on MapsMe was wrong and it was already dark when we arrived. The river rafting season was well and truly over and there was major construction ongoing. The family running the place had just completed a brand-new fireplace and they were burning their old chairs in it. They made us Muhlama, the Turkish version of Swiss cheese fondü that we ate beside the roaring fireplace chatting to the guys. It was a great evening!













We 23.11.2016, day 500. 22'000 km biked! (Ardesen - Iyidere, 75 km)

Breakfast was a carbon copy of dinner: Muhlama and bread. We admired the kiwi plantation next to the bungalows and left with our bags packed full of kiwis and tangerines. The ride was pretty much the same as the day before: a large multilane road following the coast. A bit monotonous, but we got into a good rhythm, simply keeping the cranks turning, not having to worry about navigation or traffic. Soon we could stop to celebrate our next milestone: 500 days on the road and an incredible 22'000 km biked! I'm really surprised my old knees are still functioning...

A short while later a touring motorbike stopped ahead of us to say hello. I somehow thought I recognized the bike, and sure enough, we had met the guy -a Korean who has been more or less everywhere you can imagine on his bike- about one month ago, in Samarkand. What a coincidence! How small the world is!

A quick WiFi stop before dusk indicated that there was a reasonably priced hotel, that looked quite OK and brand new, a short stretch away from the main road. We decided to indulge, seeing that we had something to celebrate.

Just before the turning we spotted a touring cyclist, who was obviously getting ready to camp in an abandoned building on the other side of the road. We stopped and he came over to say hello. He was a great guy, Tom from England, who had done quite a bit of touring in his time and was currently on his way from Georgia, via Armenia, Turkey, Cyprus towards Eastern Europe, over the Alps aiming for the north of Norway somehow. We would have loved to spend the evening with him, but we had no provisions and we were already somehow fixed on a cosy night in a warm hotel bed. So we exchanged contact hoping to meet up on the road the next day.

Our hotel turned out to be excellent. It was indeed brand new with great rooms and sparkling clean en-suite bath room. I went for a quick jog up the valley before we indulged in a great pick-nick in bed of bread, cheese, tomatoes, cucumbers, fruit and of course chocolate and cookies.







Th 24.11.2016, day 501. (Iyidere - Trabzon, 70 km)

Sure enough, quite soon after we had headed off, Tom caught up with us and we rode together all the way into Trabzon where we first stopped at the bus station to check out busses to Istanbul. There were lots of options and I decided to go for the Kamilkoç VIP bus hoping it would be the most comfortable and that it would have the most space for our bikes. The bus left at 19:30, giving us plenty of time to explore Trabzon. So the three of us headed downtown. Tom quickly found a reasonably priced hostel and reappeared freshly showered and smartly dressed. We had some delicious kebabs in the bustling pedestrian zone and then headed off for some sight-seeing. After pushing our bikes up a ridiculously steep hill we found that what had looked like the historic old town on our maps was in fact just a rather inconspicuous little fort with a big Turkish flag flying from the top of it. And so we pushed our bikes back down the hill, lugged them up and down stairs through a little park, finally ending up in a very cosy little café for chai and baklava. We all laughed. It had been a very memorable sight-seeing tour.

On previous tours, Tom had biked through the Balkan, so we were eager to get his opinion on the worthwhile routes and the places that are better avoided. We still had no idea how our trip should continue after Istanbul. The only thing we knew is that we would be back home for Christmas and that we would not have enough time to bike all the way home from Istanbul. Tom seemed to have liked Albania. Could we take a bus to Albania from Istanbul? We'd have to check.

We said good-bye to Tom and biked back to the bus station. My golden rule that every time you think it will be easy, it turns out to be hell, and vice versa, was once again confirmed. The bus had relatively small luggage compartments and they were already quite packed with big sacks and boxes. When they saw our bikes everyone shook their heads saying "Problem, problem!", in fact they got quite angry. I explained that we had shown our bikes and had been told: "No problem, no problem!". Heated arguments followed. There was a tiny space left in the luggage compartment, but even I was very sceptical if I could make the bikes fit. A first trial was disheartening and one of the guys took our tickets saying "Change, change!". After screwing off the front wheel and removing the saddle and handlebar I at least got my bike in, Sirias went in neatly beside it. Then I somehow also managed to stuff the trailer in beside the two bikes after removing the wheel and the mud guard, in front of a growing group of gaffers. Then all our bags somehow disappeared in between the gaps leaving only the kite surf board, that simply wouldn't fit. So off came the foot-straps and then also this last item somehow slid into the luggage compartment, the door was slammed shut and we collapsed into the two seats at the very back of the bus. We soon learnt that these two seats were the only two that didn't recline. It was going to be a long night!







Fr 25.11.2016, day 502. (Trabzon - Istanbul, 0 km)

The night in the bus turned out to be far more pleasant than expected. The bus stopped frequently and surprisingly I managed to get quite a few hours of sleep between stops. One early morning stop was in the highlands in the centre of Turkey. It was bitterly cold and the ground was frozen. The pass we had just crossed was covered with snow. I was glad we were not biking this stretch at this time of the year!

After crossing the newly opened Sultan Selim bridge, the northernmost of the three bridges across the Bosphorus, we arrived at the huge central bus terminal of Istanbul in the late afternoon. We were relieved to see that our bikes and bags had survived the ride crammed into the tiny corner of the luggage compartment without damage. We assembled our bikes in a murky corner of the bus terminal, that we realized doubled as a latrine. A very friendly young Turk got chatting to us and gave us a gift of some instant soup, bread and a can of peas. I guess we are starting to look a bit scruffy...

With our bikes all assembled and packed up, we took a tour of the bus terminal and soon found a bus bound for Tirana. It was half empty and had plenty of space for our bikes. For a moment, we thought of loading all our stuff straight into the bus and heading off, but then common sense prevailed and we decided that two 24h bus trips, one directly after the other, was too much. There was another bus the next day. We decided to enjoy Istanbul for one night. Somehow, even though we both had not done much research on routes we could take, it was clear for both of us that we would take a but to Tirana.

We hadn't booked anywhere to stay in Istanbul, but saw a couple of hotels on the map, close to the bus terminal. The first hotel we checked, the Grand S Hotel, out looked very posh indeed, but we got a room for 25Eur, a great bargain!

We spent a lovely evening taking in the most famous sights, the Blue Mosque, The Hagia Sophia and the Galata Bridge leading over the Golden Horn, where hundreds of fishermen were angling for fish in the murky waters. We continued up the narrow streets towards the Galata Tower where we found an excellent little restaurant with only three or four tables and the door to the kitchen wide open so we could watch the lady of the house working her magic.

It had been Siria's first time in Istanbul and for me a very welcomed return to this city I love so much.



Sa 26.11.2016, day 503. (Istanbul - Tirana, 0 km)

I went for an easy 5km early morning run before attacking the buffet breakfast served at the hotel. It was surprisingly copious and we made the most of it. We lazed around, doing a bit of work on the laptop until it was time to catch the bus to Tirana. This time the luggage compartment was blissfully empty. The bus was smaller than the one that we had seen the day before, but I had no problem whatsoever fitting our two bikes, the trailer, the surf board and all our bags neatly into half a compartment.

The bus left bang on time and it soon became clear that the bus driver seemed to be in a hurry to reach Tirana. First time we stopped was at the Greek border and there I dashed across to a nearby Duty Free to go to the toilet and was back just in time to show my passport and hop back on board the bus.

The bus raced on through the night, stopping only for two short breaks, one in Greece and one just after the border in Albania. We arrived in Tirana at the ungodly hour of 5:30 Istanbul time, 3:30 Tirana time. Luckily there was a café open right next to the bus stop, so after assembling our bikes we took refuge behind a hot cup of coffee and waited for dawn.





