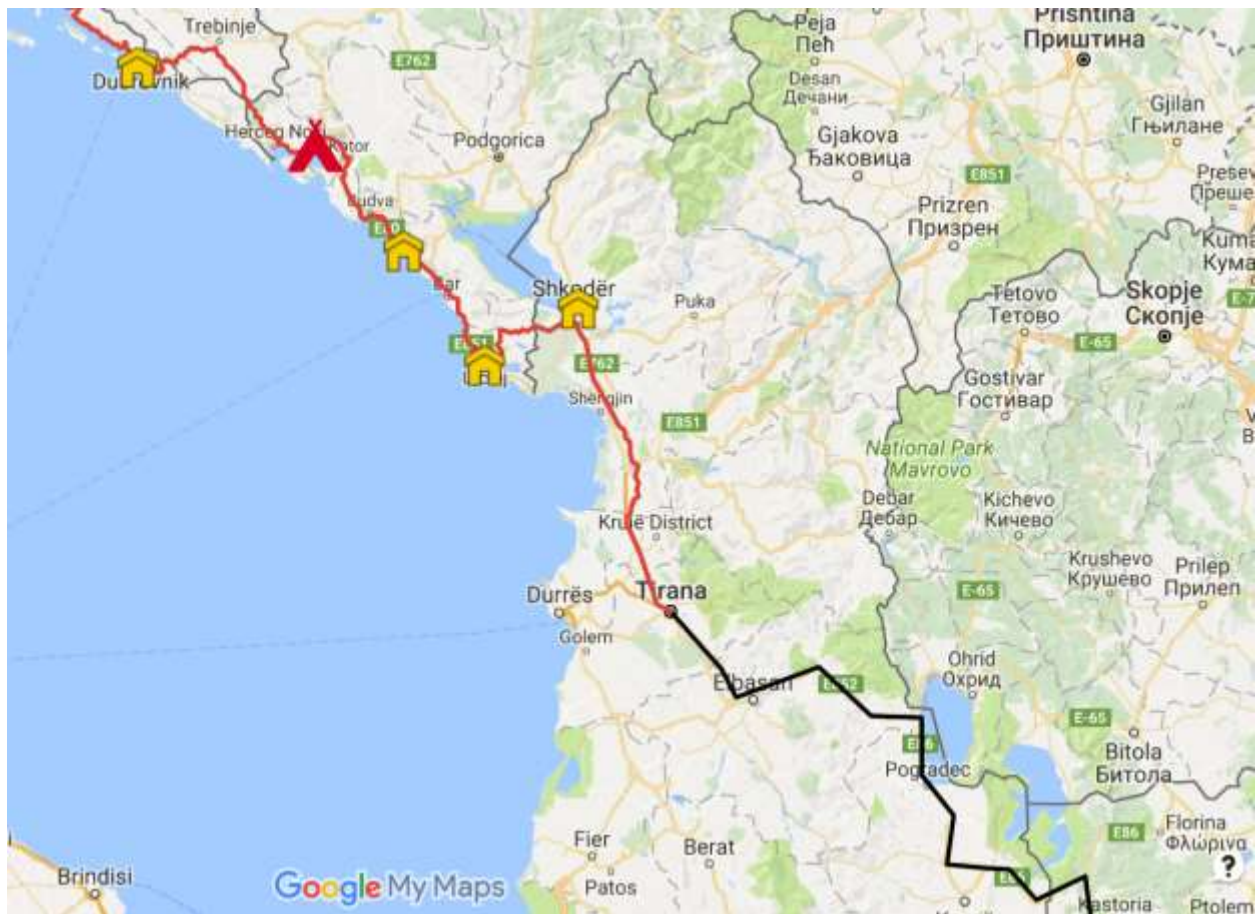


Season 15 – Part 1. Albania and Montenegro



Su 27.11.2016, day 504. (Tirana - Shkoder, 110 km)

It was Sunday morning and the streets of Tirana were deserted. We did a bit of sight-seeing, circling around the centre for a bit on our fully packed bikes, but were soon drawn into another café for some more coffee and cake. We finally managed to summon the energy to hit the road. We headed off on the main road out of Tirana, that was quite unpleasant to ride on. Very narrow and traffic got progressively heavier as the day wore on. After a while the main road turned into a highway allowing us to take the old main road that wound its way in and out of small little villages that dotted the foot of the mountain range that rose to the East of us. It turned into a great ride as we passed through the villages experiencing the local life, we passed one rather large farmer's market where all sorts of things were being sold, for example two young live piglets, that were stuffed into a big plastic bag, strapped to the back of a motorbike that quickly roared off, the plastic bag hideously squirming and straining on the rack. The other sad thing about Albania is that it has the same problem with plastic as to the poorer countries in South East Asia. The roadside and the river banks are completely chocked with plastic.

Amazingly, in spite of spending a sleepless night in the bus, we managed to bike over 100 km all the way to the town of Shkoder. It was dark when we arrived. The Art Hostel we were thinking of staying at

turned out to be a crumbling ruin with barred doors and windows. Luckily there was a café with WiFi right next door. We decided to stay at the Wanderer's Hostel that was excellently located just off the very picturesque pedestrian zone of the town. Just as we were entering a seriously intoxicated American guest of the hostel came stumbling out. We had no intention of sharing a dorm with him and so lashed out to get ourselves a private room. We found out that Albania's national day was just two days away, (that explained all the flags!), had a quick walk around town and bought ourselves a pick-pick that we ate in bed back at the hostel.















Mo 28.11.2016, day 505. (Shkoder - Ulcinj, 70 km)

Siria's bike was making very funny sounds, the reason was that her chain, that had lasted well over 10'000 km and had taken her all the way from San Francisco to Albania, was now well and truly worn and stretched beyond any tolerance. So our first stop, after a breakfast of coffee and a chocolate at the hostel, was bike shop lane. There was no reputable bike shop in Shkoder, but there was a surprising number of make-shift garages along one road selling all sorts of bike parts. In fact -according to the friendly guy at the hostel- Shkoder takes 6th place in bicycle popularity in Europe. I have no idea where this number comes from however. In any case, I was weary of buying a Shimano chain, after having been sold a fake rotor and possibly also fake brake pads at Velo+ in Tbilisi, so I bought a no-name chain for 2\$ and then we were off direction Monte Negro, making one small detour to visit the Rozafa Castle (actually, Siria didn't quite manage the climb, so I visited it by myself) and another to have a look at Lake Skadar. Unfortunately -once again!- there was too little wind for kite surfing.

On the way to the border with Monte Negro we passed lots of runners on the road, there seemed to be some sort of Albanian National Day Marathon going on, and we happily cheered everyone on, which seemed to be much appreciated. The border crossing was no problem whatsoever and it was only a short ride down to Ulcinj down on the coast. The cheapest place to stay was Hostel Center, but when we got there we found that it was very much closed for the season and being renovated. However, the family running the place lived right next door and they let us stay in a spare room of their home together with another stranded traveller. The old city of Ulcinj is perched on top of a rock on one side of the beach and is a maze of tiny narrow streets and fortresses. It was lovely and completely deserted at this time of the year. We could hardly imagine what the place must be like during the high season! We

had a very interesting chat with an elderly gentleman who owned one of the old stone houses facing the sea that he had turned into a hotel / restaurant. He told us, that in summer people queue up to get a seat on his terrace. We believed him! He also told us fascinating tales of his pirate ancestry and of fishing off the coast.















Tu 29.11.2016, day 506. (Ulcinj - Petrovac 55 km)

After a good oatmeal breakfast and after the landlady had given us piles and piles of mandarins, that we didn't really know where to stock, let alone when we should eat them all, we were off northwards along the coast. We soon realized what would be the story of the day: The Bora wind! This is a common Katabatic winter wind. Basically, it is cold heavy air that simply falls off the mountains down towards the sea. The wind is icy cold, very gusty and can reach hurricane strength. Mostly the wind seemed to be blowing into our face forcing us to pedal hard in low gears, even when going downhill, or from the side blowing us out into the middle of the road and making my trailer sway crazily. But sometimes it also came from behind shooting us forward. We passed one touring cyclist from Australia coming the other way. He had opted to push his bike, saying the gust were too much for him. After a short but strenuous day, we stopped in Petrovac, where we checked into one of the many apartments that can be found everywhere and went for a little walk down to the beach. The little bay was very picturesque, but right behind the first row of cute little restaurants and bars, most of them closed for the season, rose hideous white square blocks of holiday apartments and hotels. We found one little bar that was open right at the end of the beach, where there was a little harbour and an old stone fort. Standing on the pier, feeling the pull of the howling Bora wind was quite a sublime experience, as was watching the white spray that was being kicked up out to sea. It was way too cold to linger, so we quickly took shelter in the bar for some drinks beside the roaring fireplace, happy we had a warm flat to return home to.













We 30.11.2016, day 507. (Petrovac - Bijela 75 km)

The wind had howled outside all night and we were glad we were not camping. By the morning it was starting to lose its intensity. By the time we were on the road it was but a slight nuisance. It still slowed us down somewhat, but it was nowhere near what it had been like the day before.

We took a little detour over a small pass that took us to Kotor, an ancient walled city that lies hidden at the very tip of Kotor Bay which is the southernmost fjord in Europe. The bike ride over the pass and along the fjord was magical. We took a ferry across the fjord and found a camping that was closed for the season in Bijela. There was no hot water, but the toilets were still working and it was free. We pitched the tent and invested the money we had saved in pizza on the upper floor, right beside the beautifully warming pizza oven at the local two story pizzeria.







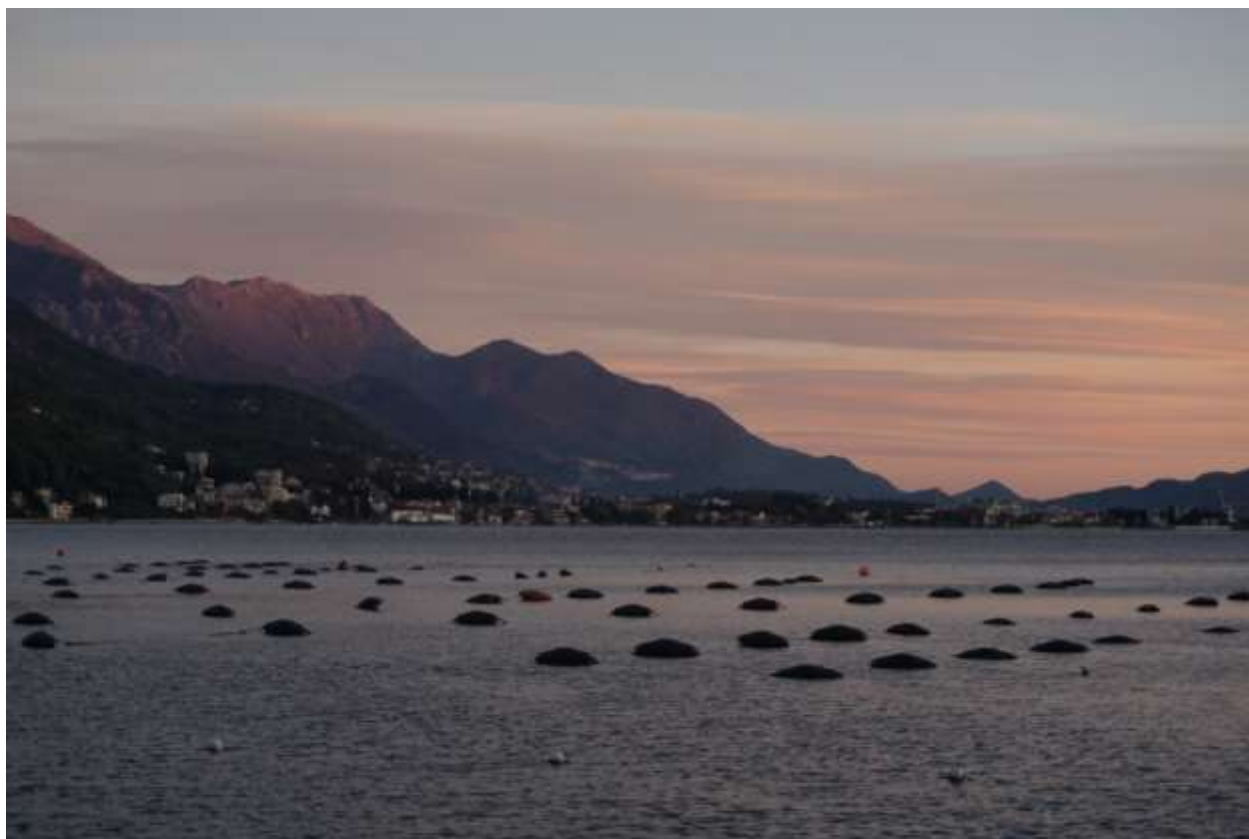












Th 1.12.2016, day 508. (Bijela - Dubrovnik 105 km)

We were up before sunset, quickly packed up the tent and all our stuff and sat down on the stone wall by the water's edge for a breakfast of oats and yoghurt while a bunch of cats prowled around us, hoping for some scraps.

We followed the coast for the first 10 km, then headed inland, climbing up 1000 m and crossing the border into Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was a tough ride, but very rewarding. The landscape was beautiful. We had lunch right at the top of the pass, sitting on some rocks admiring the view down a green valley far below us, right out to the sea.

The road then dropped down into Bosnia Herzigovina, crossed a perfectly flat valley before climbing up another hill and back towards the coast. While we were having a short bio-break a touring cyclist appeared behind us. It was a young English guy, Daniel, who has been on the road a couple of months and who has come through France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria and down the Balkans and is heading for New Zealand. He was a great guy and we ended up riding with him.

The descent down towards the coast and into Croatia was absolutely stunning. The sun was setting bathing the sky behind the black jagged outlines of the islands off the coast in a deep purply red. Also our first view of the massive fortifications of the old city of Dubrovnik was really impressive.

None of us had checked up on accommodation, so we had no idea where we should head. By coincidence, we met a Japanese backpacker, who Daniel had shared a room with two days ago. He had already done his research and pointed us towards the cheapest hostel in town, Cocoon hostel, a clean place with a good kitchen, where we got a bed for 7 Euro per night. We were the only guests and the guy running the place even gave us a large bottle of beer after we helped him clean out the room he set us up in. The only down side, was that the WiFi and the heating was switched off, probably to save costs.

We ended up spending a very sociable evening drinking beer and cooking a hearty hot stew all dressed in our woolly hats and down jackets.













