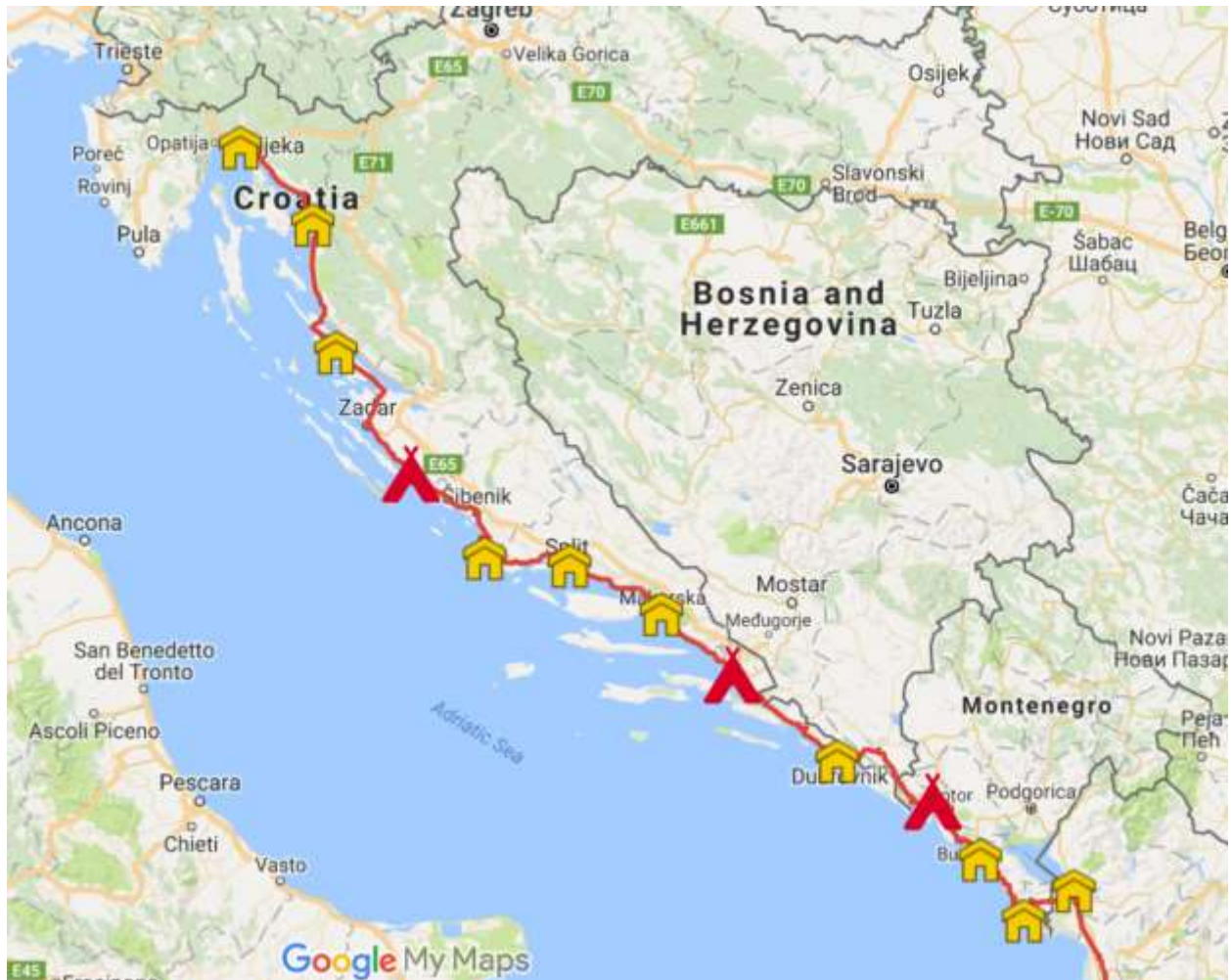


Season 15 – Part 2. Croatia



Fr 2.12.2016, day 509. (Dubrovnik 0 km)

We got up quite early, hoping to finish the administrative stuff quickly, so we would have time to enjoy Dubrovnik. First on the list was laundry. The guy at the hostel said the hotel down the road offered laundry service, so we went to check it out. At the hotel they were very honest with us and said: "Yes, we do laundry, but it is so expensive that you are better off buying new clothes!". They pointed us further down the road where there was a laundry place. It only opened at 9am, so we had time for a coffee. We got back at 9:30 and the place was still closed. We waited. Finally a guy came up to us, saying he was a neighbour and informed us that the laundry might open sometime, but we shouldn't waste too much time waiting.

Next on our list was to check out the ferry service to the islands, so we lugged our laundry a couple of kilometres through town down to port. We were hoping to do a bit of island hopping, but again we were disappointed. The islands are linked by high speed catamarans that don't take bikes and anyway, most of the services are suspended for winter. There was a laundry place close to the port. They offered to do

our laundry for 20 Eur. The bus back to the hostel was 2 Eur. So we walked back to the hostel, cooked a huge bowl of porridge and did the laundry by hand.

We had a bit of an argument about how we should continue towards Switzerland: take the ferry across to Italy? Follow the Croatian coast? We decided to continue to Split and decided there.

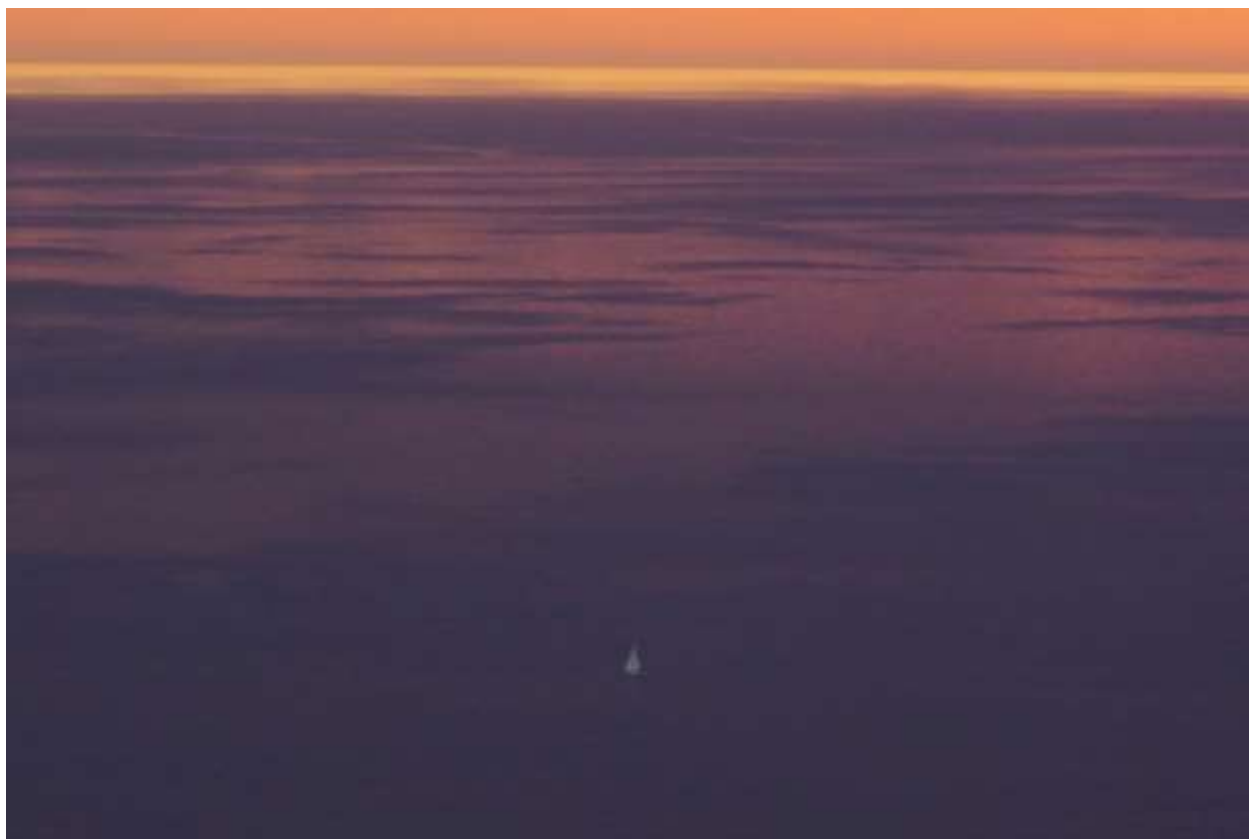
The rest of the day we went separate ways. I walked up to the homeland war museum, perched on top of a hill behind the old town of Dubrovnik and just sat there for about 2 hours, simply enjoying the view. After a spectacular sunset I walked down and wandered around the old town of Dubrovnik, getting completely lost in the myriad of narrow streets and stairways. It really is a magic city, perfectly preserved. I shudder to imagine the hordes of tourists that must flood the city in summer.

Again we spent a quiet but cold evening in the unheated kitchen of the hostel, with Daniel and Yuto, a Japanese backpacker.











Sa 3.12.2016, day 510. (Dubrovnik – Ploce, 110 km)

After downing a large pot of porridge and saying good-bye to Daniel, we got off to quite an early start. We were blessed with a slight tail wind for once and made good progress. The road followed the coast all the way, passing through a small little sliver of Bosnia and Herzegovina at Neum. We met two French touring cyclists heading for Greece and then on through Turkey and into Iran coming the other way. They had been on the road for only one month, so still had all the fun ahead of them.

Before reaching Ploce, we left the main road and took a small side lane that took us down into a flat marsh plane and out to the coast, where we were hoping to find a spot to pitch our tent. The view biking down into the plain was breath-taking. When we reached the bottom, it was already getting dark put we pushed on, finally ending up at a spit of sand where the Neretva River spilled into the Adriatic. It was an absolutely perfect camp spot. It would also have been a perfect kite surfing spot. Unfortunately there was no wind. Typical! You only get wind when you don't want it and usually in the wrong direction...









Su 4.12.2016, day 511. (Ploce – Makarska, 82 km)

We had a rather uneventful bicycling day following the coast road. The Apartment we were hoping to stay at in Makarska turned out to be deserted. We didn't have a plan B, so we went to the local pizza joint and decided to order one large pizza instead of two regular ones to cut down on the amount of food we were consuming. This wasn't really a very successful approach, as the pizza we had ordered turned out to be enormous covering the whole table. We just about managed to finish it, but decided to skip desert.

After dinner, Siria stayed at the restaurant, while I dashed down to give the apartment another try. I was relieved that the young daughter of the family running the place was home and let me in. It was -once again- a great apartment, complete with kitchenette, for a very reasonable 25 Euro.













Mo 5.12.2016, day 512. (Makarska – Split, 75 km)

On the map we had seen, that there was some sort of a path all along the waterfront, so we decided to follow it instead of taking the main road. At first the path was great, it was even paved and led along little sandy coves, through pine forests and past closed ice cream and hot dog stands. Then the coast got a little steeper, the path got a little rougher and we biked past signs reading FKK. I furtively squinted down to the beaches, but of course, with temperatures only marginally above zero, they were all deserted. Finally the path got quit unb-rideable with touring bikes and we were forced to push our biked over large rocks and through narrow gaps, our panniers rubbing against the rock face. Finally we arrived at the next village where there was again a paved road along the coast. But soon we found the road blocked by a large bulldozer, ahead of it, the road was a single gaping hole, with no way of pushing or even carrying the bike past. So we were forced to double back and take a long and winding steep road all the way back up to the main road. It was a slow start to the day and a bit frustrating, but great fun at the same time!

I have again started to listen to Podcast while biking and learnt a lot of fascinating things about sandworms, crabs, organic apple farming, orange and tangerine breeding, about Mr. Leibnitz and, most fascinating of all, a report about the Geological epoch we are living in and in fact creating: the Anthropocene. For me it is crazy to think that in 5 million years or so from now (if there is intelligent life on Earth then) the Anthropocene will be but a small marker bed in the stratigraphic record, easily detected by a spike in radionucleotides originating from radioactive fall-out. It will be characterized by a dramatic surge of atmospheric CO₂ and sea level rise. It will also demarcate the 6th mass extinction event, the 5th one being the Cretaceous–Paleogene Extinction event that wiped out the dinosaurs 66 million years ago.

My head was spinning with these thoughts when we arrived at the hostel that we were planning to stay at in Split. We didn't see anything that resembled a hostel, just a block of flats with the usual blue "Apartmani" sign outside. Just then a very robust lady with quite an impressive moustache and smeared bright red lipstick called out to me: "Brauchen Zimmer?". In said "No, we have already booked at Hostel Nataljia". It then quickly transpired, that she was Nataljia and was the lady running the "hostel". The hostel was in fact a room in her apartment. There was no escape. She barked commands at us, our dirty bags had to stay outside, we have to mop the floor after taking a shower, nothing to be put on the unused bed in the room, this door stays open, that one closed, etc... We shuddered. Luckily, soon afterwards she had to leave.

After a quick shower and after mopping the floor after us, we decided to hit the town. We weren't quite sure which door had to stay open, so we left both the main door and the door into her flat open. We hadn't gone far, when Siria started worrying about the open door and decided to go back and close it. A short time later I saw her waving at me frantically. The lock was broken and the door now wouldn't open. We were doomed! Luckily, after a bit of jiggling, pushing and pulling, the key finally turned. We were so relieved!

We had a little walk around Split, yet another magnificent Croatian city. Down at the harbour there was a bit of life, apart from this, the city was pretty much dead. Unfortunately, both laundry places we found were already closed. We dropped into a restaurant for some salads for dinner. We were the only guests.

Back at Nataljia's place we were relieved to find that things were quiet. We sneaked in and locked the door.















Tu 6.12.2016, day 513. (Split – Rogoznica, 55 km)

Already early in the morning we heard Nataljia's loud voice outside. We were still scared of her. Maybe we hadn't mopped the bathroom floor properly? We waited for a good moment, then dashed out and packed up as quickly as possible and raced off. It really had been a strange experience at the hostel. Our first priority was to get our laundry done. Siria went over to the laundry place while I guarded the bikes, sitting in a warm and cosy café. The weather was rather miserable. It was raining and cold and we had to step out of our comfort zone to head off. The ride out of Spit was a bit tedious, but the ride quickly got better after we had left the city behind us. Also the weather cleared up and it turned into a splendid day.

We arrived in Rogoznica, another beautiful little town on a small island, just as the sun was setting. After a small tour of the place we found a place with free WiFi to plan our night's stay and quickly found a promising place for 25Eur not far away. While we were sitting there we also saw one of the large sailing boats, that cruise the islands packed with tourists in summer, slowly pull up at the pier. On board was Santa Clause! So that's how he travels here in Croatia!

The apartment we had booked turned out to be fantastic. It was under the roof, complete with a little kitchenette and a dining table. We cooked a delicious bacon and potato soup and downed a bottle of Croatian wine, enjoying the cosy place in out of the cold.













We 7.12.2016, day 514. (Rogoznica - Pakostane, 85 km)

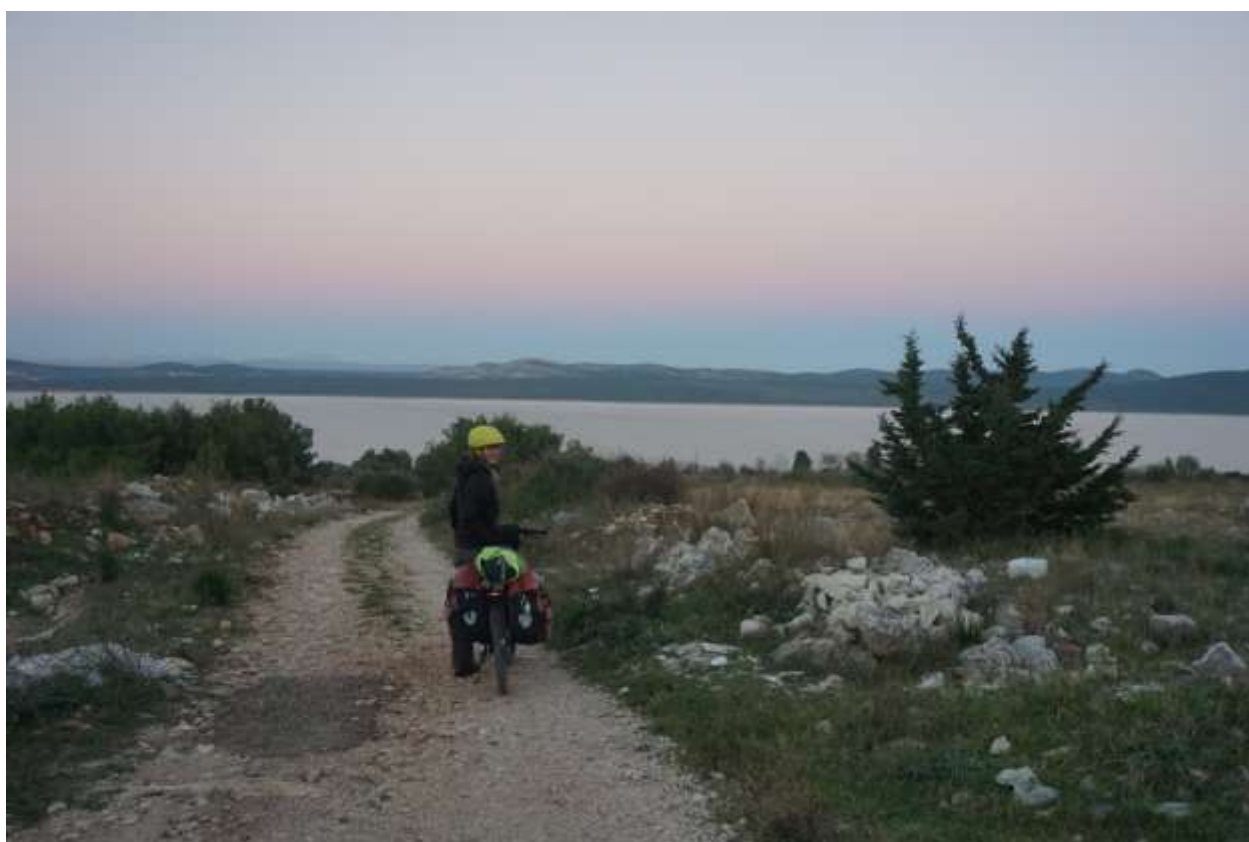
We were hoping to reach Rijeka in 4 days, this meant that we had to do 80 km per day, quite a lot considering the hilly topography and the short days. We therefore got up quite early, made a huge pot of porridge with cooked apples, cinnamon and honey. We were on the road just after 8am, not bad for our standards. It was a beautiful sunny day, however we soon noticed that we would be biking into a very nasty cold headwind. The wind considerably slowed our progress, however the scenery was stunning. Most of the time we biked through olive tree groves with the glinting sea to our left and barren lime stone hills to our right. We had a quick stop for a coffee and some chocolate croissants then continued on our way. Around 11 am we saw a tent pitched at a pull-out on the other side of the road with two bicycles parked beside it. Of course, we went over to say hello. It was an Irish couple who had toured Europe extensively and were now heading south to escape the cold. They were only just crawling out of bed, still feeling the effects of a couple of bottles of wind they had downed the night before, with the modest plan of covering maybe 5 to 10 km that day. I loved their attitude! They were a great couple and we had a long chat.

The rest of our bike day was as good as the first part, we had lunch of bread and cheese in the middle of olive trees, passed innumerable small little bays and were surprised at the number of yacht marinas we passed. Sailing seems to be seriously big business here.

We were planning to camp for the night as we didn't find any reasonably priced apartments. On the map we saw one promising spot by a big lake. It turned out to be a hut at a trail-head that lead along the lake shore. For me it was an OK place to pitch the tent, but Siria seemed to prefer to head on into the village, spend some time in the warmth of a café and then look for a place along the coast somewhere. So this is what we did.







Th 8.12.2016, day 515. (Pakostane - Pag, 98 km)

We did indeed find a place in out of the cold to spend a couple of hours the night before, we were even invited to a grappa by the locals. At about 9 pm we headed out into the cold and biked along the waterfront where we found an idyllic camping spot under some trees, right next to the beach. It was wonderful looking at the moonshine reflected on the sea that was flat as a mirror and listening to the gentle lapping of the water on the rocks. The peace and quiet didn't last long, however. Soon two guys came up to the tent. I went out to have a chat with them, one was in a security uniform. I was almost certain we'd be sent packing, but they only asked us where we were from, where we were going, if everything was OK and wished us a peaceful night, assuring us that it was very safe to stay where we were. What a pleasant surprise!

Again we a wonderful bike ride in brilliant sunshine, stopping for a short lunchbreak in the town of Zadar. We then crossed the picturesque bridge over onto the Island of Pag. We were very surprised by how barren the landscape had become. We were passing through deserts of limestone rocks with hardly a blade of grass to be seen.

We made good progress and arrived at the small town of Pag just after sunset. Our plan was to bike on a bit and find a spot to camp, however it was bitterly cold and already getting dark even if it was just after 4 o'clock. We passed a guesthouse and decided to knock and ask if they had a reasonably priced room, just on the off-chance. The family was in the middle of dinner and we felt a bit bad, but they were very friendly and offered us a gorgeous room with balcony and view out over the sea, including breakfast for 40 Eur. We couldn't resist the lure of luxury and comfort.

A little walk around the little town of Pag, a picturesque little village built entirely out of almost white limestone, revealed that there was very little going on indeed. The only restaurant that was open looked a bit posh for our pockets, so we bought a bottle of wine, an onion, a couple of cans of sweet corn and tuna fish from the only convenience store we found and returned to the guesthouse for a hotel room feast.















Fr 9.12.2016, day 516. (Pag - Senj, 82 km)

I know I overuse superlatives describing everything as fantastic, lovely, beautiful, etc., but the ride we had the privilege of experiencing on this Friday will certainly stand out as one of the best of our entire trip. After being served breakfast in our room, we biked along a tiny road along the north coast of the island arriving at the car ferry back to the mainland with 15 minutes to spare. We then biked through the Svejerni Velebit National Park. The sunset we experienced before arriving at Senj was simply unbelievable.

In Senj we went for our usual coffee and WiFi session, quickly finding a reasonably priced apartment close by. It was once again a perfect small but fully equipped apartment, warm and welcoming, right next to the town centre run by a very nice lady. She even gave us a lift down to the only open restaurant in her small little two seater somehow squeezing Siria and myself onto the passenger seat.

















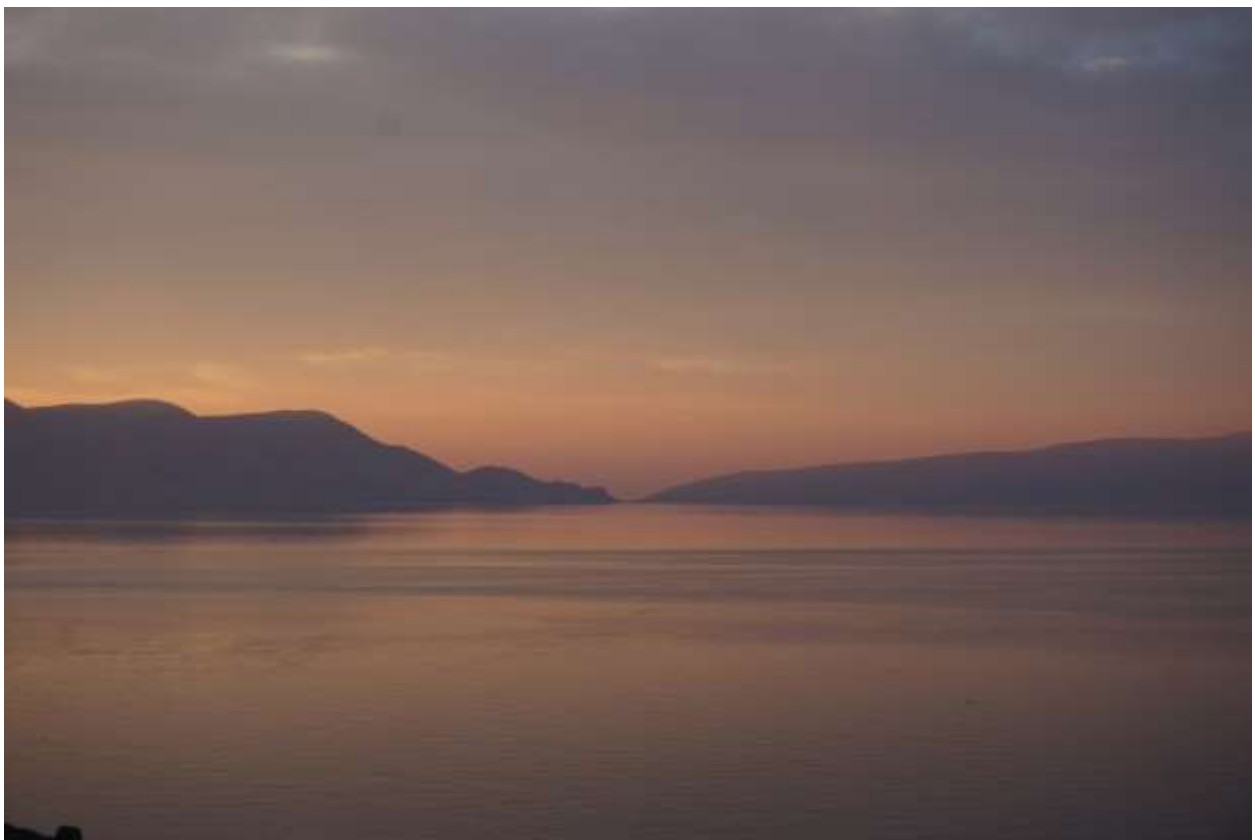








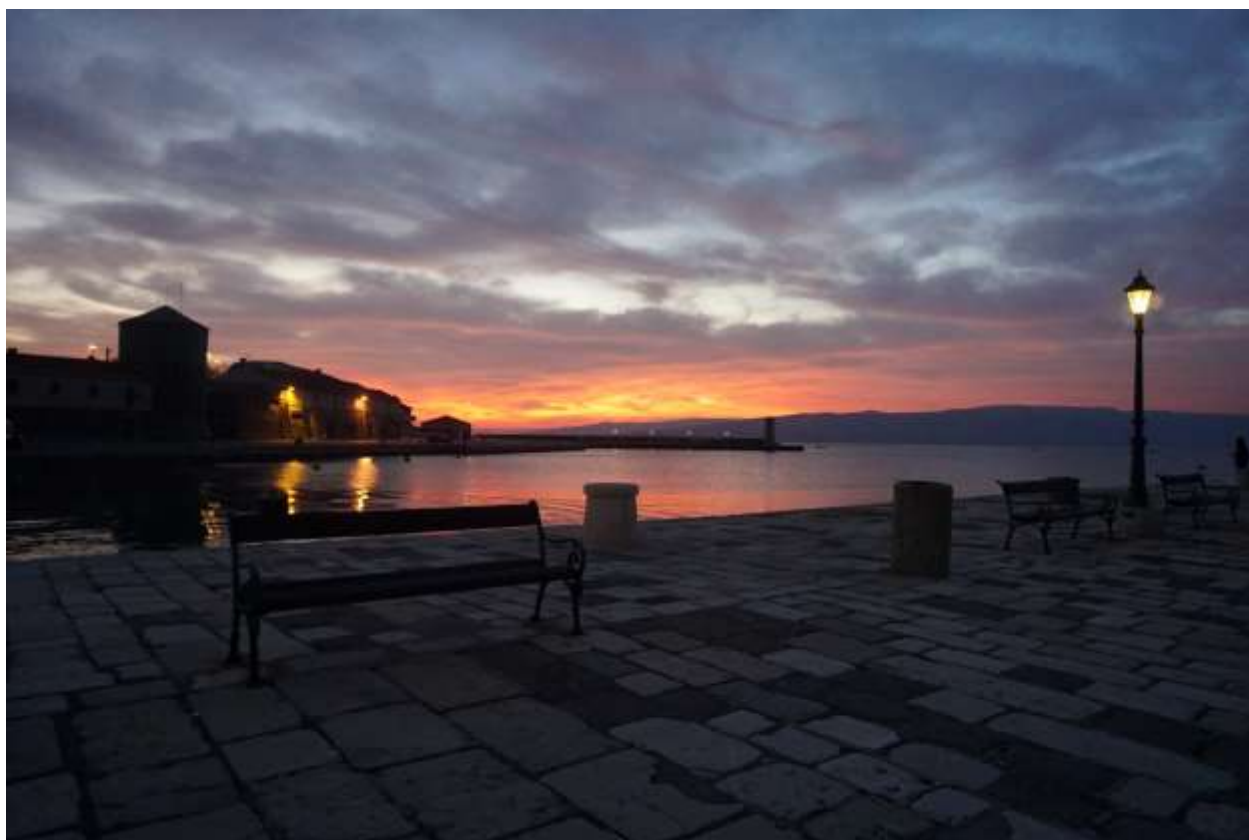












Sa 10.12.2016, day 517. (Senj - Rijeka, 80 km)

This was a rather plain bike day, quite a contrast to the day before. The road got busier as we approached the more densely populated area outside Rijeka. We had lunch outside a supermarket in Cirkvenica and then decided to bike along the small road along the coast only to find that the road leading back up to the main road was impossibly steep. I was drenched in sweat by the time I had finally managed to push and ride my 100 kg rig back up onto the main road. Just south of Rijeka there are some more fjords. The road we took wound all around their shores, dipping down to the villages on the water's edge, only to climb back up the walls of the fjord. It was quite a tough ride. We stopped at the youth hostel just outside of Rijeka. The hostel is housed in a grand old building and has a real youth hostel feel about it, however there were only 6 people staying there (including us) so it was very quiet and we had the whole dorm to ourselves.

We then went for a walk around Rijeka, treating ourselves to a sumptuous meal of pasta, salad and some red wine right in the centre in midst of a throng of insurance agents who were having their Christmas dinner.







Su 11.12.2016, day 518. (Rijeka, 0 km)

After biking big days without a break all the way from Dubrovnik we decided to spend a day relaxing and getting all the administrative stuff up to date. We slept 'till close before 10 am and only just made it down to reception before check-out time to prolong our stay for one more night. Then we headed for the centre, quickly ending up in a café for looking forward to a long and lazy sit in. The first thing I did after firing up the laptop was I ran a quick search for "jobs", after all we would be home for Christmas and it might therefore slowly be time to think of the time after this trip. To my surprise the very first result I got was quite an interesting opening, with a deadline for submission of the application the following day. So it wouldn't be such a lazy day after all!