

In memory of Keith Liddicoat, a man I never met in person but who gave me valuable information, especially on cycling in Russia. Sadly, he died while cycling across the Nullarbor in late 2019.

I would also like to thank anyone who has helped me over the years, especially any Warmshower hosts, along with anyone who has given me great advice and support, in particular, in my hometown of Berriwillock.

Finally, I would never get this far without the help of my parents. Thanks Mum and Dad for letting me be me.

This was not my first cycling trip and I plan on developing more books based on previous and future trips. I am starting with this trip because it involves being in countries which many people do not get the chance to travel in especially by bicycle.

One day I may write about how this all began but essentially this started at La Trobe University Bendigo. Where I did many outdoor activities including hiking, canoeing and cycling. Finding cycling the best fit for me as it allows me to travel at a relaxing pace without having to carry anything on my back. So thank you to all during my university time for inspiring me to go cycling in the first place

After finishing university in 2009, I set off to cycle around my home state of Victoria mostly following railway lines. Over the next few years, my cycling trips expanded to other Australian states, concentrating on one region at a time.

In 2013, I went on an overseas trip for the first time, spending three enjoyable months cycling in France, Britain and Belgium but I haven't been back to Europe until now.

In 2014, I spent five months cycling in the Sierras and Rockies in the United States and Canada.

My 2015 four month trip in North America, was timed to start with attending some FIFA Women's World Cup matches in Canada.

My last overseas trip was in New Zealand in early 2016. During this tour, I began to notice I was feeling fatigued with cycling having done a few tours in the previous three years. By not touring for a while, this has allowed me to recharge the batteries.

Clarification

In terms of spelling, language or historical information used in this book, this comes from what I learnt during the ride. Each country spell localities differently, so I've tried to use what I thought the place was called locally, while trying not to confuse people knowing that many well-known place names have been anglicised. I.e. Moscow is actually called Moskva in Russian.

I tried to make an effort to learn the local language, but many people spoke English back to me and Google Translate was invaluable.

Most of my tour was behind the former Iron Curtain, which allowed me to compare each countries' experiences before, during and after World War Two, including the subsequent nearly 50 years under communism. Along with what has changed in the last 30 years since communism fell and many countries have become independent.

Because each country has a different perspective of history, what I describe is relevant to where I was, and how I interpreted it. There is a stark difference between the Russian perspective of the 20th century and the countries which were previously under the influence or control of the Soviet Union but are now independent.

Therefore, I apologise for any mistakes, especially to anyone who has a personal connection. This isn't a history book with references so if I get a date or event wrong, it's my fault. Whatever I say about a particular place is a generalisation from when I was passing through, so things may have changed since then.

I'm writing this in 2020 using notes from my paper journal and my iPhone. Some days I wrote a lot in detail and other times I didn't. While I didn't always record the names of people I met, since many names were unfamiliar to me, they are harder to remember.

Sometimes I took many detailed photos, other times I didn't, while there aren't many photos of me, my bicycle or people I met. Instead of focusing on taking a selfie, I prefer to chat with people.

If I refer to a dollar amount, I'm talking about Australian dollars unless specified. Time in Russia and Europe is known by 24-hour time, but I will try to stick with am/pm to avoid confusion.

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My bicycle set-up



My bicycle set-up has evolved over the years. I now only carry a handful of items I took on my first trip. Even the actual bicycle has changed from a mountain bike to a professionally designed touring bicycle called Vivente World Randonneur, which I found, at a bicycle shop in Melbourne in 2013.

My current set-up involves three major bags and three smaller bags. The three smaller bags include a tool kit bag on my seat-post and two small bags around the handlebars to store my iPhone and camera separately.

Strapped under my butterfly handlebar is a long horizontal black waterproof bag called Revelate Sweetroll, where I store my one-person tent, air mattress, compressible pillow, inner sheet and rain jacket.

On the rack on the back of the bicycle, I have two red Ortlieb Back Roller Plus waterproof pannier bags. One bag carries my sleeping bag, spare clothing, book, journal, electronic chargers and anything else I want to keep clean and dry. The other pannier bag has my stove, food, spare equipment and basically anything which doesn't matter if food spills on it.

Sleeping gear

Moondance one-person tent
Sleeping bag, Mont Brindabella
Thermarest compressed pillow
Thermarest Neoair mattress
Inner sheet: Thermolite
Reactor by sea to summit

Clothing

Showerpass Mountain Elite
rain jacket
Blue Jumper with Berriwillock
writing on front
2 hi-vis t-shirts, one yellow, one
orange
1 yellow cycling top
1 set of thermals, pants and top.
The top is Merino Icebreaker
GT with hood
2 shorts
1 boxer shorts
3 Alpha Coolmax jocks, have
found they reduce chafing
2 pairs of socks, 1 thick, 1 thin
New Shimano MT42 MTB
cycling shoes that clip into the
pedals.
Pocket towel by sea to summit
1 Helmet

Small First Aid Kit with

A few band-aids
Sports tape
Tweezers
Small roll of Fixomull
Blister prevention Kit

Tools

Small shifter
Cycling Multi-tool
Spare patches
Glue for patches
Spokes
Spare tubes x2
Duct tape
Spare chain connectors
FiberFix spoke kit

Sea to summit kitchen kit that contains

A Spork
A butter knife
A multi-tool with sharp knife
Toothpaste and Kathmandu
travelling toothbrush
Soap
Washing detergent
Sponges

Electronics

iPhone 6 Plus

Apple white charging cable

SD card camera adapter for iPhone

My apple USB charger with euro plug

Cygnet Battery 5200mh

Panasonic Lumix camera with 2 batteries and 2 SD cards.

Li-ion camera Battery pack charger and cable, which charges by USB

Earphones

OwlEye Solar-powered light with a USB charging cord

Gear on the bicycle

Cycle computer and 2 spare batteries

Water bottle cage on the handlebar

2 water bottle cages one on each side of the front fork

Two large water bottle cages on the frame

A smaller cage underneath the frame for the fuel bottle

A 2 litre Nalgene bottle, along with 2 smaller water bottles

Other things in my pannier bags

Brooke's saddle cover

Money belt, Sea to Summit waterproof

Two paper copies of passport and Fan ID

Yellow A5 Paper Journal

Pens x 2

A book will try to swap

Small Sudoku book

A small pack of cards

Trangia stove

Plastic container for spare food

Sunscreen

Hand sanitiser

Voltaren

Aeroguard, as I have been told Mosquitos are bad

Lip balm

Toilet paper

A Poo shovel

Macpack backpack that stuffs into a small bag

Combination bicycle lock

Will pick up maps as I go

Why this trip

The reason for this trip is because the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup is on in Russia from June 14. Therefore, the visa requirements for visiting Russia have been relaxed during the World Cup period to allow a longer visit of 52 days from June 4th to July 25th, instead of the normal 30 day tourist visa. These dates are because it's 10 days before and after the World Cup starts and finishes

Therefore, it's an opportunity to spend more time exploring Russia than normally is allowed, along with experiencing a FIFA Men's World Cup. Having already experienced the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup in Canada, I'm curious if it will be a different experience.

This means to obtain a Russian Visa, instead of normally having to visit the Russian Embassy with an invitation letter from a travel company, all I have to do is purchase a World Cup ticket and apply online for a Fan ID. Not only is it my visa for visiting Russia, I need it and individual tickets to attend World Cup matches.

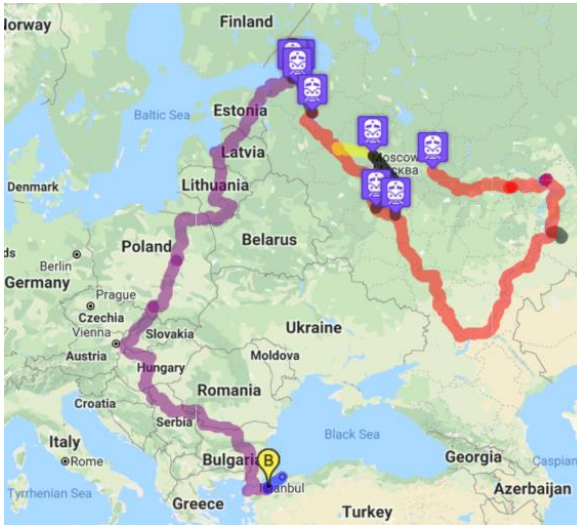
I have managed to buy tickets for Australia's first two matches against France in Kazan on June 16 and Denmark in Samara on June 21 but I was unsuccessful with finding tickets for the third match against Peru in Sochi on June 26.

Since this is the first World Cup appearance for Peru since 1982, apparently many dedicated Peruvian fans are coming, I have heard stories of people spending a fortune to come. Anyway, Sochi is about 2000 kilometres from Samara which is impossible to cycle in the period between Australian matches and even a challenge negotiating a route by train.

The only minor issue when applying for my Fan ID is getting a passport photo to be automatically accepted online, although, once I found an acceptable passport photo it was a simple online process. My Fan ID and World Cup tickets were mailed to me within a few weeks, along with an emailed electronic version of my Fan ID.



My Rough Plan



My plan is to fly into Moscow on June 4th, spend a few days there before using a suburban train to get out of Moscow, allowing me to avoid cycling in suburbia, which also reduces the distance required to cycle to Kazan, in time for Australia's first World Cup match against France on June 16.

By taking trains, this will allow me to slow down and take my time, rather than try to rush all over. For me, I want there to be something interesting for me to see every day, rather than worrying about if my ride is all connected. I also enjoy riding trains so will take the opportunity to combine the two when feasible.

From Kazan, I have four days to get to Samara by the 21st for Australia's next match against Denmark. I can travel either side of the Volga River which flows in a southerly direction between the two cities. The eastern side looks more direct but requires a long crossing on the Kama River Bridge, so I'm not sure if it's possible to cycle on this bridge. The longer west side route involves some ferries but less highway cycling; while there are railway lines in case I'm delayed.

From Samara, I have no deadlines except needing to be out of the country by the end of 25th of July, which equates to 34 days. My rough plan is to follow the Volga River to Volgograd formerly Stalingrad, a turning point in World War Two.

From Volgograd, there are a few possibilities depending on time.

I would love to visit St Petersburg, but the sheer distance from Volgograd, with the time I have left looks unrealistic without using trains especially as I could spend days exploring St Petersburg. Perhaps I should save it for another ride from Finland to Estonia on a future trip as the last thing I want to do is rush around covering vast distances rather than stopping to explore.

A shorter route is to cycle from Volgograd via Smolensk to Estonia. This area has some historical significance, as both Napoleon and Hitler invaded through here when trying to advance towards Moscow.

Another option is to utilise the train system, which would allow me to visit St Petersburg. However, there are issues with taking bicycles on long-distance trains. Apparently, they have to be disassembled and I would have to carry the bicycle into a small shared compartment, so it's not a simple process.

Since I have to be out of Russia by July 25th but have no reason for returning to Australia before October, it makes sense to take the opportunity to explore other countries in the region. Therefore, my aim is to see parts of Eastern Europe especially as their history has been influenced by Soviet Union occupation and subsequent decades under communism.

I cannot leave Russia into Belarus as the border is not open to me and Ukraine and the Caucasus are both war zones, so I will concentrate on the countries I can freely visit like the Baltics.

Once out of Russia I haven't done as much detailed planning on my route. I'm looking at Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and then turning east but don't have an exact plan. I could follow the Danube River or head to the Mediterranean Coastline but it doesn't look like I will have enough time for Greece.

Only Poland has cycling maps incorporated into Google Maps so other countries are a guess, especially Bulgaria. As always, my route is flexible and will no doubt change over time.

For ending the ride, I thought why not finish in Gallipoli in Turkey. Gallipoli is regarded as the first place Australians fought in a war, conveniently ignoring any conflicts between European invaders and Indigenous population, or the Boar War in South Africa. During my cycling trip in 2013, I experienced the Western Front World War One sites so why not see where the Anzacs started.

In April, before deciding on this trip, I read Richard Fidler's book called "Ghost Empire" about the Roman history of Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul. It feels like the perfect place to fly home from, as the rest of Turkey isn't regarded as safe by the Australian government, especially since the crackdown by the Turkish Government in 2016. Two years on still many thousands of people continued to be detained, so I don't feel like I should go further until it's safer. I also wish to return to Australia in October for Outdoor Education work and summer sport, so I won't have enough time to go further even if I wished.

From Gallipoli, the most sensible route to the heavily populated Istanbul, is to cross the Dardanelles by ferry and head north to Bandirma where there is a ferry to Istanbul.

My only previous foreign language experience is French so I have no experience with any languages I will encounter on this trip and once I leave Russia I will be changing countries regularly and so will the language and currency. This will be a change for me as all my previous tours have mostly involved being in a country for at least a month or more.

Making it even trickier is that Russia, Serbia and Bulgaria use the Cyrillic Alphabet rather than Latin. The Cyrillic Alphabet includes some different letters and even more confusing is that some similar looking letters, make a different sound.

I have downloaded some language apps but as I only decided to go on this trip a month before, I haven't had much time to try to learn Russian or any other language.