

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 Warmshower hosts, and those who have given me great advice and support, in particular, in my hometown of Berrinillock.

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

My previous cycling trips

This was not my first cycling tour and I plan to develop more books based on previous and future trips. I am starting with this one 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 it started at La Trobe University, Bendigo, where I did many outdoor activities including hiking, canoeing and cycling. I found cycling to be 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.

I went on my first overseas trip in 2013, spending three enjoyable months cycling in France, Britain and Belgium. 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, while my four-month trip to North America in 2015, was timed to start by attending some FIFA Women's World Cup matches in Canada.

My last overseas trip was to 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, I have recharged my batteries.

Why this trip

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

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 to see if it will be a different experience.

Because of the World Cup, instead of visiting the Russian Embassy with an invitation letter from a travel company, all I have to do to obtain a visa 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 16 June and Denmark in Samara on 21 June, but I was unsuccessful with finding tickets for the third match against Peru in Sochi on 26 June.

Since this is the first World Cup appearance for Peru since 1982, many dedicated Peruvian fans are coming and I have heard stories of people spending a fortune to come. Even if I could have got a ticket, Sochi is about 2,000 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, was getting a passport photo to be automatically accepted online. Although once I found an acceptable 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 Fan ID

My Rough Plan



Having only confirmed this trip a month before, I only had a chance to do a rough plan, which starts with flying into Moscow on 4 June. I will then spend a few days there before using a suburban train to get out of Moscow. This allows 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 16 June.

By using trains, this will allow me to slow down and take my time, rather than try to rush everywhere. For me, I want there to be something interesting to see every day, rather than worrying 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 25 July, which equates to 34 days. My rough plan is to follow the Volga River to Volgograd, formerly known as Stalingrad, a turning point in the Second World War.

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 all my bike parts and my bags into a small shared compartment, so it's not a simple process.

Since I have to be out of Russia by 25 July but have no reason to return 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.

As an Australian I cannot enter Belarus from Russia, as the border is not open to me. The Belarusians prefer you fly into Minsk for a few days, while the Ukraine and 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 of Australia, or the Boer War in South Africa. During my cycling trip in 2013, I experienced the Western Front World War 1 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 many thousands of people continue 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 want to.

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 the language and currency will also. 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. This 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.

My bicycle set-up



I now carry only a handful of items I took on my first trip, as my set-up has evolved over the years. 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 ones. The smaller bags include a tool kit on my seat-post and two 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. This enables me to store my tent, air mattress, compressible pillow, inner sheet and rain jacket at the front of my bicycle. This is only a recent change, having previously had most of my gear on the rear rack of my bicycle.

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

Gear on my bicycle

Cycle computer and two spare batteries

Water bottle cage on the handlebar

Two 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 1.5 litre Nalgene bottle, along with two smaller water bottles

Tools

Small shifter

Cycling multi-tool

Spare patches and glue

Spokes

Spare tubes x two

Duct tape

Spare chain connectors

FiberFix spoke kit

Electronics

iPhone 6 Plus and Apple white charging cable

SD card camera adapter for iPhone

My apple USB charger with Euro plug

Cygnet Battery 5200mh

Panasonic Lumix camera with two batteries and two SD cards

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

Earphones

OwlEye Solar-powered light with a USB charging cord

Clothing

Showerpass Mountain Elite rain jacket

Blue Jumper with Berriwillock writing on front

Two hi-vis t-shirts, one yellow, one orange

One yellow cycling top

One set of thermal pants and top

My thermal top is Merino Icebreaker GT with hood

Two shorts, one boxer shorts

Three Alpha Coolmax jocks, have found they reduce chafing

Two pairs of socks, one thick, one thin

Shimano MT42 MTB cycling shoes that clip into the pedals

Pocket towel by Sea to Summit

One Helmet

Sleeping gear

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

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

Small First Aid Kit with

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

Other things in my pannier bags

Brooks saddle cover
 Money belt, Sea to Summit waterproof
 Two paper copies of passport and Fan ID
 Yellow A5 Paper Journal and pens x two
 A book will try to swap
 Small Sudoku book
 A small pack of cards
 Trangia stove
 Plastic container for spare food
 Sunscreen, hand sanitiser and Voltaren
 Aerogard, as I have been told mosquitoes are bad
 Lip balm
 Toilet paper
 A Poo shovel
 Macpack backpack that stuffs into a small bag
 Combination bicycle lock
 I will pick up maps as I go

Clarification

Spelling, language or historical information used in this book comes from what I learnt during the ride. Each country spells localities differently, so I've used what I believe the place was called locally, while trying not to confuse people as many well-known names have been anglicised. i.e. Moscow is actually Moskva in Russian. I made an effort to learn the local language, but many people replied in English, while Google Translate was invaluable for communicating.

Most of my tour was behind the former Iron Curtain, which allowed me to compare each country's experiences before, during and after the Second World War. This included the almost 50 years under communism post the Second World War, and changes in the last 30 years since communism fell with many countries having 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 that of countries previously under the influence or control of the Soviet Union but 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 twenty-four-hour time, but I will try to stick with am/pm to avoid confusion.

Getting to Moscow

A month before my flight to Moscow I went for a week-long preparation ride in New South Wales from Moree to Scone, via Tamworth. After arriving in the evening by train into Moree, I assembled my bicycle from the cardboard box it was in and rode off. I assumed my bicycle light would automatically work as it is powered by the turning of my front wheel using a Dynamo Hub.

However, the light isn't working, nor will it charge a device by USB, so I try fiddling with the connections and googling ideas, but I can't get it to work. When I purchased my bicycle in 2013, it came with the dynamo and has worked okay until now. A few times I have had to adjust the electrical wires for it to work.

After the ride, I dropped my bicycle off at Brunswick Cycles in Melbourne, because they have some expertise with Dynamo Hubs. A few days later I got a phone call telling me it cannot be repaired, so I have to make the choice to replace it or just go with a normal, slightly cheaper wheel.

As most of my tours are in summer, I rarely use my bicycle light and I don't think I will need it very often in Russia because during their summer, sunsets are after 10 pm and sunrises can be as early as 2 am. The light only works when the wheel is spinning so it is no use off the bicycle, so I use my iPhone light around camp instead.

Another consideration is I have found that my average cycling speed isn't fast enough for the dynamo to generate enough power to charge my devices or a battery pack efficiently by USB. Anyway, on most of my tours I can usually find a power source often enough. So I decide to go with a normal wheel which will apparently have slightly less resistance, not that I have ever noticed.

Instead, I find my white OwlEye bicycle light, which charges by USB and also has a small solar panel to help charge it. The battery lasts a while and I usually only have to charge it once a month. It can be taken off the bicycle easily, so I can use it instead of wasting iPhone battery. I haven't used this light for a few years and will see how it goes.

Because my bicycle has been left at the shop in Melbourne, this allows me, a few weeks later, to catch public transport from my home in regional Victoria. Without my bicycle it's much easier for me to just carry all my gear in one light, striped canvas bag.

With Saturday, 2 June 2018 being the first Saturday of the month, there is a public bus from Woomelang to Bendigo via Charlton. With my parents attending netball in Charlton, I organise for them to drop me off there.

After farewelling my parents, with them once again reminding me to be safe and enjoy myself, it is just over an hour bus ride to Bendigo, before a two-hour train ride to Melbourne and a short suburban train ride to Brunswick Station.

Brunswick Cycles is located near the railway station so it's easy collecting my bicycle just after lunchtime. I nearly make the mistake of forgetting to take the magnet off the spokes from the old front wheel of my bicycle. This magnet is critical for my cycle computer to work.

For the rest of the afternoon, I search for a few items, including collecting some mountain bike disc brakes from a bicycle shop for my Warmshower host Daria in Moscow. She asked me via WhatsApp because she apparently can't get them in Russia.

I also find a yellow paper A5 exercise book to record my daily journal, which this book is based on.

Once everything is sorted, I make my way to my sister Brylie's house in Preston for my last night in Australia for a while.

I will be referring to Warmshowers often. This is a website where people offer touring cyclists a place to stay at their home for free. Anyone can be a host and the host decides if they are available.

Warmshowers is a great way to learn about the place from locals, so I have used this on all my tours with many different experiences. I have stayed with people of various ages and family dynamics, from singles to couples to families. The style of accommodation can vary from camping in people's backyards to sleeping on a couch, to having my own room or even a place to myself.

Not all hosts are touring cyclists, some don't cycle at all, while many are aspiring cyclists and by hosting, they get an idea of what cycle touring is like. It's also a way to meet people from around the world without having to leave home, as people I'm staying with are just as fascinated about my own country as I'm about theirs.

In return the only expectation is that you will help cyclists when you're back home. I try to help whenever I can. I hope this book and any other writing I have done can assist and inspire.

There isn't a train to Melbourne Airport, so my best two options to get there are either by bus or bicycle. Buses all require a bicycle to be in a box, as I have done a few times including from Bendigo. However, having cycled from Melbourne Airport a couple of times, I know my way into the airport and I can get a bike box there, so I will cycle as I have plenty of time on this Sunday.

From Preston, it's a simple hour cycle west through the northern suburbs to Melbourne Airport, mostly using cycle paths and bicycle lanes which includes going past old Pentridge Prison to join the Moonee Ponds Trail, before I make my way to Melrose Drive, which is a dead end road but has a bicycle path which connects with airport car parks. From there I'm able to snake my way through the car parks until I'm close to the international terminal.

I try searching for a cardboard bicycle box at the airport arrival area including where I have previously left a box. But I can't find any, so I head to the Qantas service desk and purchase one.

The price appears to have gone up since last purchasing a box, as they now charge me \$40, which, if I add the fare of \$20 for the train from Bendigo to Melbourne, negates saving money on cycling to the airport. Instead I could have used the airport bus from Bendigo for less than \$60, using a bike box I have at home.

People often ask how I fly with my bicycle. It takes about an hour to take it apart by removing both wheels, both pedals, the seat and the butterfly handlebars to fit it inside a cardboard bicycle box. Boxes come in many sizes so sometimes it requires extra disassembling, but thankfully this Qantas one is reasonably sized.

The hardest item to take off are the pedals, as the pressure of pedalling makes them tight and you have to screw them off the opposite way you pedal. With each one unscrewing in the opposite direction to the other it can be confusing as to whether you're turning the pedal the correct way. I try to visit a bicycle shop to get them to loosen the pedal before I fly, otherwise I use a lubricant to loosen them. Since I was at a bicycle shop yesterday, they are loose.

I use bubble wrap, other soft plastics or my clothing to protect certain bicycle parts like the brakes and gears. I have only had one issue with flying with my bicycle, when after returning from Paris, I landed to discover that the box was half-flattened with holes in it but thankfully my bicycle was fine.

I'm carrying some clear packing tape to seal the cardboard box, rather than duct tape which doesn't work as well. Usually airport staff will have some tape.

I ask Emirates staff at the check-in counter if I can put all my baggage gear in the cardboard box together including my tent, stove, helmet and one pannier bag. They say as long as it weighs under 30 kilograms I will not be charged any extra fee as they have the same rule as Qantas, with this being a codeshare flight.

I often hear stories of people being charged extra for taking a bicycle even when they're within the baggage weight limit allowance. I got caught out with this once when I flew back from Paris with AirFrance. They charged me 100 euros to fly home with a bicycle in a cardboard box, despite it being free with Vietnam Airlines on the flight over. This was the flight when the box was half destroyed so I wasn't happy. So before booking any flight, I check the bicycle carrying rules for each airline.

I have to show my World Cup Fan ID at check-in, as this is my visa for entering Russia. They aren't familiar with this yet, so I assume I'm one of the first to do this, as the visa-free entry only starts tomorrow.



Packing my bicycle into a bike box

Because my bicycle box is an oversized item, I must personally drop it off at oversized luggage. With this being my fifth international flight with a bicycle from Melbourne, I know exactly where the oversize luggage is. It's near McDonald's for anyone else who needs to know.

Since I arrived at the airport with plenty of time before my flight, I manage to sneak into a Qantas lounge. I'm a frequent flyer member but don't have enough points for a lounge so since they charged me \$40 for the bicycle box, I will get some of it back by eating their food.

My first flight is to Dubai, but after eight hours I have to get off the plane in Singapore while they refuel and clean the plane. All up it takes about two hours from when we land in Singapore to when we take off, before another six hours of flying to Dubai. I had expected it would be an easier flying experience being able to get off the plane in Singapore for a break, instead of a direct fourteen-hour flight to Dubai. However, the break is annoying as I don't get as long to sleep in between taking off, meal breaks and landing.

Changing planes in Dubai involves some walking and a short train ride between terminals. Otherwise it's an easy four-hour layover without having to worry about my bicycle box as it's checked through to Moscow.

On the five-hour flight to Moscow, I watch *The Death of Stalin* which brilliantly shows in a satirical, comedic way what happened after Stalin died in 1953, highlighting the bureaucracy which led to confusion once he died. This film is banned in Russia, but we are allowed to watch it on the plane to Moscow. All up, it takes me around 27 hours from Melbourne to Moscow.

After landing in Moscow, I show my passport and Fan ID to customs staff and have a quick five-minute chat with only two questions asked, including which matches I'm attending and then I'm allowed in. I'm not asked about my finances or when I'm leaving the country. I have been asked these questions when entering both the UK and the USA.

I'm expecting I'll have to send all my gear through metal detectors, requiring the opening of the cardboard box and then all my individual bags, followed by answering some tough questions. Instead they wave me straight through without checking anything – a different experience to America or when arriving back in Australia.

Assembling my bicycle is easy having done it a few times. However, finding a place to dispose of the cardboard box is harder. After looking around I eventually end up using sign language with a cleaner who takes it.

Compared to my airport arrival, accessing the airport train involves going through metal detectors, requiring the removal of all bags from my bicycle including my tool bag. This is annoying, as a couple of bags require a few straps to be undone. I have to redo this again at the busy Paveletsky Station in central Moscow. It is frustrating especially when police start asking in Russian what is in

each bag, which I don't understand until one officer says "clothes" in English.

I understand they have had suicide bombings at railway stations in the past but find it strange that the airport is less strict. Before leaving Australia, I corresponded with a few people about taking a bicycle on trains and no one mentioned metal detectors.

The actual train ride is easy with a wheelchair area for storing my bicycle on this clean modern train with announcements in English and Russian. There are plenty of advertisements including Lionel Messi advertising Lays chips.

I'm tired from flying so my priority is to figure out a route to get to Daria's home in the western part of Moscow.

As I exit Paveletsky Station suddenly I'm overwhelmed by the numerous tall, square, multistorey buildings and wide multi-lane roads with plenty of traffic. My first issue is figuring out how I'm supposed to cross the road as I can't see any pedestrian crossings. Initially I rush across between breaks in the traffic.

Eventually I figure out there are many stair underpasses, with most having pairs of narrow metal ramps designed for wheelchairs, comfortably allowing me to walk my bicycle up and down the stairs. Often inside these underpasses are shops selling a wide range of products from fresh food to clothing.

Cycling on busy roads doesn't look that appealing or safe but thankfully the footpaths are extra wide with plenty of room. After seeing a small tractor go through the middle of the city, I find a well-built cycle path beside a footpath, which takes me north through the city before crossing a canal to the Moskva River.

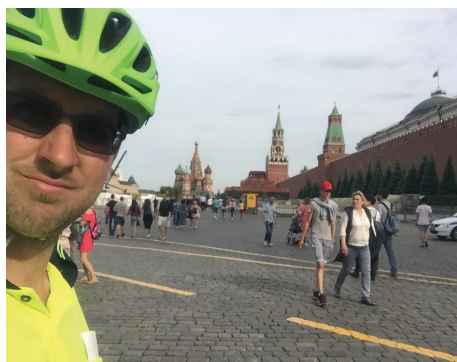
Suddenly visible across the river is the famous Kremlin, Red Square and St Basil Cathedral. The Kremlin has creamy-red-coloured walls with red and green towers and plenty of green trees inside the walls. In front of the colourful St Basil Cathedral there are numerous shipping container-sized boxes with glass windows on one side, along with a few other temporary buildings being erected. So Red Square is smaller to explore than usual. I later learn that this is where the media centre was during the World Cup.



A modern train from the airport



An underpasses with ramps on stairs

*In Red Square*

Arriving at Red Square is when it sinks in that I'm in Russia. However, being so tired I'm overwhelmed by it all, with so many stylish colourful buildings to see.

I'm planning to spend a couple of days looking around but for now I just want to have a sleep.

Except at the airport, so far I have been unable to connect to any free tourist advertised wi-fi, as they all

ask for a mobile number to get a code, even at McDonald's. Since I left my Australian SIM card at home, I can't get a code. I had considered getting a SIM card for emergencies while I'm in Russia, but now it looks like I will need it to access free wi-fi and possibly for private wi-fi as well.

This makes contacting Daria impossible, so I make my way to her apartment block, hoping I saved her address correctly on Maps.me. A cycle path near the western side of the Kremlin, takes me westward, halfway towards Daria's home before some dogleg roads take me to what I assume is the correct address.

I have a look around the old multistorey apartment block, but I'm unsure if I have the right place. After a few minutes, a young man comes outside around a corner and calls my name and introduces himself as Oleg, Daria's boyfriend. He explains he saw me from their window.

After climbing four flights of stairs, I enter a small apartment which has a couple of rooms and a small kitchen, a style of housing I would get used to on this trip. Daria and Oleg speak English well and we share some soup but I'm so tired I'm not really appreciating what they are saying. I soon say goodnight and fall asleep in a spare room, tired from a long day of travelling.

I'm awake by 4 am as the sun is already up and I try to go back to sleep but my body is still on Australian time. After a few hours I hear Daria and Oleg wake up.

We chat for a while over a slowly cooked porridge breakfast about their own travel experiences in both Russia and overseas, including how Daria is into mountain biking. This reminds me to give her the disc brakes from Melbourne. They seem like a nice couple and I assume we will talk more tonight after they get back from work.

The plan for the day is to go exploring on foot using the Moscow Metro, with 1905 Metro Station only a short walk from Daria's home.

The Metro is extremely busy but well organised with metal detectors at every entrance and often, accessing a station involves long escalator rides as some stations are deep underground. Individual tickets cost 55 roubles which allows me to get on and off as many times as I like, as long as I don't leave a station.

I could have bought a card for cheaper rates but since I will only be using the Metro today and tomorrow, it's not worth it.

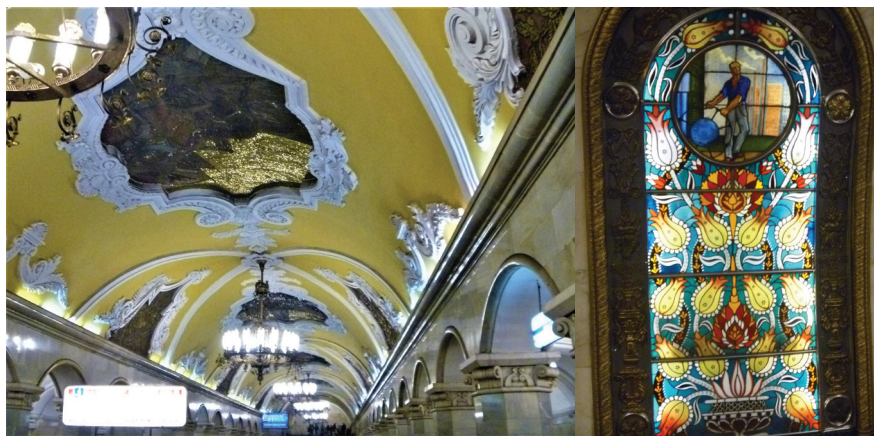
It feels at times stations are set up like sheep yards with one-way lanes directing people around, which is efficient because you don't have to worry about people walking in the opposite direction. The numerous metro lines are colour-coded, so this helps with directions but still I'm getting lost a few times when walking through stations on the various passages.

Nearly every station has its own unique style of artwork, with several stations having murals with different themes, including military, religious, agricultural or a construction focus. There are also various statues of people including a woman with a chicken and a man with a football. One station has many glass panels just like being in a church. This artwork is found all over the stations, including entrances, on walls, across from platforms and on the ceiling.

At one stage, I jump off at random stops to look at the station artwork; with trains running every three minutes it's a short wait for the next train. On the internet there are self-guided directions to see the most decorated stations.



A range of artwork is all over most metro station including the ceiling



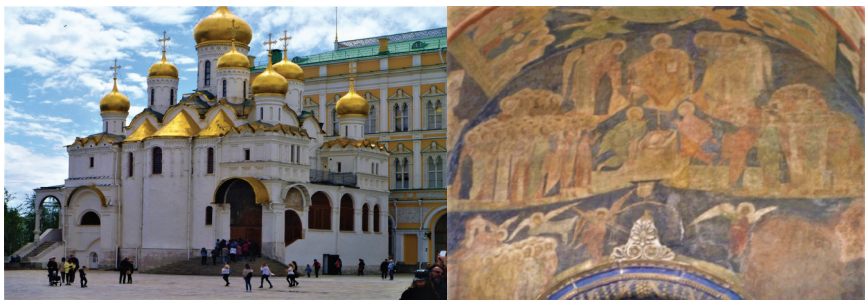
On previous overseas trips I have usually just used free wi-fi but since I'm planning on being in Russia for 52 days it makes sense to get a local SIM card, especially as I still haven't been able to access free wi-fi around Moscow.

I have gone with the mobile company Beeline, which allows unlimited internet for 350 roubles a week and 30 minutes of talking time. Not sure if it is a great deal but it works.

My first place of interest is inside the Kremlin, which requires going through more metal detectors. Once inside there are tourists but it's not packed. Dominating inside the Kremlin Walls is the large yellow and green Grand Kremlin Palace, which takes up about a third of the area. However, I'm not allowed near it as it's still the official home of the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, but it looks quiet today.

Most memorable are a few large gold-domed white churches with Russian Orthodox crosses on top, while around church entrances are amazing detailed religious paintings. Inside is similar religious artwork as this is where tombs of Russian royalty are, which reminds me of Westminster in London but with fewer tourists.

Inside the Kremlin there are also botanical gardens, a large decorative cannon and a large bell with a piece cracked off.



Artwork on the side of a church inside the Kremlin



A decorative cannon is not far from the Kremlin Palace

My method for combating jet lag is to stay awake as long as possible during the day and try to sleep normal hours. By late afternoon, I'm starting to feel tired, so I'm not appreciating the sites anymore.

Instead I will check train times to Vladimir by taking the Metro out to Kazansky Station, as I plan to catch a train to Vladimir in a couple of days. This will reduce the distance to Kazan, making it easier to get there in time for Australia's first

World Cup match. This will also avoid cycling through the spread out suburbs of Moscow and I have been told Vladimir is an interesting city to see.

Just like Paris, Moscow has numerous large railway stations on the edge of the city, with many having names relating to a location where trains depart to, for example, Kazansky Station was presumably built for trains heading to Kazan. However, after searching around multiple parts of this large station complex, I can't find the correct timetable.

Despite ticket machines having English language selection, I'm feeling confused. It doesn't help that my iPhone randomly dies when at 45% battery. After charging my iPhone back at Daria's home, I discover I have been at the wrong railway station all along as there are nine main stations around Moscow.

On the way back to Daria's, I drop into a butcher with some interesting looking meat, so I go safe with some fat sausages. They take a while to cook and aren't nice. Neither Daria nor Oleg are back yet, so I lie down expecting to wake up when they return, except I fall into a deep sleep.

I awake in the middle of the night to a WhatsApp message from Daria asking me to leave in the morning, instead of staying another night because of a small mess in the kitchen. I thought I had cleaned it up, but I must have missed a bit, due to fatigue.

I also left the toilet unflushed after a wee expecting to flush it before they came home. In Australia to save water, I often go with the theory if its yellow let it mellow. I understand Daria's decision for me to leave but my only defence is that I was so tired.

No longer having accommodation in Moscow allows me to make the decision to leave a day earlier, allowing me more time to get to Kazan, which I would find I needed. Thankfully, my Couchsurfing host in Vladimir can host me a day earlier.

Not needing to catch a train until 2 pm, I have plenty of time to spend the morning cycling around Moscow.

After taking as many side roads as I can, I make my way back to the bicycle path I used to get out of the Kremlin on my first day. However, instead of heading towards the Kremlin, I take a cycle path south as it loops around the old part of Moscow. Along the way I pass a few bicycle hire stations, each with a map showing other bike stations and cycling routes around Moscow.

The path eventually ends up beside the Moskva River where there is a large brown-grey coloured pirate ship statue in the river. Turns out it is only a twenty-year-old statue of Peter the Great, celebrating the 300th anniversary of the Russian Navy which he established.

With time getting away from me I make my way back to Red Square to visit St Basil Cathedral. Unfortunately it's closed on Wednesdays but still I admire the colourful building from the outside and have one last look around Red Square

*There are plenty of bike hire stations**A lookout over the Moskva River*

After visiting a lookout over the Moskva River with views of the Kremlin, I make my way to Kursky Railway Station.

For this suburban service, there is no metal detectors or security at this station. While it's easy obtaining a train ticket to Vladimir as the electronic ticket machine has English language options. I have been told I have to purchase a free bicycle ticket, so I do.

The station's platform is at the right height for rolling my bicycle onto an older style train, electric grey in colour with some red around the doors.

*Common style of train in Russia, with old seats inside**Train busker*

After manually opening a couple of sliding doors, I find a tight spot to store my bicycle by taking up an end corner. On this train, seating is made up of rows of basic long brown flat seats. As this is an all stations stopping train, it is a long three and a half hours.

Throughout the journey people are coming through the carriage either busking with a microphone and loudspeaker or trying to sell items like ice creams, clothing or tools. They often leave a mess behind after giving a demonstration, for example, how a knife cuts.

Once out of the considerable suburban sprawl the landscape is green with plenty of forests to see.

During the journey, inspectors check my tickets twice, and while there isn't any security to leave Vladimir Railway Station, there are metal detectors to enter it.

Valentina, Roman's girlfriend, meets me outside the station and soon Roman meets us. They both speak English well so for more than an hour we walk around town seeing the sites. This includes many churches and a fire station memorial, with a pump which actually pumps water.

One of the churches is 1,000 years old, with plenty of decorations on the outside of this white church. It has been surprising so far just how many religious buildings I have seen in Russia – not what I expected.

During the walk at some high points, I can see across the Klyazma River Valley to a road heading through a green forest towards Murom, my likely route tomorrow.

Vladimir was the capital of Russia for a short period in the 12th and 13th centuries, so some buildings still reflect this, including the Golden Gate at the western entrance to the city centre. I

have been told this is a rare medieval Russian gate with a long archway and a single gold dome tower on top. Today any surrounding walls are long gone so it is now in the middle of a road, with cars going around it.

So far, I have been falling asleep at 8 pm since I arrived but tonight, I managed to stay up until 10 pm but this is early for Roman and Valentina. Roman teaches English to people by video and since he has a class in the evening, they offer for me to sleep in their bed. I reply I have an air mattress but they insist, while they will sleep on a mattress in the kitchen. This is not the first time this has happened on a bicycle tour.



Valentina on the left, with Roman



1,000 year old church

Finally cycling

I manage to sleep in until 6 am, despite initially waking up at 4 am. Have found sleeping with an eye mask is the only way I can sleep past sunrise, which can be as early as 2 am. I gently wake Roman and Valentina up by 8.30 am, otherwise they probably would have kept sleeping. From my experience, it's common for Russians to start work later in the day than Australians and so they finish later in the day.

Valentina offers to cook me a chicken pasta breakfast, so I take the opportunity to chat more about Australia, my cycling experiences and their lives. I am thankful for all the assistance Valentina and Roman gave me.

Last night while looking at the railway timetables at Vladimir Station, I noticed that there are services further east to Gorohovets, which will allow me to cycle to Nizhny Novgorod, a city which sounds interesting to see and will allow me to be even closer to Kazan. However, I can't find the timetable online, so I make my way to the railway station to check.



Vladimir Tourist Information

Along the way, I visit a log cabin tourist information centre near the largest cathedral. I'm hoping to find a map of the surrounding area, as I didn't find any maps in Moscow but its focus is on selling tourist memorabilia, so no map.

Instead, for navigation I will be relying on apps on my iPhone like Maps.me, Google Maps and the Russian equivalent called Yandex. Yandex has a useful app which not only shows roads but is also helpful when searching for categories like hotels and groceries. It's more accurate than Google searching but could do with refining between a general store and a supermarket.

The infrequent times I did find tourist information centres in Russia, they generally only had a small amount of information on the city I was in, rather than providing any information on the local region or neighbouring cities.

Back at the very ugly, clearly Soviet era concrete Vladimir Railway Station, I admire the old steam train on display, before locking my bicycle up outside, otherwise it will need to go through metal detectors to get inside the station.

The next train to Gorohovets doesn't leave until 3 pm, so I will stick with my original plan to cycle towards Murom. This will involve taking a more southerly route to Kazan, away from the busier main highway route.

The Klyazma River forms a southern boundary to Vladimir, so a bridge crossing is required to head south. However, the amount of traffic won't allow

me to cross to the right side of the bridge, so I take a rough track on the bridge, which eventually involves carrying my bicycle over some small culverts. As soon as an intersection comes up, I cross to the correct side.

By now the weather has changed from sunny to overcast as spitting rain begins. This continues all day with moments of warm sun followed by cold clouds.

The highway is busy, especially at the start as there is a southerly east-west bypass of Vladimir. Once past this point traffic decreases a little but is constant all day, with a mixture of cars and large trucks so not the best cycling conditions. The landscape is mostly large, green pine forests on both sides of the road, which becomes a little open near the end of the day.

One of the first major differences in Russia are the Second World War memorials, which all start with 1941, ignoring the Soviet occupation of the Baltics and eastern Poland from 1939. In Russia this war is called the Great Patriotic War and for the rest of my time in Russia, I will refer to the Second World War as the Great Patriotic War but I will switch the name back once I leave.

Unlike in Australia there aren't references to the First World War. The most obvious conclusion is since their defeat to the Germans led to the Russian Revolution, which ended with the communist takeover of the country, it's not something to be remembered.



Nearly every town in Russia has a Second World War Memorial

I'm also beginning to notice numerous cement bus stops both in towns and in the middle of nowhere, usually with signed pedestrian crossings, even on quiet roads.

Throughout the day plenty of buses are going past, often hourly or even more frequently. However, only once during my whole time in Russia would I see a bus timetable. Locals just seem to know when the bus is coming.



Bus shelters in the middle of nowhere are a perfect spot to make lunch



Have seen many decorated bus shelter in random places

These shelters are a useful spot for a break from the weather and to make lunch, as often there is a seat inside.

Late in the day I begin searching for a place to set up my tent. From looking online my best option is a sports ground in the small town of Malyshevo.

I haven't seen or heard of any official campgrounds in Russia during any of my research, nor have I seen anyone camping yet, so I assume they don't exist. I have no idea what the rules are about wild camping in Russia, but I do know I'm supposed to register my stay at hotels, which I haven't done yet.

On previous trips most of my camping has involved setting my tent up in random places, so I'm experienced with finding places to sleep.

Therefore, I will stop in Malyshevo which, despite being a small town, has two small general stores close to each other. I have found this is common, even if they sell the same pre-packaged food that isn't very fresh. I'm not sure how all these shops, usually run by middle-aged women, survive.

Thankfully most reasonable size towns will have a supermarket or two and they are usually more consistent with fresh food options.



Style of general stores

Often my purchase in general stores was counted using an abacus but then I could pay with my debit card, even for say 30 roubles (60 cents) purchases. For the majority of my purchases in Russia, I was able to use my debit card and there were only a couple of times when it wouldn't work, and I'm not sure why.

Earlier in the day I found some antifreeze which I have been told can be used as a substitute for methylated spirits for my Trangia camping stove. However, when I try it at night, it won't light. Looking closer at the bottle there isn't a flammable sign. Luckily I bought food which won't go off just in case.

As for my camping spot, it is an ice hockey rink with overgrown grass where the ice would be in winter, with a shelter attached which I assume is the player's bench. However, the shelter is covered in rubbish and there appears to be a smear of old human faeces.

Nevertheless, with no other sensible choice and the fact that mosquitoes appear early, I decide to set my tent up in the shelter. Firstly, I have to empty everything out of my Revelate handlebar bag as the tent is tightly packed in the middle of it. I need most of the items in the bag for sleeping anyway.

Having had my Moondance tent since 2014, it's a quick familiar set-up, I then inflate my Thermarest air mattress, unroll my pillow, pull my sleeping bag out and settle in for the night.

During the night I hear people walking past the outside of the rink but have no idea if anyone noticed me or cared I'm here. I'm glad I slept in the shelter as bright street lights come on and the grass in the ice rink becomes dewy.



My first night camping in Russia, is in a hockey rink

As I'm about to leave in the morning, outside a general store a large white van shows up. A man gets out and opens a door to reveal shelves full of bakery items. As he takes a tray of bread inside the store, I follow him inside and find there are now plenty of fresh baked goods available including a jam roll.



A bread van

Throughout my time in Russia, I would often come across a random bread van. Sometimes I bought directly from them or found some fresh goodies in a general store. Locals know when the van comes because this is the busiest time of the day. Other times there will be fewer bakery options, often only remaining is bread which has been left out in the open, causing it to quickly go stale. Yet when purchasing a bakery item, they will then wrap it in plastic when it has already dried out.

As I approach the city of Murom my rear calliper brake begins to feel sluggish and eventually isn't working, so I stop to investigate. Straight away I can see that the brake cable is really loose, so I tighten the cable a lot. I am not sure what has happened as my bicycle was serviced just before flying to Russia, so I will keep an eye on it.

So far in Russia, I have worked out what supermarkets and pharmacies look like but I'm still trying to find what the likes of hardware stores or sports shops look like. The main item I'm looking for is fuel for my Trangia stove which runs on methyated spirits but which has a different name in nearly every country. I have found a list telling me possible names in Russian but I'm unsure where I can buy it from, so I begin searching.



Type of shop fronts in Russia

However, I don't understand the large Cyrillic Russian alphabet signs out the front of shops and searching on Google Maps isn't helpful because it often takes me to places that don't exist. I'm walking inside random shops hoping it may have what I'm looking for and when I ask no one understands what I'm looking for. So, no luck with fuel for my stove.

The searching takes longer than I expected as the day just seems to get away from me. The weather has deteriorated to light rain as I begin cycling out of Murom.

Sometimes a brand new bridge across a river isn't always beneficial for cyclists as I find out in Murom. Instead of a ferry across the Oka River from the centre of town, I have to cycle out of town on the highway to cross the Oka River on a large cable bridge and then have to loop back to where the ferry used to cross. Driving a car, you probably wouldn't notice these things, but you do when cycling.

A requirement for a foreigner when visiting Russia is to register where you're staying every so often. I have been told every seven days at a minimum or every three days if you're staying in a World Cup host city. Since I haven't done this for my first four days and the rain has become heavier, I will try staying in a hotel.

The first place I find in the town of Navashino says no to me staying, so I make my way to the second one. As I'm about to head inside a man befriends me and then helps me with checking in. The friendly receptionist asks to see my passport, immigration paper and my Fan ID, as she fills in my foreigner registration paperwork.

After paying 1600 roubles, I have a basic room which looks old but has a bed, fridge, kettle and television but all that matters to me is that I'm dry and warm.

I have figured out that a straightforward way to convert roubles to Australian dollars is to treat them as cents and double them, so 1600 roubles equals approximately \$32.00.

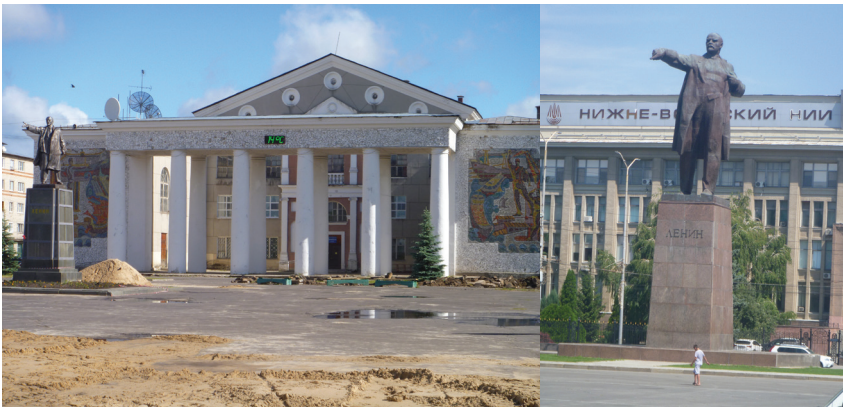
I'm finding town names are useful for helping me learn the Russian language, for example Murom is spelt Муром. With the different letters I'm having to re-train my brain to remember that y=u sound, p=r, c=s н=n, ъ=b and в=v. It's easier remembering letters sounds which are not related to Latin letters like ф=f and д=d. The most confusing are letters which either look similar or make similar sounds, Ъ is different from И so is III to И and little ь is different from В and Ъ is one letter. Some letters are the same including М Т А О К.

Newer words are usually easier to understand because they sound closer to English than older words. For example, SIM card is Сим-карта but is pronounced Sim-karta. Translation apps have been invaluable, along with setting Chrome up on my iPhone to automatically translate web pages.



Entrance sign to Murom

In the morning on the way out of Navashino I can clearly see the town square has seen better days, reminding me of the town centre in Back to the Future in 1985. With no one around it feels dead with only a Lenin statue in the otherwise empty cement-based town square. In Russia, most references to communism have been erased from history, however, most towns still have a Lenin statue.



Navashino town square, with a Lenin statue, which is common in most towns

While leaving Kulebaki three teenagers cycle past me. I follow them for five kilometres until they stop at the side of the road, so I assume I will never see them again.



Cycled with these boys for a while

Two hours later suddenly they show up again. We end up cycling together for an hour using Google Translate to ask questions and share Instagram profiles. Thanks to them for being the highlight of the trip so far.

Sadly, the road surface is not a highlight as it is terrible with potholes everywhere, even on busy highways. At Sakony as the highway

takes a slightly longer route, I take the shorter route through small rural towns. However, the road becomes dirt with numerous potholes, some full of water, which is okay – just some zigzagging required. Seeing the conditions of roads makes me think twice, when complaining about local roads back home.

Many houses in the towns are wooden and in various conditions, some okay, others falling apart, while often the best-looking building in town is a church, but a handful are derelict. Since I'm in a rural landscape today I'm seeing tractors and cows, but paddocks aren't fenced.

In one section between towns the road has seemingly been abandoned, leaving a rough track. However, with less traffic, it's a more relaxing ride. Out of nowhere a short hailstorm begins, luckily nearby in the middle of nowhere is a bus shelter.



A common site - terrible roads in towns



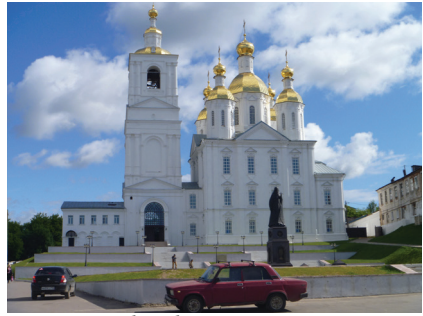
Rural life in Russia

By late afternoon I realise I will make the city of Arzamas by tonight. Using Booking.com I message a few hotels, asking what facilities they have and if they accept foreigners.

ARZ gets back with the best offer, is the first one on the way into town and will cost me 1500 roubles or about \$30 for the night. After buzzing my way inside a large gate, I find a quiet, clean hotel with a kitchen. Even with a language barrier, Tatiana the receptionist is lovely; she even does my dishes, despite my weak protest.

I wake to sunshine, so I handwash my clothes and dry them by hanging them on the outside of my bags on my bicycle. However, sunshine doesn't last so my clothes never have a chance to dry.

Near where I'm staying is the old part of town with an outdoor market and a large white church with gold domes. Further north, Arzamas becomes more of an ugly cement city with plenty of people around retail shops. Once again, I search various shops, trying to find either a map or fuel for my stove but no luck with either.



Church in Arzamas

As for cycling out of Arzamas, my route follows the railway line for a while, as the road becomes rough in places especially each side of the town of Vad. The landscape is becoming even more open but on this cold overcast day, I'm focusing on just cycling.

Vad is the first town, where surrounding the war memorial, I notice war vehicles on display including a jet plane and a tank, along with a large human head memorial statue beside a list of names of the dead. It was common for children to use these war vehicles as a playground.



Vad's Great Patriotic War memorial

After asking online for suggestions on what fuel I can get for my Trangia stove, Keith Liddicoat suggests I try asking for spirit at pharmacies.

So in Perevoz I go inside one, finding a small room with a wall of glass from floor to ceiling separating the staff and pharmacy items from me. From seeing other customers, I learn that I have to walk up to an open window and ask for what I want. So, I put a translation on my iPhone and walk up and ask for spirit. I'm given a small 50 millilitre glass bottle and it's cheap at 25 roubles or 50 Australian cents a bottle.



Spirit fuel for my stove

I see online there is a motel in the next town of Burturlino, so I race along as light rain begins. The motel cost 1500 roubles but doesn't have a kitchen so I boil water using the kettle and rehydrate powder potato, rather than use my spirit fuel.

With the sun out for most of the day I fly along despite the landscape feeling noticeably hillier today. However, rather than doing any serious climbing, I'm just going up and down every so often. Using a secondary road on the way to Sergach, it starts as five kilometres of paved downhill before gravel for the next twenty kilometres but with little traffic it's relaxing, despite cold clouds returning.

After some delicious mini pizza buns from a bakery, I leave Sergach with more rolling hills. At one stage, I stop for a pee and discover I'm near a rubbish tip with unchained guard dogs, so I jump straight back on my bicycle and take off as they begin chasing me. Thankfully it's downhill.

As I'm making my way east, I have to cross a few rivers, so I need to be aware of where bridges are. However, I'm unsure if the bridge across the Sura River on my route is open, as I have been given conflicting information from online mapping apps and a general search online doesn't help. If the bridge isn't open this will require a 50-kilometre southern detour to the next bridge which, with Russian roads, will take half a day before I have to ride north again.

So, in Pilna, the last town on the railway line, I call into the unstaffed station to see if there is a local train option to get me to Shumerlya on the other side of the Sura River. However, I can only find long-distance trains, which are no use to me. So, I will continue cycling, expecting to camp somewhere randomly twenty kilometres from town, well before the Sura River.

After heading south across the railway line and over a small river before a steep short climb, I turn off my current road and soon I come across a large yellow road sign. After using Google Translate, I think it says that the route to Shumerlya is unsuitable for heavy vehicles, so I should be able to get through.

As I'm about to set off again a cyclist comes towards me, so I put a translation on my iPhone and flag him down. He confirms in Russian that the bridge is open despite not being happy I stopped him.

Not long down the road, I take a loop road through the small town of Tenekayevo to see if there is a suitable camping spot or general store. I can't find either but I'm seeing various farming equipment parked in front of houses. Not something you see in Australia, is a harvester parked out the front.

Every so often on a tour there are times where I feel like I'm flying along not noticing how far I have cycled. For some reason, late in the afternoon returning to the main road was one of these times. The conditions are perfect with a beautiful later afternoon sun, I can hear birds calling, the road is a decent paved surface with no potholes to worry about as I'm slowly descending for a while and every so often cyclists are racing towards me. Some are by themselves, others in groups but none want to stop and chat, so I just keep going until eventually the Sura River comes into view, but I can't yet see the bridge.

I am seeing a few campers beside the river and nearby creeks. However, while searching online I see there is a decently priced hotel in Shumerlya just on the

other side of the river, so I decide to continue. Thankfully there is a bridge across the Sura River. I see why there is confusion as it is a pontoon bridge which I assume lies on top of ice during winter but is now floating on top of the water. While stopping to take photos of the bridge, I'm attacked by mosquitoes, so this confirms my plan to continue on to the motel.

The motel looks fancy, but the receptionist rejects me saying they can't accept foreigners because tomorrow is a public holiday. I suspect as a smelly cyclist she doesn't want me to stay. I can't find any other hotels despite searching in fading light, as online suggestions are not making any sense.

Eventually in the dark, I find a spot to camp in the ruins of a sportsground with the vandalised grandstand falling apart. I finally try cooking some food in my Trangia stove using the spirit bottle from the pharmacy and it works fine. However, it uses half the fuel in the small 50 millilitre bottle.

In hindsight, I should have camped by the river, as there weren't many options to do this in Russia. For some reason during my first week, I got in the habit of searching for indoor accommodation when I have a tent. Weather and lack of camping options were a factor, along with cheap indoor accommodation and a better budget than previous tours.

I awake to find a shepherd with three cows on the sportsground, as light rain begins. I can now clearly see how run-down the grandstand is, with graffiti, broken glass and random cement blocks everywhere. Looks like the place has been trashed, which reminds me of my first night camping in the trashed hockey rink. I have seen so much rubbish just dumped in random places.

While checking my cycle computer, it informs me I cycled 149.95 kilometres yesterday. This passed my previous longest day of cycling in terms of distance which was my ride out to Golden Spike in Utah in 2014. Both times, I hadn't planned to cycle that far, it just happened and both were late finishes.

I know people who cycle this distance every day, but many appear to just be cycling, whereas I prefer to stop to look at things along the way. There often isn't enough time in the day for me to cycle that far, rather than being just a physical reason.



Abandoned sportsground, with cement blocks and glass all over the place.



Russia Day Celebrations

Today is Russia Day, a public holiday marking the end of the Soviet Union and the start of modern Russia. Initially, it feels like any other day until I see a sign for a celebration starting at 10 am in a local park.

After undertaking some errands, I enter the park to find various food for sale being cooked on barbecues. A small

concert is on, with children performing in traditional dress with an orchestra. Not sure what they are singing but still it's an experience.

For the rest of the day, I didn't see any more Russia Day celebrations. The toilets in the park are locked so as light rain begins, I make my way to the railway station hoping they have a toilet. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to pay but staff just let me use the squat style toilets. For those unaware, this involves a large white porcelain square on the floor with two spaces for my feet either side of a hole.

As I'm about to leave rain becomes a little heavier, so I stay inside taking the opportunity to charge my iPhone and read my fiction book on the Australian light horseman during the First World War while railway staff are friendly, offering me tea.

The rain eventually eases with overcast clouds continuing all afternoon. My route is hilly with some traffic, nothing serious but still busier than I hoped on this cold day.

Near Azim-Sirma, I leave the highway to head south, as it looks like a quieter route, which it is. The trade-off is that this route involves a small section of gravel with potholes to be dodged, especially through Azim-Sirma. Once out of town the pavement returns all the way to Kalinino.

In Kalinino, there are a few small grocery stores, but they are all selling similar pre-packaged food with a small selection of okay semi-fresh bread. While snacking away I meet a cycle touring couple about the same age as me, but they appear not to speak English and are not interested in talking to me at all. So I'm not sure where they are going except in the opposite direction to me.

Leaving town, the weather deteriorates so a few bus shelters through the afternoon are useful.

By the end of the day, I find myself in the town of Yamashevo with a small war memorial, surrounded by a few buildings including what I assume is a school or the town hall. Importantly, with light rain around, there is a large enough spot to set my tent up in an entrance way to one of the buildings.

Nearby the small general store is open until 10 pm, which was a common closing time in Russia. After a brief explore around Yamashevo, it looks like a

run-down town, with many buildings abandoned.

While cooking dinner, a mob of cows are chased past me, reinforcing the rural lifestyle they live by here. So far I have seen plenty of cows, either chained up outside houses or in unfenced paddocks with shepherds watching their herd.

It appears in the rural communities that men dress in trousers and older women dress modestly, while farming practices are more hands-on with animals, many have their own veggie gardens and it's common to see homemade farming equipment. All this reminds me of how my grandparents used to live.

In the morning a man drives past me on his presumably homemade vehicle. It is a small trailer being towed by a rotary hoe motor on two wheels, with him steering while on a seat above the toolbox at the front of the trailer. This is definitely something my grandfathers would have built.



Staying dry in Yamashevo



I assume a homemade vehicle, while many woman are dressed conservatively

It takes a while to motivate myself to leave my sheltered camping spot in the morning as it's another cold rainy day.

The building nearby which I thought was either a public hall or school, turns out to have a hardware store inside, along with photos showing the local community in Yamashevo. Seeing the photos reminds me not to judge a town by just looking at the outside of buildings. A downside of not understanding the language, is not being able to easily chat with locals or read in detail about a town's history.

On my ride to Shikhazany the rain eases slightly but still it's all about getting there, as I'm feeling like I'm cycling with blinkers on, focusing on staying dry, rather than the landscape.

After enjoying a type of kebab-style food at a roadside stall, I begin making my way to the city of Kanash. With ten kilometres of busy highway cycling to get there, I have found a back road into town. Unfortunately, it is a dirt road and

with the rain, it is now mud so I'm slipping a few times as my calliper brake on my rear wheel is becoming jammed with mud.

Since I'm feeling frustrated and exhausted with the weather and Russia in general, I will see if there are any hotels nearby to have a rest afternoon to refresh myself. Firstly, I make my way to the railway station to charge my phone.

With metal detectors to get inside, it's easier to leave my bicycle outside locked up to a rubbish bin. However, all the power outlets are being used by waiting passengers. I still have some battery, so I head back outside to my bicycle and start searching online for accommodation.

While I'm searching, a young police officer comes over. As soon as he realises I'm a foreigner, he pulls out a piece of paper with Russian to English translation phrases. I assume this is a World Cup initiative. He asks me what I'm doing and where I'm going.

Once I explain I'm an Australian cycling to Kazan and show a copy of my passport and Fan ID, he is friendlier, with other people coming over to chat as well. I have had no issues with police, it has been more the requirement of them needing to check paperwork.

I have found an apartment on Booking.com in the nearby town of Yantikovo so message them and begin making my way through Kanash. I am finding it a busy city but I'm so focused on getting out I'm not appreciating it. While in a supermarket, I receive a message from the apartment host with the location not making any sense, so I message again. I receive another reply which informs me that the apartment is located near Georgia, 2,000 odd kilometres away rather than twenty, which adds to my frustration, as nothing is going well.

After another brief online look, I see a hotel in Yantikovo, but I can't find any contact details. Since it's on my route anyway I will check it out in person.

Once I get to Yantikovo, I can't find the hotel despite a road sign saying it exists. I do, however, find a free power point in the bus station which allows me to charge my iPhone and begin searching more thoroughly online for options. This helps to calm me down and allows me to work out a plan to get to Kazan by tomorrow night.

In the meantime, the sun has come out so I decide to continue cycling with no plan of where I will finish the day, just with the idea if I get far enough tonight, this will allow me to make Kazan tomorrow. Despite some headwinds initially, I'm still making reasonable time. During a snack break in Khozesanovo, two young boys around ten years of age appear. After a hand gesture chat, unprompted they show me to a water tap to fill my water bottles. I have been told to be careful of water in Russia as most locals buy bottled water but have had no issues with drinking this water, so I'm not sure what I should be doing.

Once I meet a road heading east, it's enjoyable cycling, as it is now more a tailwind and I only stop when I make the town of Bolshiye. On each corner

around the main crossroad, are four similar looking general stores. After looking inside all four I find some delicious fresh cake snacks. While snacking away I can see down a hill a park, so I head down to investigate. Compared to previous parks this one has a contemporary playground and a large, modern, enclosed blue ice rink building.



Modern playground

I soon spot a cement path beside a small river which goes under the road, so I follow it. This path takes me to a separate larger sportsground, with numerous small buildings scattered around a central area, it reminds me of showgrounds back in regional towns in Australia. This looks like a decent place to stealth camp but I will have to wait for people to leave as its busy with locals exercising.

In particular a group of teenage boys are playing futsal in a purpose-built basketball-size court. So I make my way there to watch, while writing in my paper journal. However, the boys stop playing and come over to me. Using Google Translate I explain I'm from Australia and I'm heading to Kazan to watch the World Cup. They then invite me to join the game, where I score a few goals.

Afterwards, they all ask me if I'm on Instagram, so we connect online. On this trip, Instagram was the preferred social media people wanted to connect with me on and some still respond to me now. In a way, they are more excited to say they have met an Australian, as I assume few foreigners visit Bolshiye.

Their coach Valiullin, who shows up later, then invites me to stay at his house. One of the boys Almaz coming along.

However, for some reason, we go via the ice hockey change rooms as Valiullin coaches ice hockey as well. They then find me a towel and shampoo among all the hockey gear, and I have a shower before we go to Coach's house.



Meeting "Coach" after playing futsal in Bolshiye

At his house, I'm given soup and some liquid to try which burns my throat; turns out this is what vodka tastes like. On local television, the World Cup is being promoted on the news. The expectation of people I have met is that Russia will not do well.

Almaz wants me to go for an evening walk as he takes me to the public park to show me off to his slightly older friends, with one of them speaking some English. I'm offered some black sunflower seeds, which aren't particularly tasty and look like birdseed, but is apparently a common snack in Russia.

Initially, I was feeling a little apprehensive being out late at night with strangers but everything works out fine, with one of them giving me a lift in a car back to Coach's house, for my first car ride in Russia. I'm sleeping in a modern spare room, so not sure why I couldn't shower here. What started as a terrible morning, turned into a memorable day.

I will be in Kazan tomorrow, a World Cup host city, the first big city since Moscow and I presume I will see numerous Australians compared to the past week where I haven't seen any tourists.

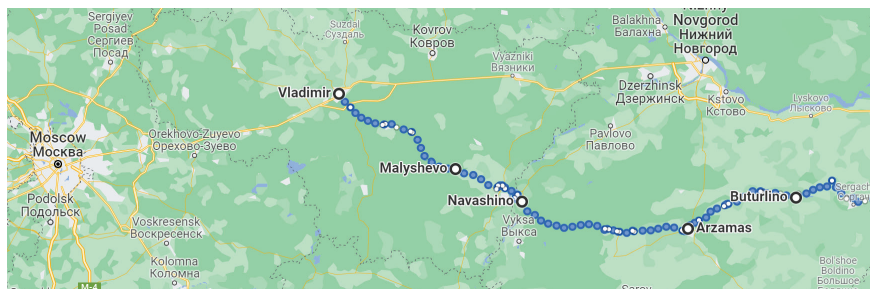
Having to be in Kazan by a set date has been a good motivator especially when it was cold or raining. I am not sure how I would have gone if this had been my first bicycle tour.



Hockey sticks in the garden

After a lovely breakfast with Valiullin and his wife, I walk my bicycle past his vegetable garden with old hockey sticks helping prop up his vegetables, while Valiullin points out a milk cow in a small shed in his backyard. The neighbours are out the front of their house, as I wave goodbye to all who helped me out.

Kazan is only 75 kilometres away with only the Volga River in the way. The direct route involves a ferry which only runs a few times a day, while there is a more regular service but to a location ten kilometres from central Kazan. Therefore, I'm aiming for the 1 pm direct ferry.



Vladimir to Buturlino (Google Maps)

With this in mind, I race along not really soaking in the landscape as the road is initially quiet with just a few gentle 100-metre climbs. What changes is when I meet a highway, where the traffic and noise increases considerably. Helpfully the road shoulder is not too bad. So I plug in some podcasts to help get me through.

In the previous two years since my last overseas cycling trip, the number of podcasts I listen to has increased considerably. I now use podcasts to keep up with news and sport, more than reading newspapers online. I'm trying to not allow them to distract me from the trip, but they are a useful distraction when noisy roads are terrible.

There is one small break from the highway with a short loop road section through small towns. However, when I return to the highway, I begin a 200-metre climb but with two lanes it is okay and a gradual climb, with traffic respectful.

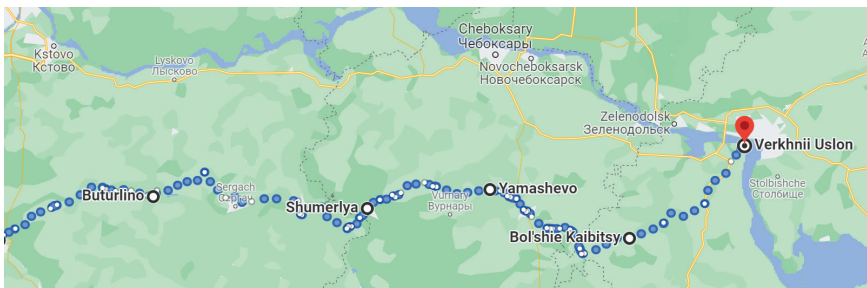
After 25 kilometres, I leave the highway as it travels over the Volga River on a bridge further west of the ferry. Instead, my quieter route is through the town of Verhnij Uslon on the inside corner elbow of the Volga River. However, since it's close to 1 pm I keep going with a short steep descent as the wide Volga River comes into view – my first view of this river I will get to see a lot more of.

The Volga is the longest river in Europe as it takes a horseshoe route through European Russia. Starting north-west of Moscow, it flows in a rough easterly direction through Nizhny Novgorod to Kazan, then south to Samara and continues in a south-westerly direction through Saratov and Volgograd before emptying into the Caspian Sea.

With many cities on this river and its tributaries, the Volga was the main navigational route in this region for millennia, and even today many cargo ships still travel along the river. It's the equivalent of the Murray River in Australia or the Mississippi in the USA.

At the ferry terminal, there are a couple of ferries waiting so I'm unsure which one to take. After putting a translation on my iPhone asking for a ticket for the direct ferry to Kazan, I show my Russian translation to the first ticket office and he says da (yes in Russian) and sells me a ticket straight away so I board the nearest ferry.

Soon after starting to cross the Volga, the ferry starts heading in the wrong direction. I have either been sold the wrong ticket or I got on the wrong ferry.



Buturlino to Verhnij Uslon (Google Maps)