

In June 2018, Joel Emonson went to Russia because the FIFA World Cup allowed him to spend extra time there without needing a visa. He spent 51 days cycling in Russia attending a couple of Socceroos matches before spending 2 months cycling in Eastern Europe finishing in Gallipoli. Last Saturday he gave a speech at the Berriwillock Australia Day breakfast, sharing parts of his trip, here is his speech.

For those not aware last year I spent 4 months cycling in Russia and 10 European countries, finishing in Gallipoli. Because of the FIFA World Cup I was able to spend 51 days in Russia more than a normal tourist visa. This wasn't my first overseas cycling trip, having done 4 previously along with numerous trips in Australia. Today I will concentrate on last year's trip, in particularly Russia. I was lucky to interact and stay with many friendly locals, despite some language barriers. We are lucky that in most countries English is a common second language for some people, but still, thanks to Google translate for helping me. I saw firsthand how many people were less well-off compared to Australia, have had a harder history and are still dealing with the effect of the communism era.

The reason I enjoy cycling is because I started doing it at university in Bendigo. I did many outdoor activities including hiking in the Grampians, canoeing on the Murray River, and cycling from Ararat to Bendigo, but found cycling the best fit for me as you travel at a nice pace without needing to carry anything on your back. At uni we also developed our own interpretive talks, mine was on walking barefooted, ironically when I cycle I end up wearing shoes all day. As well I did electives on European Union and Russian Revolution, so on my last trip I was really just experiencing things I learnt at uni.

If you look at a map of my routes, it often will look windy because I have joined places of interest rather than focusing on the end destination. That's why my Facebook page is called "It's not about the kilometres" because I don't focus on cycling a certain amount of kilometres as I often explain each day depends on many factors like weather, places of interest, mechanical issues and how I'm feeling. For example I once took 40 days to cycle from home to Renmark because I went south to Nelson and then followed South Australian coastline before a ferry to Kangaroo Island, then to Adelaide before following the Murray.

There are many different forms of bicycle touring, how long you go for, the distance you cover a day, the terrain you ride, what you carry and what you're hoping to achieve is all up to you. Some people just carry a change of clothes and a credit card, sleeping inside each night and eating in restaurants, while others carry all they need on the bike, cooking their own meals and camping, which is how I do most of my tours. The age of people touring is a wide range, retirees are a large percentage of touring cyclist, so never think you're too old. I have also meet young families where the kids were travelling in a trailer, so anyone can go.

I would recommend a book call Microadventure which is about going on small outdoor trips not necessarily cycling for a night or two, which can be just as rewarding as a longer trip. Doesn't have to be far away, on my first cycling trip in 2009, my first night was at Warne Silos. Victoria has many rail trails, which are perfect for a ride, as they are car free, and the gradient is designed for trains so they are not hilly. You may be surprised at what you see differently from the point of view on a bike. If anyone has watched the slow TV on SBS, cycle touring is a bit like that; in fact I have cycled alongside the canal featured last Sunday.

The best days are when you find unexpected sites for example in Bulgaria; I made the city of Plovdiv by 5:30pm, with no idea of anything to see. Thankfully I found out about a free walking tour at 6pm and then was amazed to learn about how a Roman stadium was found under the main street, having been lost for 1500 years. I spent the next morning exploring the city, learning more. If I hadn't found that tour, I would have missed out on a city I originally thought was uninteresting.

Using a website called warmshowers where people offer their homes for cyclist accommodation for free, is a great opportunity to experience local food and learn more about the area I'm passing through. While I am able to share Australia and my cycling experiences with them. There are also times when random people just invite you into their homes or to stay at their local sporting clubhouse. This happens more often in places that see fewer cyclists like Russia. The most memorable unexpected meeting was in the town of Bolshiye where I arrived to find a town that for once had a decent sportsground, something rare in Russia so I expected to have a quiet night camping there. However while watching some teenage boys play futsal, they

came over and invited me to join in. After scoring a couple of goals and getting up a sweat, their coach offered me to stay at his place so I had soup at his place, found out that vodka burns your throat and then one of the boys guided me around town showing me off to his mates as his friend from Australia.

I find I often forget to take photos of the people I meet because I'm too busy chatting to them and have found when people focus too much on taking a selfie you miss out on connecting with them. In fact most of my photos are usually taken because I'm taking break from cycling because I need to catch my breath while climbing.

The good thing about bicycle touring is that it allows a breaks between attractions, so for example rather than say if you're travelling by car or public transport where you can go from Warsaw to Auschwitz in a day or two, it took me over a week, so in between learning about the horrors of Warsaw during German occupation and visiting the concentration camp of Auschwitz, I had time to visit happier places in Poland, seeing things that other people may miss.

While seeing the horrors of the Holocaust especially in Poland was depressing, for me the saddest part of my trip was in the Baltics when I went to former secret police buildings. This is where firstly the Soviet Union interrogated people and either executed or deported them, then when the Germans arrived they did the same thing in the same building just to different people, and then when the Soviet Union returned, they did it all over again and continued to do it for 45 years. In one room you walk in and there is a fiction video showing how they executed people, literally by shooting them in the back of the head and then you realise you are in a room where it happened. The sheer numbers is always hard to comprehend, but one stat I saw was that 1 in 4 people were not in the Baltic's anymore post WW2, not all died but many moved away not all by choice.

Only when communism fell where these museums allowed to be opened, as any independence references were banned including indigenous culture, colours, language and monuments. Things we take for granted like a pair of jeans were a black market item Therefore, a lot of museums have only been opened recently and are still being developed. In contrast in Russia, WW2 is referred to as the Great Patriotic War that started in 1941 and ended in 1945, where museums focus on how brave every one was against the Germans. This shows how history is written by the victors.

When visiting holocaust museums, they deliberately showed how Jewish people were slowly dehumanised by making special laws for them, then forcing them into Ghettos, separated from rest of the community and then separating families. This reminded me of stories you hear about what happened and still happens to some indigenous Australian. The difference is the lack of information about the conflict between indigenous and Europeans that has been ignored from our history books, at school I learnt more about serfdom in England than indigenous culture in Australia and more about wars in Europe than conflicts in Australia. My theory is that we can still have this breakfast, citizenship ceremonies and anything else you want to do, just on a different date that doesn't disrespect the fact that on January 26 1788 the British did invade, just like the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic states in 1940, in the guise of protection from the Germans and then didn't leave until 1991. While changing the date is one small step, more importantly we should learn more about the various indigenous cultures, and frontier wars should be talked about as much as Galipolli.

I have had so many people ask me if I was scared in Russia and other than a few hairy moments with cars over taking towards me I felt safe. Sure there was plenty of security having to put bags through metal detectors to enter and leave railway stations was annoying but I only found the police and security friendly, helpful and really just doing a job that must be boring, as often they would outnumber civilians at certain locations, especially museums and art galleries, where elderly ladies would follow you around a gallery, doing nothing but watching you. It felt like many jobs like that were left over from the communist era. Having said that it was useful having conductors on buses when I caught the wrong one and they were able to help me out.

Have never had any issues with leaving bags on the bike unattended, having left it at many places. Where as these days you cannot leave just bags anywhere unattended even the Berriwillock post office. For those not aware in 2016 I got the Vline bus back after flying in from New Zealand, left my bags outside the post office

and walked up to the tennis to meet mum, when I returned we found James ringing the police for the bomb squad.

Often when cycling on highways I could see towns only a kilometre from the highway. However usually towns were only accessible by one way roads, sometimes there were connecting roads between towns but it was often potholed or just a sandy track forcing me to cycle slowly or walk the bike. Therefore I often skip towns because it's not worth the extra kilometres especially when often the road into town has potholes as well. Frustrating as the highways were usually busy with traffic and have poor road shoulders, which makes me focus on cycling safely and not the scenery. Contrastingly the rest of Europe normally had decent secondary roads so I could avoid highways.

In Russian cities most people live in small apartment blocks, with communities built around a few apartment blocks. Sometimes there are sporting facilities and had playgrounds for kids, however they definitely do not have Tidy town awards, with rubbish dumped in places very common and recycling virtually non-existent. Nearly every town in Russia had three things, a large Lenin statue, a war memorial to the Great Patriotic War and at least one well kept church.

However whenever I was out of a city, it felt much further behind, some very old wooden houses with not many modern features lacking running water and having drop toilets. People lived lifestyles of my grandparent's generation, with veggie gardens, a milk cow in the back shed, a goat chained up the front acting as a lawn mower. I was amazed to find in small towns often a few general stores near each other, selling the same packaged food, usually run by middle age women, not sure how they were all viable. Outside local markets, fresh food was often hard to find, the best time was arriving just after the bread van, where you could get some fresh buns, pizza etc but they wouldn't last long in the shop. A lot of food, especially bread and fruit is sold in individual plastic bags and I had to constantly explain I didn't need a bag for my fruit when I had pockets in my top to store them. I did have to buy water, because locals didn't trust their own water and I suspect that's why a lot of them drink tea. One thing I did notice was food was often weighed that we don't see in Australia like bread and ice creams, recall making a person laugh at why I was taking photo of an ice cream being weighed.

Farms still appeared to be farmed as a collective, sometimes I would see horse and cart being used and other times modern equipment.

People are nothing like Putin, people barely talked about him, the stereo type we get is so different, most people just want to live a safe life, with their families and are jealous of how lucky we are in Australia. Outside of St Petersburg and Moscow, people are not use to international tourists, which has challenges like finding local information, in particular maps. However it also feels more genuine, with people welcoming you rather than been treated as a tourist to make money off.

I have talked about the challenges in visiting Russia but there are also things that we can learn from. For example in Kazan, there are Russian orthodox churches next to Mosques, along with a statue depicting a Muslim with a Christian, sharing the city, some how where the two religions meet they have been able to find a way to get along. In fact Kazan had an artistic building built using different styles of religion and inside was the same, again showing how people can get along. That's what surprised me the most in Russia was how religion has survived despite communism. As someone not religious I spent considerable time visiting there buildings because they are beautiful inside and dominate towns. As well there are certain features we should have in Australia, like traffic lights that count down to when they will change and disabled ramps on nearly every stairs, very useful when you have a bicycle. There are also bus shelters in the middle of know where, without timetables so not sure how local know when bus is coming but they do.

I would recommend going to Russia, just probably by train, because I found the cities more exciting than cycling the country side, plus the fact that you may only get a 30 day tourist visa means there is not much time to explore cities while cycling. Russia has a decent rail service, some modern trains but also some old clunkers which add to the charm. The rest of Europe is nearly all free to visit without a visa for 90 days at a time and more set up for cyclist.

Thank you for listening