

This extract is taken from a blog entry that forms part of *The bicycle diaries*: an account of a journalist's travels across three continents and twenty countries by bike.



Posted at 17:14h in Blogs • by reol8 • 4 Comments • 1 Like • Share



Tran¹ to Harmanli, Bulgaria (23 Oct – 2 Nov)

Total miles cycled: 1950 (3138 km)

Thigh status: Baby manatee

My first day in Bulgaria doesn't bode well. The sky is black and buckets of rain thump down outside my window. I spend an exhilarating 20 minutes wrapping all my electrical equipment in plastic bags, then venture tentatively out. Ten minutes later, I venture back in again. I can't see a thing through my glasses and my padded underpants are already sodden. This is almost certainly how I'll be spending my dotage so I'd rather not start now.

Instead I make my way to the Tran bus station. This transpires to be a grim concrete bunker with water pouring through the roof into oily pools on the floor. A woman in a dark, grimy cubbyhole tells me the next bus to Sofia goes at 1pm. So I return to the hotel to wait it out over a cup of tea and bowl of intriguingly titled 'paunch soup' – an experience I still have troubling flashbacks about today. Suffice to say, if a soup costs under 30p there is usually a reason.

When I return, I discover the bus is tiny with almost no boot². But I strip Maud³ down to her bare essentials and a supportive group of about 17 bystanders help me squeeze her indelicately inside. Then we're off, and for the next three miserable hours, we plough sluggishly through the tsunami towards Sofia.



20 By the time we arrive, the rain has slowed to a funereal drizzle and I cycle the final 8 km in
the growing gloom over heavily cobbled streets and thick traffic. Pavements appear and
disappear on a whim, along with the occasional pseudo-bike lane. I have a vague idea where
I'm going, having located it earlier on Google maps, but find myself wishing not for the first
time that I had a sense of direction. It could come in handy at moments like this, when trying
25 to find somewhere.

I finally arrive at the house of my hosts, a family I found on the cycling couch-surfing website
Warmshowers. They have a newborn baby and hyperactive two year old, and the flat is in
disarray. She is exhausted and barely able to speak, while he does his best to drag the infant off
me while serving cold red wine and pizza. What possessed them to host me, I think to myself?
30 Are they some kind of cycle-obsessed sadomasochists?

Maybe, as it turns out. They are keen cycle tourers, they tell me, and like to take the children
with them. This to me sounds like the worst kind of self-inflicted torture – unless it's possible to
harness the small cherubs like huskies or use them to hunt for food.

They are a sweet couple, however. He is Welsh and works for the British Council, while she is
35 Bulgarian and an electrical engineer. They are gentle sorts with a beatnik⁴ edge and unkempt
charm. He tells me about the quirks of the country through the eyes of an ex-pat. People shake
their head when they mean yes, he says; except those who have been abroad, who tend to nod.
So the country exists in an almost constant state of unresolved ambiguity – which may go some
way towards explaining why nothing has really been achieved over the past couple of decades.

¹ Tran: A small town in Bulgaria

² boot: the trunk or area of the bus where you store luggage

³ Maud: this is referring to her bike

⁴ beatnik: means to have a young and/or artistic edge, possibly unconventional

- Examine how the narrative voice is used in this text to create a sense of immediacy whilst also attempting to involve the reader.
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