



London to Lhasa by bicycle

'A lump in my throat and tears in my eyes – as I stood on the dusty mound on the edge of the moonlike mountain landscape and saw the shimmer of the Caspian Sea in the distance below. The words, "Coast to coast to coast" entered my mind, and like flickering time lapse photography, I saw moving snapshots of two steady and determined bicycle riders traversing the lands that lie between the English Channel, the Black Sea and the Caspian.' [Extract from www.ridehimalaya.com/blog].

Krista Bernard and Daniel Coward left their London home exactly one year ago, to cycle across the world on order to raise money for *Rainforest Rescue*; an organisation that protects the world's forests and helps combat climate change.

iNBaku had hoped to meet the pair during their stay in the city but as they were waiting for a cargo ship to take them across the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan, they had to leave at a moment's notice as the ship was full. Instead, we have communicated by email in-between their trips! Keen advocates for sustainable travel, Krista and Daniel have shared with us how easy and fun it is to get on a bike and cover distance – whether that be to the shop, work, to the next town, or even Tibet – and with 5524 kilometres on their expedition odometer and a veritable smorgasbord of travel tales to boot, we are inclined to believe them!

Previous trips

Krista is not new to long-distance cycling. Her passion for pedalling started about 18 years ago, and ever since then she

hasn't been without a set of bicycle wheels. In the early 90's, she cycled down Australia's East Coast and around Tasmania. "When I became more courageous and foolhardy, I took to dirt tracks, making my way across the sparsely populated Nullarbor and Central Deserts in Australia. Those trips taught me that life richly rewards you when you make the time and take the courage to fulfil your dreams."

Krista's previous trips:

- London to Lhasa – latest trip, 2008-2009
- Tunisia mountains- preparation for *RideHimalaya*, 2007
- Morocco-Casablanca-Tangiers via Rif mountains, 2002
- Indonesia to Egypt- solo bicycle expedition, 1996-2000
- Central Desert, Australia Alice Springs to Adelaide, 1995
- Tasmania, Australia Circumnavigation of the isle, 1995
- Nullarbor Desert, Australia-Kalgoolie to Melbourne via Indian Pacific train route and Great Ocean Road, 1994
- Sydney to Melbourne down the East coast, 1993

Krista's first international trip was a 15,000 kilometre solo cycle from Indonesia to Egypt, which she began at the age of 24. During that trip, she participated in a 300 km Peace Walk with monks and nuns in Cambodia, had a private audience with the Dalai Lama in his palace in India, was thrown into a prison in Iran for five days, chased by wild mountain dogs in Turkey and worked as an extra on film sets in Egypt. On a less glamorous note, she also became adept at mending broken spokes, chains and punctured tyres in adverse conditions ranging from torrential rain to pitch darkness.



Packing up the camping gear in a rainy Belgium

This, on the other hand, is Dan's first long-distance bicycle expedition, "Even as a lover of sport and nature, I still swapped my bike for a car at the age of 17, forgetting how enjoyable and energising it is to cycle" he admits. He didn't pick a bike up again until he met Krista three years ago. Talk about jumping in at the deep end!

Route

So far on this trip, their route has taken them through Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria into Turkey - where they escaped from winter and taught English in Istanbul. When spring finally arrived, the couple set off again, crossing Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

From Kazakhstan, more turns of the wheels will transport them through Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China and finally to Lhasa – the capital of Tibet and their expedition goal. Secretly though, Dan told iNBaku, "We're really enjoying this adventure and have found pace and momentum, so as long as our health and energy remains good and our savings don't run out, we may just continue pedalling onto South East Asia back to Australia, where we hope to set up a home."

Krista's describes life on the open road...

A Typical Day on the Road

"The alarm on Dan's watch beeps at the ungodly hour of 4.30am. It's still cold and dark outside as we crawl out of our sleeping bags and eat a big bowl of breakfast cereal. Not long after, we're packing up sleeping bags, mats and pannier bags, and as dawn's first rays crawl into the sky, down come the tents too. We're ready to roll.

We try to cover at least 20 kilometres before our first break – which is spent sitting at the side of the road guzzling water



Krista preparing to cycle up a steep climb in Turkey



Krista and Dan in Germany



Dan carrying out some bike repairs in Germany

and eating dried fruit and nuts. We're usually not feeling too sociable at this point, but try to muster some energy to greet the friendly, smiling people that always stop to say hello, salaam, zdravstvuyte, merhaba, and gamarjobat to name but a few!

During the next 20 km stint, we try and find a shop to stock up on food for lunch and dinner. Finding a variety of products in small villages or desert places can be difficult, and as a result, we have learnt how to become creative chefs on our small camp stove!

Lunch is a restful hour and after eating, I always lie spread-eagled for a power nap, whilst Dan is usually peacefully watching ants, birds of prey, or the mountains.

On most days, we meet local people and are often lucky enough to be invited to come and drink çay or eat food with them.

Depending on the terrain and the weather, we cover between 60-90 kms in a day, and by about 4.30pm, we start looking for a suitable camp spot. Our favourite places are next to clean rivers that we can swim in, or places that have sweeping views of the mountains. Sometimes, we are invited to spend the night in a family home – which we love too.

Setting up the camp takes some time and energy and there's usually not much daylight left by the time we've cooked, eaten, washed, written our diaries and planned the next day's route. And as the sun sinks over the ever-changing terrain, we collapse contentedly into our sleeping bags."

Azerbaijan's famous hospitality

"A tall man wearing the typical black flatcap and sporting a full set of dazzling gold front teeth, runs over and accosts us. He's so energetic and eager that after having crossed the border from Georgia and cycled 50 kms through heat and dust, we just don't have it in us to match his conversation pace, and are apprehensive to stop and chat with him. Politely though, we

answer the where-from's, where-to's, why's and wherefore's, without too much animation, whilst preparing to get going again. But this man, Natik, is not put-off by our lack of warmth. In fact, he is so excited that he hasn't even noticed we're getting back on our bikes so we can reach our planned destination of Zaqatala before the sun sets.

"Come and drink çay!" he exclaims, beckoning us over to a small, dimly-lit café, full of cigarette-smoking men. "Come, come!" I look at Dan, who raises his eyebrows in a look of, 'Do you really want to?' whilst Natik's beckoning becomes more voluptuous by the minute.

I am reminded of the words, '... to let go, or to hold on...' We believe so strongly that we are in control of our own destiny; we make plans and organise our pathways and are not open to a change in direction, however big or small. We think we know what is best for us and try to manipulate the world to fit into our grand and rigid plans – which are really just arbitrary ideas that we've concocted.

'... to let go, or to hold on...' These words loop in my mind and in this moment, I know I have to surrender to something deeper than myself. I look at Dan and nod – letting go – and with a golden smile, Natik opens the café door.

Once inside, seated around a table with Natik and three of his friends, Dan and I begin to relax. Natik plies us with çay, and thinks we must be hungry so orders us kelem dolma (spicy meatballs wrapped in cabbage leaf) and salad, whilst introducing us proudly to his Azeri culture. Dan and I relax some more.

When we finally depart, it's with happy, full hearts and bellies – and it suddenly doesn't matter if we are unable to reach Zaqatala before the sun sets.

I thought that nothing particularly extraordinary had happened

in this encounter, apart from some great hospitality and a gentle meeting of souls. But when we reached Baku, 10 days later, I realised that indeed, magic had taken place. Natik; the first person we'd met in Azerbaijan, had given us so much warmth and generosity upon our arrival in his country that the spirit of his friendship accompanied us throughout. Without even knowing it, he had softened us, allowing us to open and trust more in this unfolding journey, and reminded us that the ideas that we've created for ourselves can and may change at any given moment... and that's not such a bad thing..."

Stats and superlatives

Distance cycled so far: 5524 kms

Biggest day: 96kms (Sheki-Agdash, Azerbaijan)

Top speed: 73.9km/hr (the Alps, Germany)

Steepest hill up: 16% (Turkey)

Steepest hill down: 14% (Turkey)

Punctures: 4

Tyres: 2 sets each

Repairs: New freehubs on both bikes, new gear and brake cables, 3 new noodles

Weight of baggage: 40kg each plus water

vBest camp spot: Near Agdash, Azerbaijan, next to a freshwater spring and with a view of the snowy peaks of the Greater Caucasus. As the sun set, a friendly shepherd came to visit our camp to say hello and to assure us that we would be safe for the night

Worst moment: Being afflicted with a serious case of dysentery when we were staying as guests of a family in Bulgaria. They prepared us a feast and plied us with rakia – the local, homemade spirits. We both came down with the same malaise in the middle of the night. We had to make numerous giddy treks to the pit toilet in the pitch black which was situated three buildings away, past a giant bleating goat and the ever-watchful and aggressive guard dog. Even though we were still really ill the next day, the shocked family had us packing, worried we may be contagious! It was a grim ride of 50 kms over a mountain pass to the next town

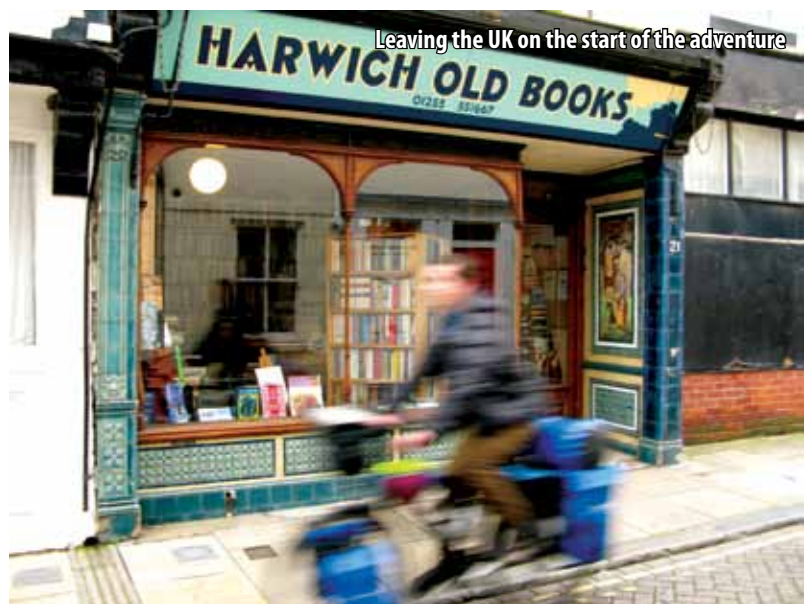
Major cities: London, The Hague (Holland), Antwerp (Belgium), Cologne (Germany), Salzburg and Vienna (Austria), Bratislava (Slovakia), Budapest (Hungary), Alba Iulia (Romania), Gabrovo (Bulgaria), Istanbul (Turkey), Tbilisi (Georgia) and Baku (Azerbaijan).

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Visit Krista and Dan's website at: www.ridehimalaya.com

Donate to Rainforest Rescue at: www.rainforestrescue.org.au

iNBaku wishes Krista and Dan all the best and good luck in reaching Tibet!



Leaving the UK on the start of the adventure



A steep mountain track in Turkey



Enjoying some Turkish hospitality with a local family