

THE BAD ROAD

Sometimes the road less traveled provides a memorable touring experience

by Willie Weir

Straddling our fully loaded mountain bikes at an intersection during peak rush hour, we were faced with a decision—to take the small road over the mountains, or the main road around them. This is usually a no-brainer.

Take the small road, of course. But there were complicating factors. This intersection was in the city of Inegol in western Turkey and the four men surrounding our bikes were as adept at the English language as my wife, Kat, and I were at Turkish. Two and a half days

into a three-month journey, my Turkish vocabulary consisted of about twenty words, seventeen having to do with food.

We pointed to our map and outlined the main road through Domaniç.

“Good. Good. Yes,” came the jumble of replies screamed over the din of traffic.

I then traced our preferred route, a thin gray line up into the mountains through a village named Bogazova.

They all shook their heads in unanimous disapproval and one man yelled, “No. Bad. Bad. Bad.”

I turned to Kat, “This isn’t just a bad road—it’s a triple-bad road.”

That should have sealed our decision right there. But the thought of taking the main road (which was sure to carry bus and truck traffic) kept us frozen at the intersection.

What did the men mean that the road was “bad?” Did it travel through a region filled with packs of ravenous wolves? Was it paved with gravel the size of your fist? Was the map wrong and did the road dead-end up there, somewhere above 6,000 feet?

Kat shouted as a bus filled with screaming students passed, “We can always turn around and take the main road if it doesn’t work out.” Problem solved.

We pedaled off toward the mountain road while the four Turkish men shouted and frantically waved for us to go in the opposite direction.

The mad combination of scooters, mini-busses, trucks, and schoolkids on foot darting all about reminded me of India. We pedaled for our lives. Then, as if some wizard had waved his magic wand...we were out in the country. Most cities in Turkey lack



Willie pushes his bike up the “triple-bad road” toward Bogazova.

suburbs, so the transition from urban to rural is as instantaneous as flipping a light switch. On one side of the road we were looking up at a row of eight-story apartment buildings and on the other side was a pastoral field with shepherds attending a herd of goats and sheep.

Evening was fast approaching, so we pitched our tent off the side of the road in a grove of cherry trees planted next to a rushing spring stream. *This* was a bad road?

We awoke to a brisk, crystal-clear morning, which featured an incredible electric-blue sky and a quarter moon glowing behind cherry blossoms. We packed up our tent, loaded the bikes and began climbing up into the mountains along a narrow, lazily winding paved road...with not a motorized vehicle in sight.

There are moments in a bicycle journey (when the light is perfect, the weather sublime, the scenery a bag of eye candy) when I get downright giddy. A smile and a giggle emerge from my soul that melts away the years and I am seven years old again, without a care or worry in the world.

After about ten kilometers, we pedaled through a small village. The pavement gave way to a firm dirt road and the grade increased as we climbed higher into the mountains.

My own preconceived impression of Turkey as a dry, hot, dusty country kept me from ever imagining (even though it was April) that we might hit snow if we pedaled up into the mountains.

When we reached the next village, the temperature had plummeted and we were surrounded by pine trees, not cherry

trees, and our packed dirt road was getting soft. With the help of our pocket dictionary, we managed to ask a man walking along the road about the conditions further up. He looked at our vehicles of choice and shook his head. “Çok kar. Çok çamur. (Lots of snow. Lots of mud.)”

In a very un-adventure cyclist-like reaction, I suggested we coast back down the mountain and try the other road. Kat took me aside and suggested we ask if there was somewhere we could stay in town and see what the next day would bring.

He was absolutely delighted that we wanted to stay in Bogazova and led us to his home. We removed our shoes outside the front door and stepped into a toasty-warm sitting room. His wife gave us an equally toasty-warm greeting and then opened up the oven and pulled out the largest loaf of bread we’d ever laid eyes on.

This large, thick circular loaf was just the beginning of an evening of Turkish delights. We soon learned that our host couple was childless (a rarity in Turkey) and they both loved to cook. As their surrogate kids for the evening, we were presented with a feast: fresh, stream-caught trout baked in their wood-stove oven with cheese and slabs of butter; pilaf and potatoes; freshly made lentil soup; cooked tender nettles; a drink called ayran, made from fresh yogurt and spring water; and to top off the right-out-of-the-oven bread, homemade sun-dried tomato paste with olive oil,

walnuts, and garlic.

After several post-dinner glasses of chai, we were ushered into their bedroom and allowed to slip into deep food-induced comas.

In the morning, refreshed and rejuvenated, we decided to press on. Our hosts insisted to lead us out to the road. We wondered why they donned rubber boots until we turned a corner and spied a river of thick brown mud that *was* the main road. We laughed. This road was so atrocious it was comical. It wasn’t triple-bad...it was five-star bad. But we’d made it this far...why not?

We waved good-bye to our hosts and began to slowly push our bikes through the brown ooze. We managed about two kilometers over the next hour and then it began to rain. A cold drizzle, just this side of snow, had us both wondering why we decided to leave our warm guesthouse in Bogazova. Then it dawned on us that as well as we’d been fed, we’d managed to leave town without stocking up on any provisions.

As we climbed higher into the mountains, the temperature steadily dropped. The mud thickened, allowing us to occasionally pedal. Just as hunger and hypothermia were creeping into our cores, we stumbled into a village. Our delight quickly dissipated as we stared at the “closed” sign on the only store.

A slight man dressed in a wool cap

and suit coat walked up to us, and Kat asked where we might find bread. A smile spread across his face and within five minutes we were once again in the warm glow of a wood-burning fire.

We were made to understand that we were honored guests. Our clothes would be washed and dried. We would be staying for lunch, then dinner, and, of course, we would be staying the night and Kat would receive a gift of hand-knitted slippers. We were learning first-hand how few cultures on this planet rival the hospitality of the Turks.

After dinner the room filled up with sons, daughters, neighbors, friends, the schoolteacher and his wife—over twenty people in a ten-by-twelve-foot room, drinking chai and snacking on popcorn and sunflower seeds. I glanced over at Kat on the other side of the room, and we exchanged “can you believe we’re here” smiles.

Who knows what kind of experiences would have befallen us on the main road? But I do know from a lifetime of experiences...that the bad roads most often lead to the best adventures. **AC**

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KAT MARRINER