



Meeting an old shepherd in Bosnia.

bulbous steeples. The roads got bumpy to the point where, one by one, Marc lost all the bananas we had slipped into his saddlebag nets. We felt close to the landscape as we proceeded along winding and tiny paths. Farmers cutting the hay with scythes and lining it with rakes greeted us. An old woman beating dried pea plants with a long stick stared at us, taken aback. Indigo damson plums from roadside

trees soon loaded my jersey's back pockets. We would find an abundance of them all across the Balkans, where they play a crucial part in the local kitchen and distillery – notably the *rakija*, or Serbia's famous *šljivovica*, an alcohol made from the fermented and distilled fruits. For us, this also brought a concern about inebriated drivers, who almost brushed against our bikes as they passed!



At lunchtime, we usually ate little and then indulged in a nap to see us through the hottest part of the day. After a dip in the verdant Dobra river and the day's nap, the plums on my back had turned to jam.

The memory of the Balkan wars, source of the bullet holes in ruins that now started showing up along the road, became our regular companion as we entered Bosnia. The first

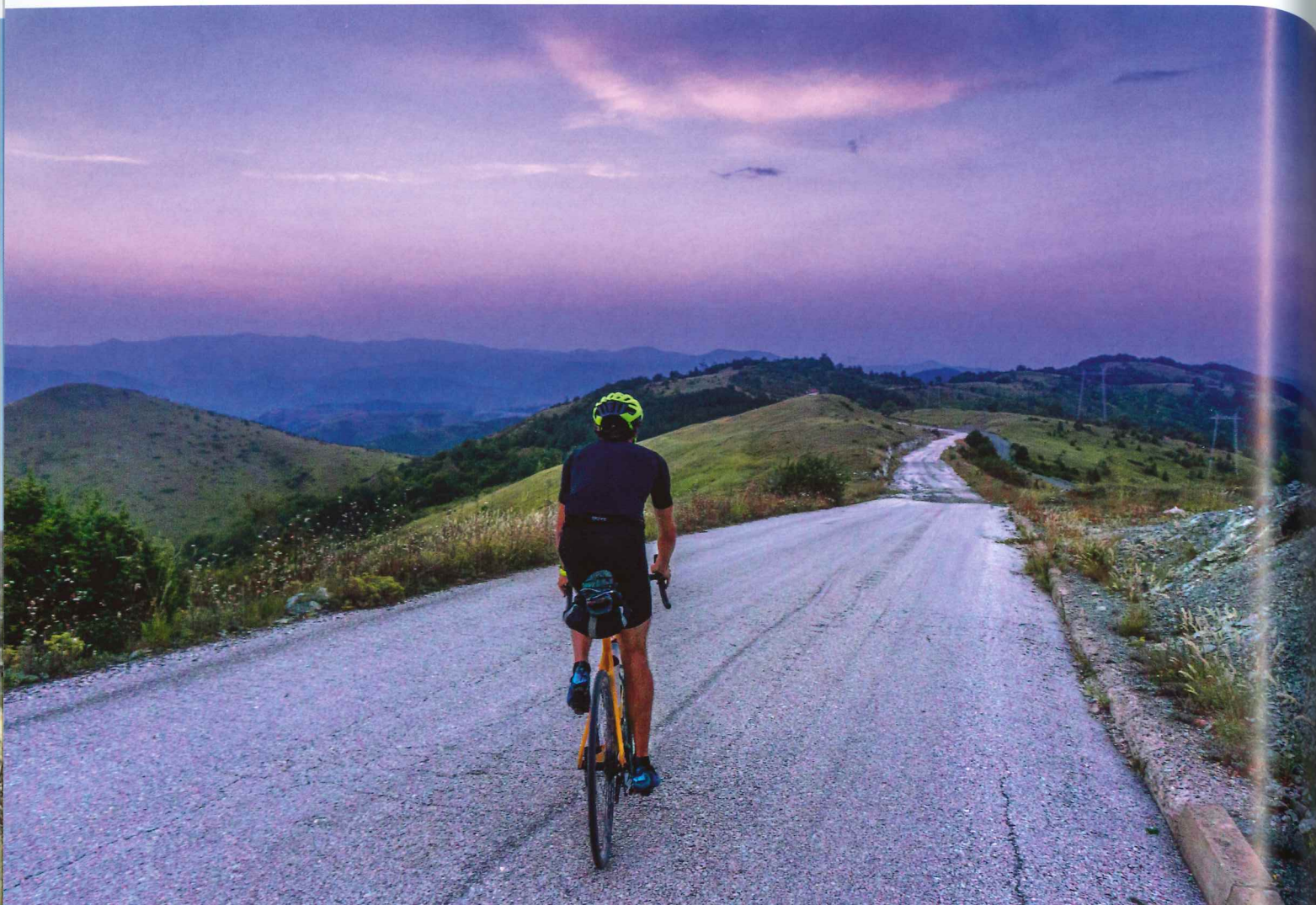
bright white minarets appeared among old-style turbaned marble tombs from the Ottoman period. Tractors puffed along, pulling carts loaded with hay and kids. We dived in the turquoise icy Una river, at the bottom of which lay an iron bridge, sunk by the Serbian army. We had our first Turkish coffee and encountered our first muddy road, before rising above the canyons on a straight road



Top: Turbaned marble tombs evoke the Ottoman period of the Balkans

Above: Marc enjoys a fast lift in Bosnia.





Above: Shadows fell as we 'gravelled' down into Kosovo. We arrived in the dark.

Opposite, top: Dusky shepherd in North Macedonia.

Middle: Nap time in Thrace region, Turkey. The littoral looks like Greece.

Bottom: A woman sells black and green olives in Turkey.

built for the army in the 1990s. The road signs warned us that we were surrounded by both mines and wild bears. Drvar, the next town, was something of a ghost town, with entire neighborhoods in ruins. Stray dogs and people whispered in the streets. We stayed at the only hotel around, a tacky ostentatious palace with shiny, but cracked, black marble.

We had established our rhythm. Our muscles were now accustomed to riding continuously for six to eight hours, gaining between 1,000 and 2,000 m (3,300 and 6,500 ft) of elevation every day. The next day had a surprise in store for us. I was using Google maps, and I could not determine whether the roads were asphalted or not. Half an hour into the day, we found ourselves on a 50 km (30 mile) gravel stretch that crossed a plateau near Veliki Šator summit. Vegetation was scarce and dried by

a burning sun. Stone walls ran alongside the track, sometimes disappearing to let us see the remains of hamlets destroyed when general Ratko Mladić's troops scoured the area. An EU dwellings rehabilitation program sign rusted amidst the ruins.

Heat waves distorted horizons and shapes. The figure of a local shepherd appeared like a burnt tree trunk framed by a hundred sheep. We left our bikes under a flock of butterflies to meet him, ploughing the earth with our road cleats. His peaked cap protected his wrinkled eyes. He cautiously carried a bottle of *šljivovic* in one of the pockets of his long-sleeved heavy jacket. The man grinned and hugged us with uninhibited joy.

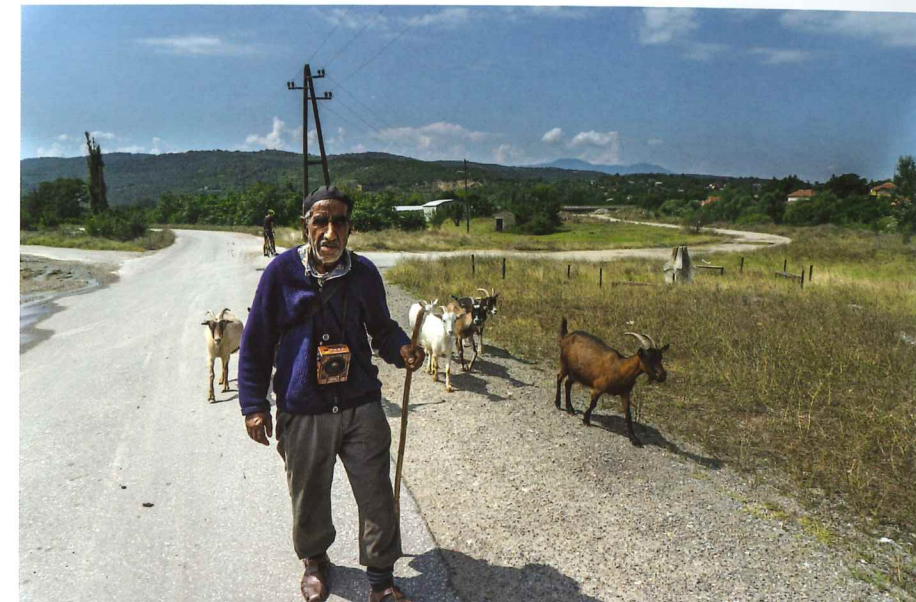
At one point, hundreds of bee hives brought bright colour to the barren landscape. But when thousands of bees began flying over the

path, we had no choice but to pick up speed and take off our helmets each time one buzzed in. Nothing, not even the hay stacks, would provide us any shade. And our minds had to stay focused as our thin tires sank into the gravel. Our calves were whitened with dust. We biked with joy when we saw a tar road and a roadside cafe with parasols. We gulped a dozen fruit juices and savoured the usual cabbage salad, watched by a baffled policeman.

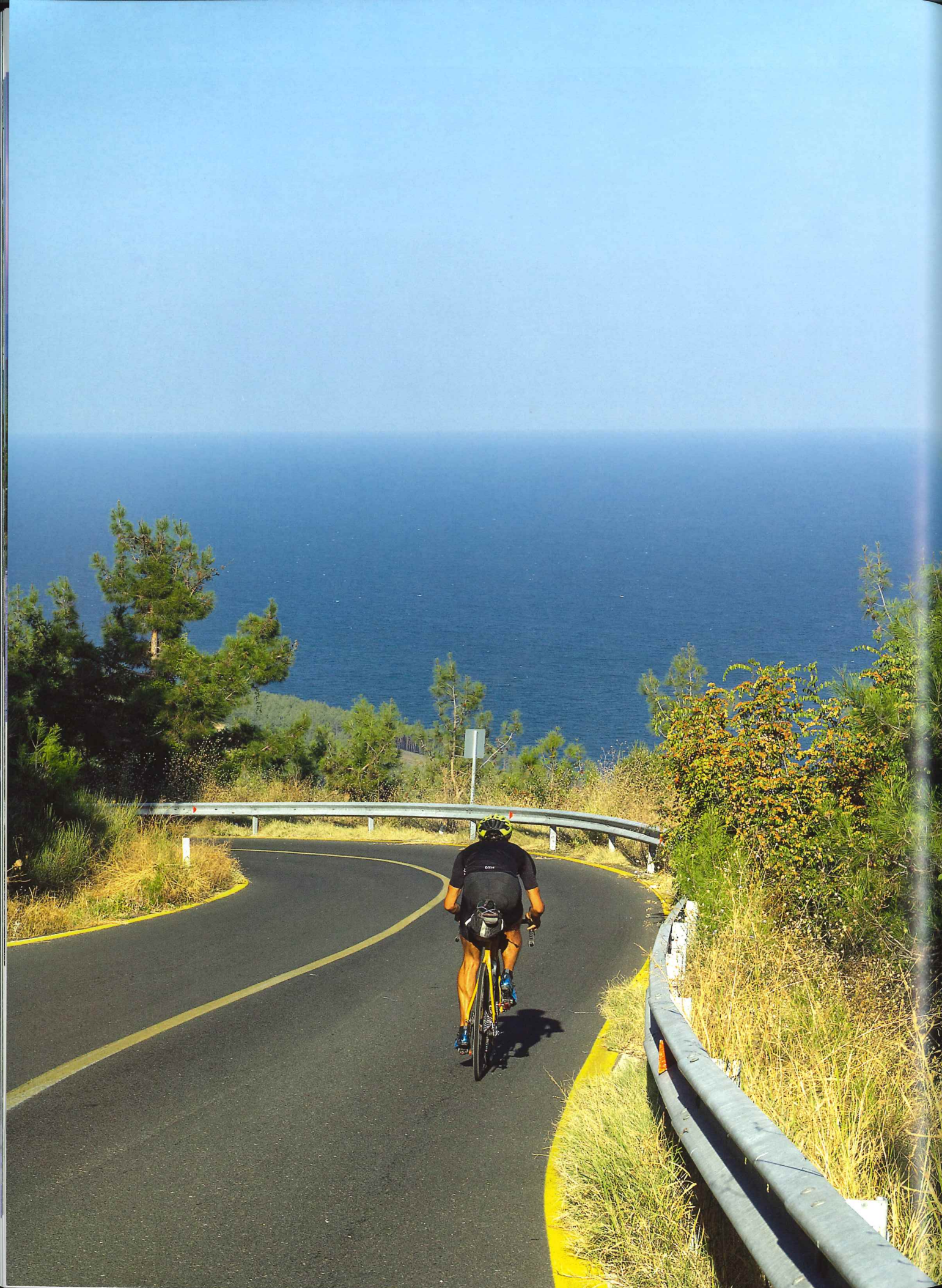
In Sarajevo, a film festival was on. We exchanged our bike shoes for flip flops and walked, all salty and filthy, a few flies trapped in the sweat decorating our complexion, among slender girls in high heels with heavy make-up. We made acquaintance with our first *börek*s – puff pastry rolling up meat, spinach or cheese – and heavy cream-stuffed Bosnian desserts. Marc picked up a band-player's trombone and started improvising flawlessly, much to the musician's surprise.

The next day, we roamed the city, exploring the centuries-old bazaar and mosques. We crossed the Ottoman Latin Bridge where the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip in 1914 in the name of a unified Yugoslavia. This was the claimed *casus belli* for World War I. We came to understand the drama of the Sarajevo siege that lasted from 1992 to 1996, only eight years after the city had hosted the Winter Olympics. Surrounded by steep hills, the city was easily cut off from the rest of the region by the Serbian military and militias. Dozens of minarets did not hide that this 'Jerusalem of the Balkans' still hosts Catholic and Orthodox churches, and a synagogue, all in the same neighbourhood.

Now into the second half of our trip, our momentum was unbelievable. We raced through pastures filled with sheep and hay stacks centered around wooden stakes, devoured the 1,000 m







(3,300 ft) of elevation up to Romanija summit, crossed pitch-black tunnels, sprinting as fast as possible in the dark. Two French motorcyclists accompanied us, lighting our way through a series of kilometer-long tunnels. A car's front beam exposed a dog's carcass, allowing me to swerve and avoid an accident.

We followed the deep limestone gorges carved by the river Lim into Serbia. Spruces scattered on the slopes of the Nova Varoš ski resort. Wooden barns overflowed with hay. Farmers raked the meadows using tools carved out of a single piece of wood. This was the second crop season of the summer, and entire families could be seen in every field, hurrying before the rain. We stopped to get some vegetables and instead found gigantic slices of meat displayed outside. Horse carriages and minarets showed up. In the town of Novi Pazar, angular old Russian Lada cars stood alongside Mercedes with German plates.

We entered a kind of no man's land as we got closer to Kosovo, with only cinderblock cottages covered with blue tarps breaking our loneliness. In the midst of white angelicas and pink clovers, grasshoppers and crickets devoted themselves to their summer song. A slanting border stone informed us that we had left Serbia.

A sublime violet twilight blushed the sky as we started a long descent into Kosovo, a country whose independence, unilaterally announced in 2008, has not yet been recognized by the UN. We saw people picking blackberries. Descending on gravel, darkness encircled us as we hurtled down rocks and pebbles, our wheels veering into the ruts. We could not see much and left a foot clipped out in case of a slide. Exhausted after that 800 m (2,600 ft) plunge in elevation, our forearms tensed on the brakes and our heads filled with the noise of stones pinging off our wheels' spokes.

The next day, we rode on mud roads paralleling the main highway and at times got bogged down. Dozens of Romani kids rushed out of tire piles and social housing, in the middle of nowhere, and stare at our muddy legs and faces. We found a car-washing business, eager to pressure wash our mounts. In the distance, a minaret faced coal chimneys of

all sizes: food for the soul and hearth. The Albanian flag greeted us as soon as we arrived in Prishtinë, the capital, informing us that Albanians were the ethnic majority in Kosovo. We wandered through the city streets and noted the severe contrast with the destitute environment just witnessed. A carefree jet set elite was sipping cocktails in fancy hipster bars.

As the quieter secondary routes were gravel, we opted for the highway. Other drivers did not mind our presence on the motorway, and we had the benefit of wide sideways busy with fruit vendors. At one of the stands, cheerful Arbeshi, a 15-year-old girl, smiled, showing her braces. The Albanian girl performed a sentimental Turkish song for us. The blending among the three nationalities she represented, Albanian, Kosovo and Turkish, epitomizes the Balkans amalgam for me. And I would encounter her again a year later, in a clip on YouTube with 40k views.

Once in North Macedonia, the road narrowed. The environment was now definitely Mediterranean. Dusky shepherds rested in the shade of vineyards, their goats crowned with impressive spiral horns. Fragrances were now of cistus and cypress. Traveling at high speeds on almost flat roads, we passed workers bent over in tobacco fields, with yellow barren hills in the distance.

In Bulgaria, we passed old gas stations now used to store hay. Reentering the EU, there

Opposite: Racing towards the Sea of Marmara, Turkey.

Below: The Bosphorus and its one hundred tankers queuing.







al check-points and a queue of  
s that we easily skipped. The border  
ered water when they saw us, prob-  
ain attraction of the day. On the  
an old lady-shepherd was abiding by  
She wore the traditional dark spotted  
ress. Her eyes were like blue pearls  
in her aged face. She stood like a  
from a Greek myth under an antique  
with an extra beer in the picture.  
th through Bulgaria was to be very  
er 40 km (25 miles) of riding under  
alnut trees, we passed into Greece.  
occupied countless terraces and played  
ocal backgammon. In a remote *tavola*  
le of majestic plane trees, we tasted  
a (stuffed grape leaves), *saganaki* (fried  
d *tzatziki*. Going through Macedo-  
ce was like flying into holidays. Cattle  
way along a dusty horizon.  
ter in our flasks became boiling hot,  
with a subtle plastic aroma. Sweat  
wn our faces. We made a stopover in  
g harbor of Kavala on the Aegean Sea.  
hot to continue, so we waited for the

We reunited with the motorway to cross into Turkey. During the night, a strong wind pushed against us as we tried to maintain our speed. Trucks were jostling us on our left, and we heard the deep grunting of dogs on our right. We could see two pairs of eyes as massive grey Anatolian sheepdogs got closer and closer. I imitated shepherds and stopped to whistle gently to them. Useless. Marc was screaming, which made matters only worse. I jumped on the saddle again and sprinted until the eyes disappeared in the night.

The last two days of riding through Turkey involved lots of heat and wind. There were the charms of Eastern Thrace though, as we sped by olive groves and farmers in vineyards. Once we had reached the Sea of Marmara, we followed a winding coastal road in a setting that was painted in pastel colours. Men took naps besides the traditional *caïque* boats, fishing nets hung from huts on stilts, and old women sold green olives and grapes along white-washed cottages. We spent the evening in a little beach resort. Vacationers paced back and forth, snacking on sunflower seeds and nuts.

For our last ride, we steered among bazaars and cars in the long tasteless suburbs of Istanbul. Once in the city, we found a cycling path that bordered the Bosphorus. Young men contemplated the many tankers queuing to cross into the Black Sea.

Eager to see the old town, we climbed up into the busy Eminönü neighbourhood. The bazaar was so crowded that we had to click out of our pedals and walk among tea merchants rattling porcelain cups and artisans soliciting customers. I fulfilled my dream of admiring Galata bridge and the Golden Horn. Crowds of fishermen rocked their rods in the water. And we had our first *simit*, that circular bread encrusted with sesame seeds sold on the streets

