

# Like a Local

## Explore Palestine with a New Pair of Eyes and Wheels



By Malak Hasan

When most people plan their first visit to a country, the first thing they do is look up the top-ten must-see places in their desired destination. It is something we all have done because it seems like a safe and convenient option to take the word of other experienced tourists and carefully curated travel websites. It is not a completely bad idea, but limiting ourselves to crowded tourist attractions and bustling cities is really not going to teach us much about traditional and authentic lifestyles, cultures, and customs. American novelist Herman Melville once said, "It is not down in any map; true places never are." I finally understood what he meant when I started to bike around Palestine for sports and adventure. I discovered that true experiences are not found on the busy road but rather on the paths taken less by tourists and more by locals.

Therefore, the best way to explore Palestine is by putting on the local lens and getting in the saddle, in the same way as Cycling Palestine's youth. Our growing group of experienced and new cyclists uses the bike to explore the land and uncover its secrets, learn about its history, and connect with the present. Since 2016 we have visited more than 300 villages, towns, and cities and become more aware of Palestine's diversity.

We would like to share some of our group's raw discoveries and experiences with people, culture, and nature to give you, our dear readers, a new perspective and incentive to join us and experience the road not taken.

Qusai Musleh, 26, Kharbatha Al-Misbah

Palestine is not a very large country, which makes exploratory cycling a great and feasible idea. You do not have to travel hundreds of kilometers to immerse yourself in magic. The magic can be easily found in your backyard. Ein Qiniya village and Mashjar Juthour are located approximately seven kilometers from Ramallah city center. The village is considered a spring and autumn resort and is home to many water springs and almond, olive, cherry, and apricot trees. The route is downhill and suitable for both experienced and new cyclists. As you

**Cycling in Palestine is unique because there are not many designated cycling lanes; thus, every road, paved or not, can be considered a cycling lane that will lead you to discover hidden or not-so-hidden treasures.**

stone terracing that is built in the traditional way retains the soil and agricultural land, and protects wild animals. At sunset you can see the glistening coast, and if you decided to camp, you can light a bonfire and listen to the crackling wood. As a chef, I take the opportunity to prepare my



go down the steep hills, the magic of the valley will slowly unveil itself.

Mashjar Juthour is an arboretum where you can find water. Extensive

favorite Palestinian dishes under the night sky and to share these treats, as well as stories, with my friends until the sun rises.



Al-Mintar. Photo by Phantina Sholi.

Hanady Suhail, Ramallah

It is because of cycling that I know so much about my beautiful country. I've been introduced to many places that aren't usually advertised, and I've met people that you wouldn't normally meet in a luxury hotel or at a famous sightseeing destination. Some of my favorite cycling places include the village of Battir, a UNESCO world heritage site that is six kilometers west of Bethlehem, and the Jenin countryside in the northern West Bank, in particular, the fascinating small village of Faqqua.

This beautiful Palestinian village is located 11 kilometers east of Jenin. The road from the city center is flat and easy for beginners. But what really caught my attention is how the locals, many of whom work in farming, accumulate knowledge.

**The best way to interact with locals is when you are riding your bike. They will be intrigued by you and your bike and will look forward to sharing some of the most amazing and personal stories with you.**

The village experiences heavy bird migration, and many locals practice ornithology. They study the birds that pass over the village, and they sometimes tie a small thread or special symbol onto a bird's leg to indicate that it has flown over Palestine. The village is also home to the national flower of Palestine, the Faqqua iris. Many people believe that it is a sacred

The beautiful village of Battir. Photo by Malak Hasan.



flower because it appears to pray to God. I had heard that it could be found in graveyards and mountainous areas, but I never knew for sure until I began to cycle through Palestine.

Phantina Sholi, Assira al-Shamalia

I never imagined that small Tulkarem, in the northwestern area of the West Bank, was so rich with nature and archaeology. If you ever go to Tulkarem, make sure to visit Al-Kharq, an 800-meter tunnel that was part of the Ottoman railway. And when you leave Bal'a and go toward the main city, be ready for the most thrilling downhill views. You will not be able to close your eyes, not only because you will almost be flying, but also because you do not want to miss the most breathtaking green scenery.



The village of Al-Khader. Photo by Malak Hasan.

You can make a quick stop to visit Al-Mintar, which is a private Palestinian museum and resort that hides among the heavily dense pine trees on the tip of the mountain. Finally, when you arrive in Tulkarem, you'll have a chance to walk in the steps of Prophet Jacob and his daughters, who are said to have rested in a village that is now called Irtah, two kilometers south of the city. When you plan your trip, do the necessary research and do not settle for visiting only the famous places that are mentioned online; these small sites will fill your heart

with joy.

Ahmad Khatib, Beit Rima

I think the road between Kifl Haris and Wadi Qana in the Salfit governorate, to the north of Jerusalem, is absolutely mesmerizing. I live very close to these areas but have never been



The cyclists holding the Palestinian flag. Photo by Malak Hasan.

there due to the presence of many settlements that limit access for Palestinians. Kifl Haris, to the west of Salfit, has an abundance

A blossoming almond tree at Deir Ghassaneh. Photo by Malak Hasan.







Mashjar Juthour. Photo by Karolin Kruuse.

of archeological treasures and a religious heritage site relating to the Prophet Dhul-Kifl.

I hope that you will get a chance to take one of my favorite routes and cycle up a challenging hill that leads to Deir Istia, where you will meet the people who keep the past alive. They will share stories about the 300-year-old village, which once functioned as a guesthouse for travelers. Once you absorb the new knowledge, you can continue your bike ride and enjoy the green downhill slope that will carry you to Wadi Qana Nature Reserve, which stretches over 10,000 dunums of green areas that are teeming with springs and planted with all kinds of seasonal fruits and olives. There, if you are feeling brave, you can try some mountain biking or simply enjoy the fresh air.

Ammar Abu Doha, Deir Sudan

The unique aspect about cycling in Palestine is that you can be road biking and suddenly find a beautiful mountain that will challenge you. It is absolutely thrilling, and not many people get to enjoy the experience because most people simply opt to drive around crowded cities.

Umm Saffa Forest is one of the places that leaves me in awe. The forest is spread over vast areas of the lands of Umm Safa, Deir Nitham, and An-Nabi Saleh villages, north of Ramallah. Unfortunately, the forests are becoming a playground for the Israeli settlers who surround the villages. I encourage all Palestinians to visit these green forests and do what they can to protect the natural environment. Attempts by Israeli settlers to take

At the new city of Rawabi. Photo by Malak Hasan.



over the forests must not stop us from enjoying what is rightfully Palestinian land. I feel that cycling has equipped us with a great tool to resist movement restrictions and the attempt to erase Palestinian memory.

Anas Hroub, Wadi Fukin

I am from Wadi Fukin, a village eight kilometers southwest of Bethlehem. My village lies on the 1967 Green Line, which separates Israel from the occupied Palestinian territories. You can reach the village by cycling down a very long and steep slope that starts from the center of Bethlehem, specifically, the Church of the Nativity. The route is diverse since you start in an urban setting and slowly find yourself surrounded by olive trees, figs, and old houses that date back half a century.

When you arrive at Wadi Fukin, you can sit under one of the gigantic fig trees that locals use as shelter from the sun and then build a small stone fireplace to prepare a favorite Palestinian dish such as *qalayit al-bandora ma'a al-thoom* (sauteed tomatoes with garlic). The village is not just a place to enjoy good views of the countryside, it's also a place to meet people who have witnessed the Palestinian *Nakba* and *Naksa* and listen to an alternative point of view from an authentic Palestinian voice.

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As for me, I am unable to choose among the amazing routes that offer visitors a unique perspective on Palestine. I cannot forget the long hours and endless stretches of green farms that I enjoy while cycling through the Jordan Valley, where farmers tend their land and children follow me with curious eyes. I fell in love with the old town of Deir Ghassaneh, one of the throne villages during the Ottoman Empire, and had the honor of engaging in a thrilling conversation about history and religion with the granddaughter of the late Sheikh Salih Al-Barghuthi,

**Cycling in Palestine is not easy. Know for sure that after every spectacular downhill, there is an uphill waiting for you to climb. But you will get used to it.**

who continues to live in her ancestor's famous palace that is considered to be the jewel of the village.

I will always remember the village of Sebastiya, which is located 11 kilometers northwest of Nablus, and its challenging topography that forced the best of cyclists among us to dismount their bikes and surrender. I still remember the conversations with its youth who strive to protect their beloved village and its neglected archeological sites.

And last but not least, I will always cherish the memory of every friend, meal, and house that welcomed us in every Palestinian refugee camp, such as Al-Jalazoun, Nour Shams, Dheisheh, Balata, and the Jenin refugee camp. Although you will not find any travel website that recommends these crowded areas, you will learn all about Palestinian resilience, determination, and pride in the way that people still identify themselves with the names of their original cities and towns. Only the curious will wring the most out of life and a land called Palestine.

*Malak Hasan is co-founder of Cycling Palestine, the biggest cycling group in Palestine, and founder of Women in Sports Network | Palestine. In March 2017, Malak cycled for 500 kilometers from Qalandiya Refugee Camp, in Palestine, to Aqaba, in Jordan, to promote cycling as a sport among women and girls. You can follow her on Instagram @malak\_*