



The Palestine Riders – Biking through the Holy Land

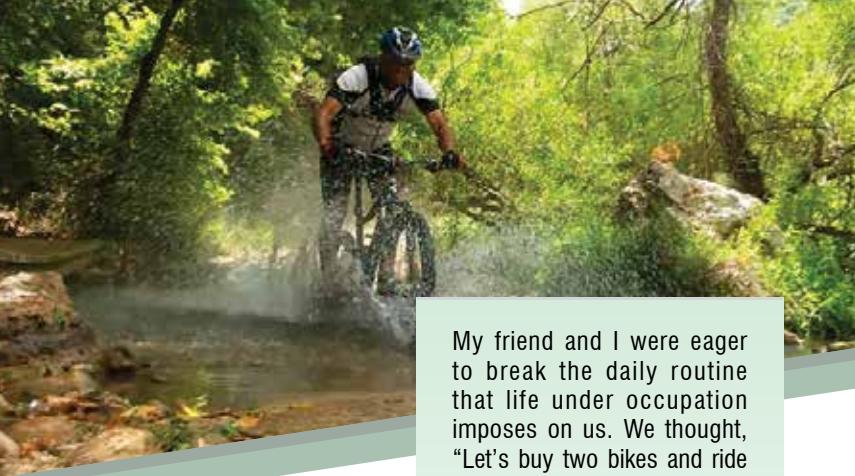
Mutual Love for Mountain Biking
Unites Palestinians

By Mohammad Zarour



Ramallah is surrounded by hills. The landscape around it is crowded with terraced olive groves, boulder-strewn ridges, and winding roads where yellow buses swerve toward their destinations. At its edge, white buildings file off in lines towards the green of the natural landscape.

On a summer morning earlier this month, a group of young men and women set off to explore the desert around Jericho in a way that's unusual in Palestine: by bike. Leaving Ramallah very early, at 5:00 a.m., to avoid hitting the heat of Jericho, we headed down towards sea level. The group rumbled down rutted and



Bike riding in northern Palestine.

bumpy tracks, passing camels, goats, and Bedouin tents, and stopping to make coffee in a spot with a great view, Sugar Trail, before returning home – traversing the tough uphill route over rocks and stones.

The ride was challenging in a few areas but we were not looking for boring and easy. All of us were tired during the last quarter of the trail (almost 40 km off-road), but we had a great time. We are all members of a group of enthusiasts who, for the last few years, have been quietly building a movement around mountain biking in the West Bank. The 40 riders meet most weekends to bike along some of the toughest and most beautiful routes in the region.

Being one of the co-founders of this group, Palestine Riders, I go biking whenever I get a few spare hours on weekends or after work. I bought my first bicycle in Ramallah in 2008 and started mountain biking seriously a few years later. Cycling in Palestine was unusual, and I didn't have much guidance about the various ways to pursue the sport.

It was when I was forced to turn back from a mountain track at 6:00 a.m. – after starting out with an old mountain bike and wearing jeans – that I was compelled to do some serious research

My friend and I were eager to break the daily routine that life under occupation imposes on us. We thought, "Let's buy two bikes and ride around Ramallah." Later on we followed a post on the Internet of another biker who was searching for people to join a more professional group. Together we founded the Facebook page Palestine Riders.



into riding. It didn't take long for me to get completely hooked.

No one can imagine what my face looked like after the first ride. I didn't want it to stop. It was too hard, a really long ride, and I was out of water for the last quarter. But I was enjoying it so much, like a little kid with a new toy.

Now I spend every weekend mountain biking, and I have attracted a small but growing contingent of converts to the cause. Wael, a local businessman, is among them. In the past, I felt anxious about how a bike would be perceived by colleagues and friends, and being part of a group like Palestine Riders gave me confidence.

Let's face it, people here look at a bicycle like a toy – they think that if

A moment of rest during a bike ride in Jericho.



you're riding a bike you're like a kid. Even I thought that at the beginning. But when I joined the team I felt like I had broken through a wall of shyness with the bike. There's a form of support when other people are doing it.

The confidence, too, has set the riders on a raft of new adventures. The West Bank's geography is small but varied: from olive groves to moonlike cliffs and craters that fall toward the Dead Sea. In one video, captured on the GoPro camcorder that the team now takes on every ride, bikes cling to the edges of Wadi Qelt, a gorge close to Jericho, which hides monasteries and hermitages in its lush green riverbed and sand-colored cliffs. The drop, inches away from the riders' wheels, is stomach churning.

In a landscape so often viewed through the lens of political treaties, movement restrictions, and violent land seizures, many riders find it refreshing to navigate Palestine on two wheels, with an eye to nothing but beauty and adventure. But that doesn't mean biking takes place in a political vacuum; occupation still makes itself felt in sport. Many of the tracks in the West Bank are inaccessible to Palestinian riders, and restrictions can prevent some individuals from travelling freely in Area C, which covers most of the natural wilderness.

It's very nice to discover these new parts of the country and very sad when you see the areas of your country that you don't have access to. We can't travel down some tracks in the West Bank, even if it's on Palestinian land. If the track starts off at a settlement we can't go inside to the track's genesis. You don't see many Palestinians going into natural areas to discover the country either. They think it's not safe. My family always asks me to stop riding because they worry about my safety – that's because I often ride close to settlements and they worry that I might be kidnapped.

Unlike most of the other riders, I have permission to enter Israel. But it's no

party getting to Jerusalem on a bike, which comes with its own problems, too.

The checkpoint at Qalandia has two parts: one for cars, which only people holding Israeli IDs can go through, and one for Palestinians with permits. I can't take my bike through the part for Palestinians, so I have to go with the cars. But I'm not allowed to do that either because I'm Palestinian, that is, I don't have an Israeli ID.

check bikes. We were forced to go back to Ramallah.

Such infuriating obstacles, however, haven't stopped the riders from making connections with Palestinians on the other side of the wall. Last year, Palestine Riders connected with another Palestinian mountain biking group from Nazareth and Western Galilee, and the teams clicked immediately. Now we regularly ride together in the hills around Jericho and Jerusalem. Those who

it than by practicing a mutual sport?

Joint expeditions have moved beyond biking too. On a recent ride, Aboud met groups of Bedouin living in camps with minimal shelter, and later arranged for friends to donate clothes and blankets. They delivered them to the communities, by bike, during their last ride.

But biking inside the wall is not a piece of cake! Once I went riding in the north, around Akka, and I passed a



Exploring Palestine on a bike.

As a result, going through the checkpoint is usually a gamble: sometimes a sympathetic soldier might arrange for a bus to take my bike to Jerusalem, at other times the soldiers might be uncooperative. At 6:00 a.m. on New Year's Day, Wael and I began our bike trip to visit friends in Nazareth. When we got to the checkpoint after two hours of riding, the soldiers there said that they didn't have the equipment to

have access ride in the Golan Heights or in the southern Naqab Desert.

The group has fellow bikers from Akka, Haifa, and Nazareth! We all bike together to explore our home. Rami Aboud, a biker from a town close to Haifa and Nazareth, never spares a chance to cheer for the connections between us as one people separated by a wall. And what better way to do

destroyed village that I had never heard about. It was destroyed in 1948 – it's really heartbreaking when you see the destroyed village, when you read about how it used to be before and what happened in the war.

But while my experience has exposed challenges, mountain biking has been liberating and exciting for Palestine Riders – and it has become all-



Lost during a bike journey.

consuming for many enthusiasts. I take pride in having become an evangelist for the sport during the past year, and I hope to expand my reach even further. So far, it's been going well, as the group has had success in recruiting female bikers and the number of people participating in rides is climbing.

A few months ago I started guiding groups of riders onto the trails that I'm very familiar with, and I'm thinking now to start an indoor biking club for kids, with weekly outdoor tours since I believe that a bike club could play a leading role in shaping the travel habits of children in the future, showing how cycling can not only boost the health of youngsters, cut car usage, and reduce travel costs, but also improve their outlook and quality of life.

The feeling you get when you go up in the mountains, the smell, it's like nothing

I've ever experienced before. Until a few years ago I had always wanted to leave the country. I had never been able to imagine myself here. I had always just wanted to live somewhere else. But when I started to bike, I really fell in love with it, and I started to encourage people to take up the sport. On any given ride, I see hundreds of Israelis who engage in sports in a way that makes the most of the landscape, but we're always the only Palestinians there. I've really fallen in love with our nature.

Mohammad Zarour, 29, is from Nablus, Palestine. He currently works as an export development coordinator for the Palestine Trade Center – PalTrade in Ramallah. Along with two friends, Zarour founded Palestine Riders, through which they explore Palestine on their bikes.

Article photos courtesy of the author.

Our Readers Say ...

My 12-year-old daughter loves sports, but I don't know how to guide her. Most of the active initiatives such as hiking and cycling are geared to an older audience.

Noor Tubaileh, businesswoman