

## Cycling through a Divided Land



For many years I have had an interest, both political and cultural, in the Middle East and a year or so ago I met some students from Gaza who encouraged me to think about travelling around the West Bank on a bicycle. A friend and I decided, in the absence of our Arabic and cultural knowledge, to seek out a supported tour and found it in 'Bike Palestine' ([www.bikepalestine.com](http://www.bikepalestine.com)), which is a small tour organisation linked to the Siraj Centre, a Palestinian Christian organisation that aims to promote an understanding of the country through sustainable tourism. The 7-day ride was exceptionally well-organised with, in addition to the supported rides each day, a range of very interesting guided tours from walks in the desert to visits to historical and religious sites, all included in the cost of the trip.

If it is possible to describe cycle touring as ranging between 'heads up' and 'heads down' then this definitely favoured the former. Each day we completed no more than 40 miles and sometimes far less. That is not to say the cycling was in any sense easy. Cycling on hired bikes in a constant 35° C, in a group with variable cycling experience and up some of the most challenging hills anywhere, made for interesting and not unrewarding rides. In the Palestinian landscape of deserts, gorges and wonderfully hospitable villages it is difficult to treat the cycling as anything other than incidental. Of course, a group of 8 Western cyclists was mostly treated with astonishment and amusement by the Palestinian people. I cannot recall on how many occasions we were invited into someone's home to have tea. To have accepted all these invitations would have severely lengthened the tour. At one house we did not decline and, in addition to tea were shown around the house and garden and, furthermore, the woman's husband who was at work was summoned to speak to us by phone to wish us well for the remainder of the journey. In the early afternoon we were regularly surrounded by groups of schoolchildren on their way home who, I am sure, thought we were all mad. In one

village we were met by a Palestinian police motor cyclist who escorted us like celebrities through throngs of locals wishing us well.

The ride was fully supported with a support vehicle and radio intercom. This was essential at times when the stragglers, for whatever reason, disappeared from view just as we were about to pass through an Israeli checkpoint. It is difficult to do justice to the organised tours and their guides, who enabled us get under the cultural and political skin of the Palestinian people. The ride began in the north of the West Bank in Jenin taking in the towns of Nablus, Taybeh (a very small Christian village), Jericho, Bethlehem, Hebron and Jerusalem. We visited the sites where John the Baptist was beheaded; Christ was born, tempted by the devil, killed and entombed. In Hebron, which in some ways is the most bitterly divided town, we were taken to the tombs of the patriarchs where Abraham, Sarah and Isaac are buried. The tomb of Abraham is separated between the mosque and the synagogue reflecting the religious divide.

In addition to the cycling the highlights of this tour were many. We walked across the Judean desert for 10 or so miles to the awesome Mar Saba Greek Orthodox monastery built into the side of the gorge of the Kidron valley. Drinking freshly-squeezed pomegranate juice in a small bar on the Via Delarosa in Jerusalem and eating the best falafel sandwich in the world in Manger Square in Bethlehem were others. Swimming in the Dead Sea was a case of 'been there done that'. The little stretch of beach was more crowded than the Costa del Sol in the height of summer. The 'swimmers' were closely supervised to ensure, for example, that no one did anything other than bob around on their backs and cover themselves with black mud.

Any tour of the West Bank by bike or otherwise clearly cannot avoid the political situation in this part of world. A tour of religious sites is a tour of religious division and contestation. The West Bank is, after all, designated by the UN as part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the area is peppered with Israeli settlements and security points. No such tour would be complete without a trip along the 'Wall' (security fence to the Israelis and apartheid wall to the Palestinians). The monolithic concrete slabs are decorated with political thoughts, slogans and graffiti, the most famous of which are by Banksy. After the tour ended the friend I was travelling with and I spent the night in the company of an Israeli soldier and testing out our experiences and ideas. I cannot say there was much meeting of minds. He described himself as a right wing biblical Jew living in a settlement in the Occupied Territories and that closed down any possibility of engagement.

Would I return – most certainly! Would I tour by bike – most certainly! Would I encourage you to go – most certainly!

David Woodman