

## Bike Palestine September 2015

After a two year break from international cycling due to the sudden, unexpected passing of my good friend and cycling companion, I was ready to get back on the saddle and hit the road. Having cycled several countries in Europe, I wanted to explore a new region. As none of my cycling buddies were available, I decided to seek out an organized group trip for the first time. Visiting "the holy land" had always been something I wanted to do, so when I came across the Bike Palestine website and the trip dates fit my schedules perfectly, I knew this was for me.

Upon telling family and friends about the trip I got a host of responses. They ranged from "you're crazy, good luck" to a close friend who is a retired police officer asking if I wanted to borrow his bullet proof vest; and then there was my mother, a practicing Catholic, who promised to pray a novena for my safe return every day I was away. Truth be told, my mother prays a novena for any of her children at the drop of a hat, but I could tell this trip had her worried.

Although my family and friends truly had my best interest in mind, their responses and concern were rooted in misinformation and a perspective likely skewed by the popular media. The truth is I felt as safe, if not safer, in the cities and towns we visited in Palestine than in the vast majority of places I have cycled in Europe. This was true when with our guides, and also when I found myself apart from the group - whether it be awakening before dawn and bicycling alone to the top of Bethlehem to watch the sunrise, or choosing to walk on my own in East Jerusalem on a warm summer night. I can honestly say there was not a single time on the trip I did not feel safe.

This being Bike Palestine, it's only fair to start with the cycling itself. As most cyclist would agree, it's always a little concerning to do an extended ride on a bike that is not your own. I found the bicycles provided to be very well maintained and there was a variety of different frame sizes. Additionally, we traveled with extra bicycles in case of an unexpected equipment failure. The terrain on the tour was actually more challenging than I had expected due to some rather steep hills. The bicycles were adequate for the terrain and I enjoyed the challenge the hills provided. The passenger van always accompanied the group while cycling and did an excellent job with support. Our two drivers were constantly offering a fresh bottle of water and got out of the van to direct riders through busy roundabouts and across major roadways - both rare occurrences. Whenever a cyclist maxed out for the day, he or she was quickly taken aboard to enjoy the rest of the way in air conditioned comfort. Our drivers kept all riders safe on the roads and ensured an enjoyable ride each day.

One of the best aspects of the trip was the small size and relaxed atmosphere. Including George, our leader, we had a total of six cyclists. This allowed us to really get to know one another, as well as our two van drivers and guides, Nidal and Omar. Nidal in particular, was amazing. He knows the lay of the land like the back of his hand, always telling us when we were coming into a congested area or when there was a curve on a steep downhill we needed to watch out for. He is also a very knowledgeable tour guide who clearly enjoys introducing people to his home country. Furthermore, Nidal was always on top of the little things, like telling us when we needed to have our passports to cross a checkpoint, or when we needed to put on long pants to be allowed to enter a religious site. That enabled us to relax and enjoy the experience knowing Nidal had thought of those things for us. He is also easygoing and has a great sense of humor.

There is no denying some people might be hesitant to participate in an activity such as Bike Palestine because of the political and ethnic complexities that are an undeniable reality. Some may worry there is a "hidden agenda" or they will be making themselves an "audience for propaganda." I found neither to be the case. People usually have strong opinions and are passionate about issues that affect their daily lives, be it in the Middle East, or anywhere. In my experience most appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences and perspective with others. They are usually not seeking to convert others to their beliefs - rather simply to be heard and understood. I believe when that can occur, both parties benefit.

Simply put, Bike Palestine is exactly what an international bicycle trip should be and exceeded my expectations in pretty much every way. The itinerary designed by George and the Siraj Center was excellent, as was the logistic support and practical advice they provided before and during the trip. The cycling was superb. The food was delicious. The accommodations, with the exception of the guest house in Beit Sahour, were at the level I am accustomed to when traveling on my own; and even the guest house was more than adequate with air conditioning, private en-suite bathroom, and free wifi. My fellow cyclists were a joy to ride and travel with. The land is full of beauty and wondrous sites, both natural and manmade. The cultural and educational experience was second to none.

I recommend Bike Palestine, without hesitation, to anyone looking to combine the joy of cycling with an amazing travel experience. Do it, I promise, you will thank yourself!

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