



2004 FTW Ride

April 16-23, 2004

Event Highlights



Saudi Arabian cyclist.

More than a year passed from the time Detta Regan of UK conceived of Follow the Women until the inaugural bike ride actually happened. Everyone was sending emails to the Yahoo FTW list serve asking, When is the ride? When is the ride? Admittedly, there was ample confusion that first year but also beaucoup excitement that a Pedal for Peace ride in the Middle East was actually happening. About 200 women from 28 countries came that first year.



LEBANON

Southern Lebanon The first day was not a biking day. Half the group, including the U.S. team, was taken to southern Lebanon to a twenty-mile stretch of territory Israel occupied for over twenty years until June, 2000 when its military forces evacuated in the same fashion and similar reasons as the U.S. fled Vietnam in 1975. Hezbollah has controlled the area ever since. We were shown where Israelis held prisoners for months in cages too small for an adult to stand up. When the prison was liberated these men could not even walk.



Biking in Lebanon.

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Samir Kuntar In Beirut we met the mother of Samir Kuntar, the longest held political prisoner in Israel. A Lebanese Druze and member of the PLO, he was captured at the age of 16 in 1979 and convicted in Israel for murdering a policeman, a four year old girl and her father. Samir claimed they were killed by Israeli security forces in an ensuing gun battle. The FTW teams didn't fully know the particulars of Samir's incarceration, but we did sympathize with Mrs. Kuntar's visually expressive grief and anguish – the way any of us would if we had the opportunity to meet the family of the little four-year old Israeli child. Samir was released in 2008 in an exchange for the remains of two Israeli soldiers.



Sidon.welcome hosted by Bahia Hariri.

Iraqi Team An unforgettable moment occurred at the opening ceremony at UNESCO Palace when the Iraqi team entered the grand hall. Five female cyclists, their coach Mahmoud Muhemed Flayeh and his wife traversed three countries with bikes in tow to reach Lebanon. Without passports or even a laissez-passez, they crossed borders with mere laminated pieces of paper signed by the United States Provisional Occupation Authority. The team was given an extended standing ovation. Several years later we learned that the coach was killed in Iraq.

Sidon We cycled from Beirut to Sidon where we were guests of Bahia Hariri. Her brother Rafik was a wealthy entrepreneur widely popular for initiating projects to get war-torn Beirut back on its feet. Traditional music and dancing and a banquet greeted us inside her caravansary-like compound.

Sabra Shatila We were taken to the Sabra Shatila memorial park where the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian refugees took place in 1982. FTW founder Detta Regan laid a wreath to the victims. Many of us wanted to visit the actual camps. Coinciding with our arrival to Lebanon, the Israelis assassinated Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, the co-founder of Hamas. The head of the women's committee of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila had invited FTW to visit the camps but many feared that there would be violence against foreigners as payback for Rantissi's murder. We were discouraged from going but at least 25 women went anyway. Rather than attacks, the Palestinians welcomed us with open arms. We saw protesters who waved to us with vigor, no hint of danger. Seeing the camps was a painfully short, but eye-opening experience. We vowed to return as an FTW group and stay longer.



FTW wreath at Sabra Shatila Memorial Park.



SYRIA

Madame Assad We didn't cycle across the actual Lebanese-Syrian border but once on the other side we pedaled all the way to Damascus which took about two hours. The Syrian government shut down the highway for us. We were met by Madame Assad, so alluring in an emerald green outfit, as if she intentionally color coded her visit with the FTW teams. She came to the pit stop and wandered into the crowd to talk to the riders. She was as excited about the exchange as we were.



Madame Assad greets Detta Regan at pit stop. Photo by Italian team

The most thrilling part was reaching **Damascus** with scores of people lining the streets cheering us on. It reached a crescendo when we actually biked into the heart of the souk (the market). We whizzed through the covered arcade and then slowed down to navigate the precariously narrow streets made for donkeys not cars. All the shopkeepers stood in the doorways less than an arms length from us as we rode by amidst their smiling faces and cheerful waves.

Our first evening in Syria was a scintillating extravaganza. At the souk, rose petals were thrown on us. At the end of the arcade lie stately ancient ruins where a pair of whirling dervishes performed their hypnotic "dance." Before entering the restaurant located in an 18th century mansion two garishly costumed men with long swords gracefully sparred so that you heard the clink of silver metal against silver metal in a rhythmic way.



Cana from Turkey FTW team



Damascus banquet.

Bosra Perhaps the best cycling day in Syria was our ride to Bosra, a city of 50,000 residents. Unlike the national highway leading to Damascus, the paved, flat country road to Bosra passed through farms and towns. Villagers lined the streets, old women waving with henna on their palms, children running alongside the bikes seeking a high five. In the fields, farmers, male and female, stopped working to greet us. It was an intimate and very friendly experience that completely discredited the slander President George Bush pronounced shortly before our ride when he included Syria in the so-called "Axis of Evil." Whatever policies an official government may engage in cannot justify defaming an entire population.



Ride Start Point.

In Bosra, as guests of the city's mayor, Kassem Khalil, we stayed in huge Bedouin tents with carpets and light mattresses that had bars of scented Syrian soap on the pillows. It felt like an exotic slumber party. One tent also had a couple of laptops with internet (Portable toilets and sinks were nearby).

Bosra is a World Heritage Site with a spectacularly restored ancient Roman amphitheatre that once seated 15,000 with a wooden roof and perfume sprayed into the air. We were treated to a feast where the food on the table stretched out on the table for what seemed a half a block. The most incredible evening performance in the amphitheatre included male Bedouin dancers, several of them elderly. One guy did a back bend and his partner danced on his stomach as if it were as stable and as flat as a tabletop! The evening ended with throngs of women descending from the stone seats to joyfully dance under the night sky beneath the amphitheatre's stage. What a night!



Bosra with Bedouin dancers.

Italian cyclists from Padua with Bosra mayor. Padua and Bosra are sister cities. Photo by Italian team





JORDAN



Riding in northern Jordan. Photo by Italian team

Border crossings are usually monotonous tedious affairs. Not so the 2004 FTW entry from Syria into Jordan. A dozen or so Bedouin police in uniform with red checked kefiyehs on their heads riding atop lumbering camels led us into Jordanian territory as we cycled behind them. It felt triumphantly awesome. We stayed in a Bedouin tent our first night. Lots of excitement that evening, mostly singing and dancing by military men which was somewhat strange entertainment for a women's peace ride.

Our second night in Jordan was spent at the Hashemite University where we slept on the gymnasium floor with mattresses. The dean hosted an elaborate feast that evening along with stunning entertainment of traditional singing and dancing, including a Circassian boy about ten years old performing a military-like dance of his culture – most of his people from the Caucasus live in diaspora with many in residence in Turkey and Arab countries.



Jordanian team at the Syria-Jordan border.

Peace Conference The 2004 ride culminated in a two-day peace conference in Amman attended by FTW and local women. It was entitled “Women Take the Lead,” and its aim was to “create a common understanding of values and enhance feelings of solidarity” and to “plan for future partnerships and networks.” After HRH Princess Basma gave the keynote address, we broke down into small groups to discuss these topics, then share with the larger group.

There were deep exchanges and moments of pain as we tried to understand one and other and appreciate the other’s view point. Initially, the Greek and Turkish teams were cool towards each other — their countries are not on friendly terms. But at the conference, they met and discussed the idea of a Greek-Turkish FTW ride. This is an example of the type of intimate and honest exchanges that arose at the conference. Little did we know in 2004 how precious two full days of discussing our concerns, plans, goals and ideals would be. The itineraries of subsequent rides have rarely included downtime for group meetings, although we aspire to do so.



FTW conference Amman . Princess Basma, middle, with two Italian riders . Photo by Italian team