



2009 FTW Ride

October 8-21, 2009

Event Highlights



LEBANON

The FTW teams split in to two groups for two rides in two destinations, the Bekaa Valley (48 km) and Mt. Lebanon (20 km). U.S. team member Lilly Ann Popken from California described her cycling experience, "Biking along the Mediterranean was quite beautiful and especially breathtaking when we came out of a tunnel and saw Tripoli in the distance. We had a substantial police escort at all times and had a rousing welcome when we got to Tripoli."



At the opening reception, everyone was enthralled by the presence of a dozen cyclists from Japan all wearing kimonos. Japan team leader, Mio Yamada, wore her grandmother's kimono.

We visited Shabra Shatila refugee camp and stayed for a longer time than past years whose visits always seemed rushed. Chairs were set up for us for an outdoors program and we were able to meet many residents.

Above photo, U.S. team collects their money to pay Jawad for the bikes. Left, some of the 12 member Japanese team. Below, mural at Sabra, Shatila Refugee Camps





Wonderful cycling in Syria along its Mediterranean coast in Latakia (45 km). At the sea, riders plunged into the water, no one bothering to change into bathing suits. We also biked in Homs (32 km), a northern Syrian city where we stayed in a newly constructed resort near Krak des Chevaliers, a Crusader fortress and World Heritage Site.

In the south of Syria, we visited the De'era refugee camp near the Jordanian border, established in 1950-51 for Palestinians who fled from northern and eastern Palestine during the 1948 war. A newer camp was set up in 1967 for some 4,200 Palestinians who fled from the Golan Heights in 1967. More than 10,573 Palestine refugees live in neighboring Syrian villages, many working as shepherds or farmers on Syrian-owned lands.

The US team distributed soccer balls to the Palestinian children.



Photos, above left, cycling in Syria. Above right, jumping into the Mediterranean — on left is Madeleine Mendy of the UK team. Below, children at De'era Palestinian refugee camp.





JORDAN



An impressive entry into Jordan. We crossed the border at night, greeted by a rousing military band and spectacular Bedouin stately seated on stunning camels.



Amman, Jordan's capital, is not the greatest cycling venue — too much traffic and seven steep hills. At the Citadel, an impressive site rich in archaeology, we joined children to make and fly kites. Jane de Jarnette of the US team helped Ahmad write a letter on his kite. It reads: "Hello Mr. Obama. We are humans too and we want peace. We deserve peace. Ahmad."

In the evening the Italian team entertained the group with a video from the 2008 FTW ride



Karin Strauss of the Austria Team cycling to the Dead Sea



Checkpoint at Hebron



PALESTINE

Hebron For the first time FTW visited Hebron, the largest city in the West Bank. Approximately 400-600 Jewish settlers occupy houses in the middle of a city of about 160,000 Palestinians, 30,000 of whom since 1997 live under Israeli military control to protect the Jewish settlers. The Palestinians within this zone are subject to extended curfews and restraint on freedom of movement arising from 16 check points.

We biked up to one check point but were not permitted to enter inside to this area of Hebron. We saw empty buildings outside the check point spray painted with a Star of David and were told by Hebron residents that the settlers have claimed them. On the rooftop Israeli soldiers peered down curiously at us, probably never having seen dozens of cyclists trying to enter the historic center of Hebron.

A local Hebron teacher told us school children must pass through check points to get to school. We saw the soldiers with machine guns at the gate and wondered how children endured this daily. The teacher told us that settler students on their way to school sing a song in Arabic to ensure the Palestinian students would understand the lyrics which say the land belongs to Israel. The teacher said the Palestinian school now starts an hour earlier so that the children will not encounter the Israeli youth en route to school.



Sylwia Groszek of Poland at Hebron checkpoint in front of empty building marked by settlers as their property.



Left photo, mural at Bil'in of a villager chained to an olive tree.

Right photo, Rasha Abdel Latif of Jordan team examining a tear gas bomb



Bil'in Since 2005 the villagers of Bil'in have held a non-violent protest every Friday to protest Israeli annexation of their land for Israeli settlers and the intrusion of the Wall which separates farmers from their crops, families from families. Mohammed Khatib, an activist from Bil'in, told us how the villagers chained themselves to the olive trees that the Israelis sought to uproot. The destruction eventually happened anyway. The villagers lost a law suit brought in Canada against the company that manufacturers the bulldozers, but are appealing it. After being served delicious homemade cinnamon rolls, we biked to the barbed wire border where the Israeli soldiers stand guard and sang, "We Shall Overcome." Nearby guards threw tear gas and some FTW members were affected. Our hosts passed out onions to cover our noses to counteract the tear gas. See the Links page of our website for more info about Bi'lin's struggle to keep the land.



Evicted Palestinian family sleeping on the street at night across the street from their long term home.

East Jerusalem Jewish theft of Palestinian land is happening in East Jerusalem unabated and with little or shallow protest by the U.S. government. We visited a house in the Sheik Jarrah neighborhood whose residents were evicted with the property turned over to zealot settlers. These residents have no where to go and have lived in their homes for decades. Each night this particular family took out their blankets and mattresses stored at a neighbor's yard and slept on the sidewalk in protest of their eviction from their long time home. Israelis installed security camera on the house to ensure that the family does not re-enter their home.

Settlers Everywhere we went we saw illegal settlements scattered throughout on some of Palestine's richest agricultural land. We witnessed trailers on hill tops and knew they were the beginning of a full-blown settlement, evidence that Israel's commitment to the Oslo peace process was a cunning sham. Since Oslo in the early 1990s, the settler population on Palestinian land doubled from 200,000 to 400,000. Israel is a signatory to the Fourth Geneva Convention which prohibits transfer of the occupier's population to the occupied territory.



While settlers enjoy swimming pools, many areas of Occupied Palestine are rationed two hours of running water a week. Roads are made solely for settler access while Palestinians must travel miles in circuitous routes and military check points which may or may not accept them. Entire villages are shut with a lock and key and opened once in the morning by Israeli soldiers and later in the afternoon, or at the military's whim.

Left photo, illegal Israeli settlements taking the best of Palestine's hilltop property



Reem Mana of the Jordan/Palestine team. Her necklace is the key to her family home in the former Palestine from which the Israelis deny access.



In Ramallah we briefly met with the **Palestine Parliament** and paid respects to Yassir Arafat's tomb. Salam Fayyad, the Palestinian Foreign Minister, thanked us for our cycling delegation to Palestine.