



2017 FTW Ride October 1-8, 2017 Event Highlights



For the first time ever, Follow the Women cycled in only one country, Lebanon. Staying in one place allowed us to become intimate with the people, culture and land of that remarkable territory known as Lebanon.

The most important take-away was that despite a polyglot of cultures, religions and ethnicities, the Lebanese people are one. Yes, there have been divisions, but we observed a people striving for a unified, harmonious nation.

We are grateful to the organizers of FTW 2017, primarily Jawad Sbeity and his Beirut by Bicycle team for sharing the secret gems of their magnificent land whose multi-cultural population yearns for a calm, peaceful life.

Tripoli



Tripoli was the launch site for the Lebanon FTW 2017 event. Our hosts, including Mr. Toufik Dabbousi, had so many exciting events to share with us, starting with amazing dancers who came to our Hotel Quality Inn to welcome us with traditional music and dance. We cycled through downtown Tripoli stopping at the souk (marketplace) to meet the shopkeepers. We were taken to the 14th century citadel and the Izzeddeen hammam (Turkish bath). The day culminated with a visit to the awesome eco village of Badr Hassoun Soap Factory where we were regaled with shampoos, facials, soaps in a fortress-like setting built in 1480 with a cavernous interior. On display was "the most expensive soap in the world." Outside artists painted their work on canvases.



Photo above, Hala Khoury of the Palestine team,. Photo below, welcome dancers



Batroun

Byblos

Jounieh

On our second day on the bikes we ascended up into a thrilling long tunnel from which we emerged to cliffs and the sea. It was awesome cycling.

In Batroun we visited Colonel Beer, a micro-brewery started by a self-taught local young man Jamil Haddad. Despite having just hosted a three day festival, his team opened up their brewery to the FTW women.

How thrilling to cycle to the ancient town of Byblos, a World Heritage Site due to its fame as one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. It is a port city with a lovely harbor and a thriving market place.

We spent the night in Chouf Ain Zhalta, a camp in the mountains. It was cold and sparse but the hospitality warm. Strangely, we were given UNHCR blankets. We were told that the refugee agency doled out tons of blankets to Lebanon several years ago without asking if they were needed, and they were not, and have been warehoused ever since until FTW came along to use them.



Chouf

Jumblatt

Jezzine



The organizers arranged for us to cycle in the magnificent Chouf mountains. (photo, top left) We spotted many of the famous Lebanese cedar trees in this region, as seen on Lebanon's flag.

The Chouf region is the heartland of the Lebanese Druze community. The Druze are a small Islamic sect constituting 5-8% of the population. The Druze are an important and powerful political force in Lebanon due to the Jumblatt family, particularly today, Walid Jumblatt.

We had the opportunity to bike to the Jumblatt family mansion. (photo, middle left) The exterior is stunning Ottoman era architecture. Inside, the rooms are exquisitely hand painted with village and mountain scenes.

Jezzine is primarily a Christian Maronite city located in mountains amidst aromatic pine forests and vast vineyards. We spent the night with our mats and UNHCR blankets in the gym of a brand new cultural center funded by the Mexican magnate Carlos Slim. (outlets were still being installed!). Who knew Jezzine was his ancestral village? (photo, below). Many arrived late to sleep after hearty dancing at a dinner and reception in FTW's honor.





Mleeta & Ansar

"Where Land Speaks to Heaven" is the title of the entry portal to the Hezbollah Resistance Museum in Mleeta (photo left). It opened on May 25, 2010 marking the tenth anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000. As of 2017, the museum has had over 1.6 million visitors including Follow the Women cyclists.

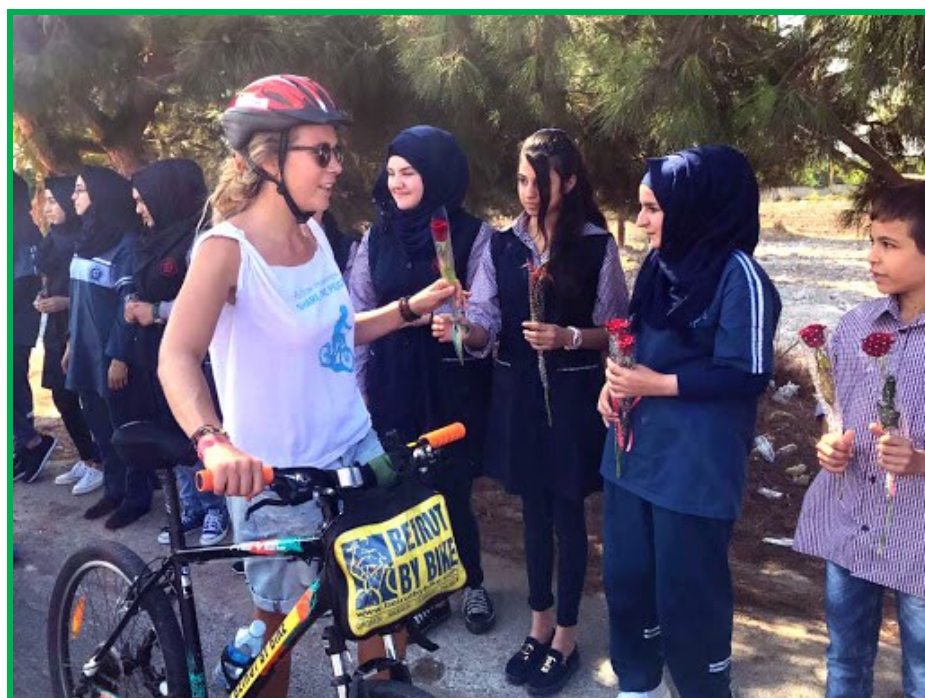
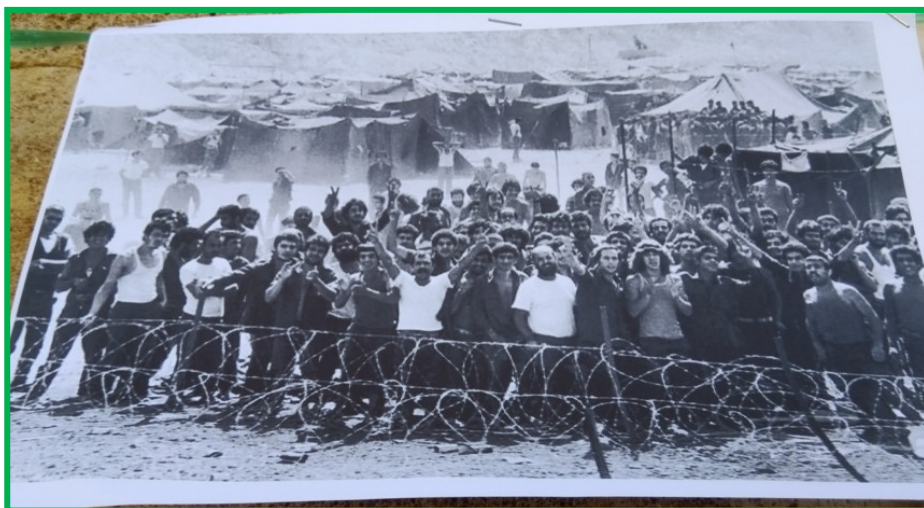
The Israelis did not leave voluntarily. They were militarily defeated by Hezbollah fighters defending their homeland against a well-armed Goliath.

The museum was built on the site where the Israelis set up occupation headquarters. It was a brutal occupation. Example. Near the museum entry is "The Well," the only source of water back then for Mleeta. Villagers and soldiers had to brave Israeli target practice when they ventured to gather water from the well.

The curators took abandoned Israeli military infrastructure, weapons and equipment and cleverly turned them into modern art installations. You walk in the open air museum through underground bunkers and around dilapidated tanks bearing Hebrew text. A welcome video is shown in the theatre featuring Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasralla and old war footage.

The site was used by Hezbollah fighters in 2006 when the Israelis unsuccessfully tried again to establish a foothold in southern Lebanon.

We also visited Ansar, site of an Israeli detention camp holding 5000 fighters and civilians captured during the 1982 invasion. It was shut down when the Israelis discovered the inmates had dug escape tunnels. The villagers welcomed us with snacks in a center where photos of Ansar detainees were displayed. (photo, left middle). Children lined our bike route to hand each of us a red rose. We carried those flowers for days in our Beirut By Bike handlebar bags.



Sarafand & Tyre



Top photo: Cycling along in the middle of seemingly nowhere we came upon a lovely elderly woman selling fresh figs. Jawad's team bought her entire stash! At first she refused to take any money.

Middle photo: Mrs. Randa Berri at the Nabih Berri Rehabilitation Compound named after her husband, a Lebanese Shia parliamentarian. The center in Sarafand offers many treatments for special needs people. Mrs. Berri met with us and gave an inspiring speech about her work and helping others.

Bottom photo: We strolled in the ancient beautiful Phoenician city of Tyre, a World Heritage Site. You feel yourself in another era in the old town. Bahia Hariri met with us again. She is aunt of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and sister of the late Rafik Hariri.



Bekaa Valley & Baalbek



In the Bekaa Valley we had a super duper cycling day to Lake Qarauon dam. Left photo is Wendy van de Kamp, US team. Pure nature. Almost no traffic. Exquisite scenery. Easy cycling.

The Bekaa Valley is very close to Syria. En route we saw glimpses of UN tanks.

Syrian refugees are now encamped in this region. We made a point to visit one camp. Various FTW women brought toys and supplies to be distributed. It was an emotional experience. Middle photos

Photo bottom: The ancient ruins of Baalbek are phenomenal. Many say parts of these Roman ruins date back 10,000 years ago. We are grateful to the organizers for including Baalbek in the itinerary and thank our professional guide Mr. Salba Charbel.



Beirut!

Beirut has changed so incredibly since Follow the Women first came in 2004. It has grown exponentially. The sea front where Beirut By Bike had its headquarters in 2004 is not even recognizable. The city is vibrant. It pulsates and is clearly the cultural capital of Lebanon. It was exciting biking through the city's streets — but great regret that we could not linger longer in its many neighborhoods.

How fortunate FTW was to have Makhzoumi Foundation as a sponsor. On our bike route we stopped at their headquarters where their visionary leaders Mr. Fouad Makhzoumi and Madame May Makhzoumi met with us. Mr. Makhzoumi mounted a bicycle and rode with us! He went around to speak with each woman. We and Lebanon are blessed to have his support.

A big surprise was meeting the Prime Minister Mr. Saad Hariri, son of Rafik Hariri the Lebanese entrepreneur booster who was assassinated in 2005. He was so kind to take endless photos with all the FTW country groups.

Big kisses and love to Beirut by Bike for making it all happen. Apart from Jawad Sbeity, we commit a sin in not naming everyone on his team but of course we cannot forget Farah Jaroudi and her father the General and Shireen Uthman. And we love Fatima our 12 year old "mascot."



Prime Minister Saad Hariri taking a selfie with the US team



Cycling through the streets of Beirut



Left—Jawad's Beirut By Bike Team.
Above—12 year old Fatima. May she never lose her wild spirit

The Closing Celebration



ABOVE Detta Regan, center, with Fouad Makhzoumi & Madame May Makhzoumi, Makhzoumi Foundation, Sponsor presenting her an award

RIGHT Sensational Violinist who entertained us



The closing ceremony was a grand banquet held in a flashy seaside hotel where everyone shed their lycra and dressed in their finest available wardrobe. Awards were presented. Speeches made. Everyone congratulating everyone. For Jawad it was the climax of an ambitious accomplishment for his team to organize the logistics for dozens of foreigners to cycle to all parts of Lebanon. Each team took the stage to sing their country's national anthem. Below is the US Team.



US Team. Standing from left, Fouad Makhzoumi, Bernadette Ridge, Carol Murry Steveson, Caroline Spoeneman, Wendy van de Kamp, Kathleen Walker, Jawad Sbeity. Kneeling from left Colleen McGuire, Marny Kittridge