

# A RARE EVENT

In 2004, over 250 Middle Eastern women  
cycled from Beirut to Amman

Story and photos Sophie Nicholson

A few hundred women cycling together for over a week may not sound unusual, but when the trip is through the Middle East and many of the women are from that region, the event is unique. You rarely see a woman on a bicycle in Lebanon, Syria, or Jordan, where the ride took place. Despite the obstacles to the trip, the Follow the Women organization arranged a cycle ride in the Arab world for women from around the world. The oldest participant was a sixty-three-year-old Norwegian, the youngest an eighteen-year-old from Cyprus.

The ride started on an April Sunday morning in Beirut. Families strolled along the seafront as nearby over 250 women from twenty-three countries chattered and stretched their legs. Some were wearing the latest cycling gear and had their own bikes flown over from Europe or the United States. Others had thrown on what they thought would be suitable for the first time they rode a bicycle.

Detta Regan, a British mother of two spent the past eighteen months developing her "crazy idea." The former air-traffic

controller has worked with young people from conflict areas for many years. She's also a bike fanatic.

"I always de-stress when I get on my bike. Get me in my cycling gear and I'm okay," she said, explaining why cycling is important to her.

"Cycling only discriminates between who's fit and who isn't, but anybody can do it. Now that we've introduced cycling to people in countries where they haven't really thought about it, it's going to be interesting to see what happens."

The trip was well organized; coordinators had worked on generous sponsorship deals that funded food and accommodations along the way. A volunteer technical team carried out last-minute adjustments and swept up the rear. The Palestinian team received their bikes last. They had a difficult journey to reach Beirut, and only eleven out of twenty-five made it through various checkpoints to get there. Ansar Burgothi from the West Bank glanced over the mass of women preparing their bikes and told me she was nervous because some of the Palestinian

girls had never ridden a bicycle before. She said they had nowhere to practice.

The Iraqi women were experienced cyclists and had been practicing on a sports track in Baghdad, but they didn't know whether they'd make it to Beirut until the last minute. Their male cycling coach took the risk of driving them out of Iraq. They traveled with temporary passports from the United States army and initially were turned back at the Jordanian border. The youngest Iraqi, Basma Ayad, said she was nervous that as an Iraqi she would be unpopular with the other women.

"I thought that they would not like me because they're saying so many bad things about Iraqis on TV and on the radio," she said, laughing, after discovering that Iraqis were very popular.

The streets of the Lebanese capital were closed, and local people looked on in surprise as the women, some wearing head scarves, shot along the coast. The route was hilly as we cycled inland past cranes, bullet-ridden buildings, and brand-new skyscrapers. We were united in fatigue at this stage. The evening, however, was the



first in a series of nights of Middle Eastern feasting and dancing.

On Monday morning, we left early for the Syrian border. Broad plains and gentle hills were our scenery for the next part of the trip. Large billboards from our sponsors advertising the ride inspired us. We caught our breath as we caught sight of the wide metropolis of Damascus. Then we followed traffic into the modern city. Suddenly, still pedaling, we were in old Damascus, transported back in time on narrow streets, riding past startled street vendors in the covered market, and ducking through welcoming crowds. Finally, a long stretch of road led us to a luxury hotel that we had little time to appreciate. We had cycled fifty miles and were ready to rest. But we were soon stumbling through cobbled streets, following musicians and sword fighters towards our evening's feast.

On Tuesday, we traveled south through vines and olive groves. The streets were lined with locals offering helpful support. Entire families stood by the roadside, holding babies out to us, waving and cheering. They said they'd been waiting all day to see us cycle by. Their enthusiastic welcome moved many of us to tears, including Detta, who hadn't expected such support.

"When I first wanted to do this project, somebody told me we wouldn't be able to do it in Syria because the men will just throw stones at you and you'll have to be



**Cycling through the Paris of the Middle East.** *The group in Beirut.*

completely covered.

"Today, some of us were wearing shorts, and they were throwing flowers at us and putting petals on our heads and things like this," she added, laughing and crying.

And the welcome got warmer. Hundreds of people were waiting for us in the old Roman city of Bosra. We followed flares towards luxury Bedouin tents, our night's accommodations. Then we dined in a spectacular amphitheatre, listening to Syrian music and watching dances. Our

aching limbs didn't stop us from joining in.

On the fourth day, some women had to accept that they'd be finishing the trip by bus. They were starting to feel the strain of an average of thirty miles per day. Elham Roheil from Jordan was sad that she wouldn't be cycling home. She fell off her bike in Damascus but didn't report it because she was determined to finish. After another thirty miles, she went to the hospital. An X-ray showed two breaks in her left wrist and another break in her right elbow. With both arms in plaster she managed to get back on a bike for a while, using only the ends of her fingers to hold the handlebars.

The next border crossing took place by bike. There was no time to stop at the duty-free shop as we cycled to our Bedouin tents, this time in Jordan. By now, a lack of sleep and a lack of fitness were problems for many of us. The desert, we had discovered, was very windy. On Thursday, we cycled through the yellow expanse to the Hashemite University outside Amman. Interested students came out to talk to us. They said they'd like to take part in a bike ride like ours.

American participant and bike enthusiast Colleen Maguire from New York City said she hoped the ride would increase the use of bicycles in the region.



**Group finish.** *The women arrive triumphant in Amman, Jordan.*

"I'm hoping that this event will spur women to use bicycles in their daily lives. The bicycle is a source of empowerment because you're completely independent. There's the beauty of getting from point A to point B just on your own human power. You feel a thrill. It empowers you."

We found some extra strength for the final stage to Amman on Friday. The Jordanian capital sits on seven hills and we traveled over many more to reach it. Although there were few people watching us along the busy roads, we appreciated the cheers at the finishing line. Some of us didn't believe that it was over. Our legs felt like jelly, but we wanted to get back on our bikes again. It suddenly seemed as if the journey had been so easy. We'd made new friends and discussed our lives as we pedaled across the Middle East.

In Amman, we took part in a two-day conference working on projects for peace in the region. Afterwards, even Detta said she was surprised at how important the bike ride had been for the Arab women.

"I knew it was different, but they talked about how it was changing their lives, how they'd had arguments with their husbands about these bike rides, and how they wanted to continue. They wanted to meet every week," she said, collapsing in a chair on the last day.

As the conference closed, the Iraqi and Palestinian women wondered whether they'd be able to cross their borders to return home. Yet they said they had no regrets about taking part. Meanwhile, Detta was talking about a new Follow the Women cycling project. She doesn't yet know what it will be, but she has inspired a few hundred women to help her find out.

For more information about Detta's project, visit [www.followthewomen.com](http://www.followthewomen.com).

AC

*Sophie Nicholson is a freelance journalist based in Paris. She works as a print, radio, and television journalist for international publications and broadcasters. She has had a bicycle for as long as she can remember, but this was her first cycling adventure.*



# IRON DONKEY

BICYCLE TOURING



- Self-Guided Tours
- Guided Group Tours
- Custom Group Tours

in

## Ireland

Connemara, Burren, Donegal, Causeway

## England

Cotswolds, Wessex, Wiltshire

## Italy

Tuscany, Umbria

[www.irondonkey.com](http://www.irondonkey.com)