

A Motorcycle Tour around Ramallah



By Bassam Almohor



The newly renovated old town of Birzeit is reminiscent of Hebron's ancient souq.

"I'd feel the earth molding herself under me... alive, heaving, and tossing on each side like a sea." T. E. Lawrence

I am riding a motorcycle, but where to go in this ever-shrinking land? How can I enjoy riding and feel "free" while my country is divided, occupied, and imprisoned? Most intercity roads (Area C) have Israeli checkpoints. So I patiently wait for Fridays, hoping that the situation would be easier and allow me to ride more freely – until I hit the Wall in the north or south. Today, let's have a short ride around Ramallah, avoiding all Israeli checkpoints. Follow me.

Starting in Ramallah, I ride to the end of Tireh Street, then descend the very curvy road that leads to Ein Qiniya and on to the bottom of Dalb Valley. Turning right onto the street that used to connect the Israeli Dolev settlement (it was located west of Ramallah and abandoned following the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000) to Bet El settlement, north of Al-Bireh, I ride a few hundred meters between evergreen olive groves. Then, I turn north towards the new Rihan neighborhood, located in the suburbs northwest of Ramallah. A new suburb with unfinished streets, crowded buildings, and same-style villas, it has cameras everywhere; my every turn of the wheel is being watched. The suburb is quiet (as if it were an abandoned mining town) except for some machinery sounds in the distance. On a Friday morning, the streets are empty, there are no signs of life. But I feel warm on this cold morning: I am enjoying a speedy motorcycle ride in a new town.

From Rihan, I turn back and take the new fast street until it ends at Star Mountain Rehabilitation Center on the street that connects Ramallah with Birzeit. Crossing

the street, I head towards the new and quiet Ghadeer suburb that is dominated by tens of buildings that all look alike. Before I reach the tranquil suburb, I turn left onto the street that leads to the ancient Abu Qash village. Its old quarters with narrow alleys and the sounds of its roosters and sheep make me feel safe.

At the end of this road, I arrive once again at the Ramallah-Birzeit road. I turn right towards Birzeit town and enjoy the thrill of seeing the impressive buildings of Birzeit University lying peacefully on a small hill. A magnificent university campus that has produced thousands of Palestinian graduates since 1980, it has evolved from an elementary school for girls, founded in 1924.

A little bit farther down the street I reach the historical old town of Birzeit, which is home to a mix of Christians

and Muslims. Riding in the newly renovated old town, I feel as if I were in Hebron's ancient souq, and when I hear the church bells ring I can imagine being in one of Nazareth's quarters. I cross the town towards the east and after a few kilometers reach Jifna. There simply are no long distances in Palestine. This place is so tiny that when I stop to look at the panorama, I feel as if I could touch the next village, the adjacent valley, or even the small Jordanian town of Shuna and the port of Jaffa. Jifna is a small green village full of garden restaurants that offer grilled food. When I ride my motorcycle through it, I smell everything; and the smell intensifies the faster I go.

I continue riding northeast until I reach the adjacent Ein Siniya. It is the home of Abdul Qader Hussein, one of Palestine's rebel icons during the British Mandate era. His house is

still standing, crumbling slowly, with capers growing on its walls. There is not even a plaque that tells its story. I wonder what it was like back then – noisy, vibrating, full of life, with kids playing around and peasants milling their grains. Why don't they renovate it, or at least clean and preserve it? I follow the street that used to be the main road from Nablus to Jerusalem, connecting northern and southern Palestine – until bypass roads were built following the Oslo Accords. I take a right and ride to Dura al-Qare' with its glorious castles and villas. It's unbelievable how some people can build such gigantic, fairy-tale

Ramallah, I turn left, passing scattered Palestinian houses everywhere. I continue on, under Road 60, and a clear view opens up onto a stunning town of massive villas with red, blue, and lilac tiled roofs. It is Deir Dibwan, or as some of the Dibwan-American teenagers would call it, Dee Dee.

The majority of people in this town live and work in the United States. They feel a certain social responsibility towards their hometown, which is why the town looks so rich: it features a wide four-lane street with palm trees in the middle and plenty of large red roofs everywhere. At the town center by the mosque, there is a café whose

years so that they become protected archeological sites.

At the top of the hill I stop to entertain my eyes with the beautiful scene of the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley. How did this valley become the lowest point on earth, with a dead sea that occupies only a small portion of it? There is no water left in the Jordan River; Israel has diverted all the water from Sea of the Galilee to its industrial center, and the Dead Sea has nothing left to do but die.

I turn my head a bit towards the north to see a centuries-old little town, interspersed with churches;

The single-cylinder motor thumps so loudly that it resonates in my head.

sea level. Unfortunately, it's off limits for Palestinians; in 1967, following the re-occupation of the West Bank, the Israeli occupation built an early-warning radar station at the top of the hill.



Abdul Qader Hussein's house is still standing in Ein Sinya, crumbling slowly, with capers growing on its walls. There is not even a plaque that tells its story.

At the town center of Deir Dibwan by the mosque, there is a café whose two rows of plastic chairs line up on both sides of the street. Just before Friday prayer starts, men sit facing each other, leaving some room for cars to pass through.



Villas are spread everywhere, with their look-alike architectural designs that are a mixture of styles: Western European red-tile roofs, Chinese red roofs with curved corners, Arab-style arched doors and windows, and Greek Corinthian columns.



Behind the hills east of Taybeh lies the Jordan Valley. How did this valley become the lowest point on earth and the location of a dead sea?

limestone villas that look like citadels from the Arabian Nights. I turn left towards the town center and continue along the winding street – there are no straight streets in Palestine's hills.

Climbing up the road, I reach the mosque in Ein Yabroud and turn right onto this village's wide main street that has traffic bumps every hundred meters. Slowly I ascend the gentle hill until I reach Baytin, a small, rich village that lies less than a kilometer away from Al-Bireh/Ramallah but is separated by the unfortunate Bet El checkpoint. Until less than a year ago, the residents of Baytin were not able to reach Ramallah via this road. Just before the road descends towards

two rows of plastic chairs line up on both sides of the street. Just before Friday prayer starts, men sit facing each other, leaving some room for cars to pass through.

After sipping a bitter cup of coffee, I move and turn my motorcycle to the east. Here, I am taken by the spectacular scenery, overlooking the Jordan Valley with its magnificent barren hills. I ride with a mesmerizing gaze on this majestic landscape. I descend to the lower part of the valley and then ascend towards another town whose people also migrated to the land of Uncle Sam. It is Rammun, with its limestone castles. I am hoping that these castles will survive another 200

in its center, an ancient town with old alleyways that emit a Palestinian fragrance. It's Taybeh, with its delicious beer and Oktoberfest celebrations. A right turn at the intersection in the town center leads down to the Jordan Valley towards Jericho, along an old curvy and serpentine road. A left turn leads to the town of Deir Jarir. Names are confusing sometimes. Deir means monastery in Arabic, but the village is not Christian. Perhaps there was a monastery a few hundred years ago when the Crusaders once conquered this land? Deir Jarir, one of the highest towns in the hills of the West Bank, contains Tall Asur hill, which rises 1,016 meters above

I follow the main street towards the northwest, passing to the east of the Israeli settlement of Ofra, which was built on the lands of Silwad and Ein Yabroud in 1975. After a mere five kilometers, I reach another town, Al-Mazra'a ash-Sharqiya, which was built on top of the hill facing east, overlooking towns and villages to the east and west. It is yet another rich Palestinian town with huge stone workshops at its entrance.

I take the street that leads eastward past the school and descend down a steep hill through the centuries-old grove of olive trees with huge trunks – a common scene in these hills that are

Nobody is in the streets here; the villagers are still sleeping. Let them sleep, it's not yet 9 o'clock – and it's Friday, the day when even God takes a rest.

filled with deteriorating stone terraces. The image provokes a heaviness in my chest; Palestine no longer produces farmers. There are not even enough left to take care of the amazing stone terraces.

An ancient little town, interspersed with churches and alleyways that exude a distinctly Palestinian fragrance, Taybeh is home to delicious beer and Oktoberfest celebrations.



From Al-Mazra'a ash-Sharqiya I descend towards Turmus Ayya along a steep hill whose asphalt pavement has been scored to prevent vehicles from skidding, a method not suitable for a motorcycle's thin wheels.

At the bottom of the slope, there is a small plain where some farmers have planted all kinds of summer crops among the olive trees. The road connects Turmus Ayya with Kafr Malik via the small village of Khirbet Abu Falah. I turn left towards Turmus Ayya. According to some sources,

have traveled 62 kilometers. I return by taking the same route in order to see everything from another angle. I ascend the slope, descend the mountain, and look towards the west and the south. I find another scene, another time, another world – and another 62 kilometers.

Article photos courtesy of the author.

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The refreshing cold breeze makes me feel as though I'm flying, not riding, on my motorcycle.

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