

**WHERE:** Across Europe to the Middle East  
**START:** London **FINISH:** Palestine  
**DISTANCE:** 7,000km, riding around 100km each day  
**PICTURES:** Robbie Gillett and PEDAL (100daystopalestine.org) unless noted



## GREAT RIDES

# PEDALLING TO PALESTINE

Shortly after university, **Robbie Gillett** and 19 friends cycled to Palestine to draw attention to the humanitarian crisis in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.' The African proverb seemed fitting for our cycle trip from London to Palestine in 2011. Our group of 20 cyclist would be travelling 7,000km.

We choose to ride to the Occupied Territories in response to the ongoing detention, displacement, home demolitions, deaths and human rights abuses suffered by Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Along our route through Western Europe, the Balkans and Turkey, we arranged to stay with different communities involved in community food growing, permaculture, and DIY educational projects, volunteering our help while we were there.

Our group met through networks of friends in Glasgow, Manchester and London. Many of us knew each other from climate and anti-war campaigning at university. All were keen cyclists but none of us had undertaken any touring on this scale.

There were four requirements for people joining the trip: a roadworthy bike; a competent cycling ability; enough money to cover £5 per day for food; and an understanding of and agreement with the political aims and objectives of our trip. These were: to promote environmental justice and food-grower networks along our route; to contribute to the growing international movement of boycott and sanctions against Israel in light of repeated

violations of UN resolutions; and to share stories of resistance between different communities as we travelled.

## Group dynamics

It was an emotional farewell from friends and family at Cable Street, London. We would be gone for six months, heading across unfamiliar countries into a troubled political landscape. Nonetheless, we were eager and excited to get going as we set off through Kent in the March sunshine.

After spending six days in Calais working with homeless international migrants, we began a 200km, two-day stint across the flat fields of Flanders to Brussels. I found the flat monotony of the roads exhausting, and was glad to be surrounded by gentle rolling hills and Sunday bike clubs as we came closer to Brussels.

We rode in groups of six or so and met up for lunch and dinner. Riding in groups any larger was not practical. Delays were too easily caused, especially setting off after rests, as people fuffed with panniers, dealt with punctures and repairs, visited the toilet, or bought extra snacks. We re-grouped in »



## DO IT YOURSELF

**Our trip was mostly a political project with a cycle touring element. In the six months prior to our trip, we met three times in Glasgow, Manchester and London to collectively create our political aims, plan our route, and pick the communities we would visit along the way. We also did a much-needed practice ride from London to Uckfield. In doing so, we discovered that our single-wheel trailers were rubbish. We replaced them for two-wheel trailers before departing.**

**“GERMANY’S BIKE PATHS WERE A LUXURY TO CYCLE ALONG. THEY GAVE WAY TO SNOWY ALPS AND GREEN MOUNTAINS IN SLOVENIA”**

- (Opposite) The ride south down the Dalmatian Coast of Croatia was blessed with great weather
- (Right) Crossing the Alps. Like any cycle-tourists on a long trip, the group grew fitter as they went along
- (Below) Protesting in Bil'in against a concrete wall that cuts villagers off from their farmland
- (Bottom) A collective farm in Austria. The group visited a range of communities on their journey



## “AFTER ONE LONG, SWEEPING DESCENT THROUGH THE CLOUDS, WE FOUND OURSELVES BY THE CRYSTAL WATERS OF THE ADRIATIC”

» the evenings to camp and make dinner together.

Although we had all been saving before we began the trip, none of us had money to splash around, given that it had to last six months. However, after buying equipment (bikes, panniers, trailers), our day-to-day costs were extremely low. We wild-camped nearly everywhere, asking permission when practical and being discreet when it wasn't. We were always mindful to leave the land exactly as we found it.

Food was our biggest daily cost. We tried purchasing food from a communal kitty but our appetites grew as our mileage increased, so we were soon gorging on snacks at each stop. Throughout Western Europe, we found plenty of good, clean food discarded in supermarket bins – often shrink-wrapped in plastic. As we moved into Eastern Europe and beyond, food outlets

became far less wasteful and we gave up looking, especially as the prices were so much lower. I still look back in wonderment at how hungry we felt. Our stomachs were like furnaces devouring fuel.

### Germany to Albania

Germany's bike paths are well-appreciated amongst cycle tourists in Europe, and they were a luxury to cycle along. They gave way to snowy Alps and green mountains in Slovenia, where we were surprised to find the Royal Wedding on television in a bus station café in a small border town.

After one long, sweeping descent through the clouds, we found ourselves by the clear, crystal waters of the Adriatic. We'd reached Croatia. We followed the coast road south through beautiful tourist towns for 400km, always with dry, red rock on our left, clear blue sea on our right, and the sun above our

heads. The road didn't provide much room for passing traffic but the views and sunshine more than made up for this.

Albania contained a few surprises. Firstly, everyone was extremely friendly, tooting and waving from their motorcycles as they passed, even offering us places to stay. Secondly, despite the obvious poverty of the country, there were Mercedes cars everywhere. Albania's bumpy dirt roads do require a robust vehicle, and Mercedes was evidently the favoured marque of the country's former political leaders, so the brand had a particular status there. But still: a Mercedes isn't cheap. Where had they all come from? Albanian émigrés working abroad?

The third surprise in Albania was the E851, a 90km stretch of smooth motorway that blasted its way from Rrëshen near the coast through a dramatic mountain range to Kukës near the Kosovan border. This four-lane highway was largely empty of vehicles and had ample space on the hard shoulder to cycle on. The array of expensive cuttings and bridges that lined the route were



**Fact File:**  
**PEDALLING TO PALESTINE**

**DISTANCE:** 7,000km.

**ROUTE:** Through Belgium and Germany, then the Alps to Austria and Slovenia, along the Dalmatian Coast in Croatia, then through Kosovo into the heat of Greece. We then rode to Istanbul and south through Turkey, where we split into two groups.

**CONDITIONS:** Germany and the Alps were chilly in mid-April. Turkey in early June was very hot; we cycled only in the mornings and early evenings.

**ACCOMMODATION:** We free-camped everywhere. As we moved out of European countries, people began offering their homes, especially in Albania and Turkey.

**BIKE USED:** A heavy but robust Bronx Rambler Hybrid (£270) with Schwalbe Marathon Plus tyres.

**MAPS:** From petrol stations en route.

**I'M GLAD I HAD:** A sturdy roll matt for sleeping out anywhere. Others had inflatable matts that punctured.

**NEXT TIME I WOULD:** Not bother with trailers. You fill whatever carrying capacity you have. Our three trailers held seldom-used gas stoves, hand axes (for chopping wood) and other inessential kit. The trailers made the hills harder. We eventually gave them away.

**FURTHER INFO:** 100daystoPalestine.org

**ROUTE TO PALESTINE**



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|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1) South east England | 4) Bavaria, Germany     | 7) Kosovo and Albania |
| 2) Northern France    | 5) Austria and Slovenia | 8) Greece             |
| 3) Belgium            | 6) Croatia              | 9) Turkey             |
|                       |                         | 10) Palestine         |

conspicuous in a country notable for its poverty and rising public debt. Which foreign company had been paid to construct such a pricey and under-used road? (We later discovered it was US-Turkish consortium Bechtel-Enka, for an estimated 1billion euros. There were allegations of corruption.)

The lack of traffic on this road and the clear view ahead meant that we could take descents at full speed. After 60km on the E851, we were dismayed to find a traffic cop standing at the entrance to a 6km tunnel at Thirres. He prohibited us from cycling through, so we enlisted the help of a truck driver. He took us through with our bikes in the back and Balkan klezmer music blasting out of the stereo.

On the other side of the tunnel, we found the best descent of the entire trip: 10km without pedalling, to a lake where the sun was setting on a snow-capped mountain in front of us. We had bureks for dinner, then laid out our sleeping mats in the gardens of an abandoned hotel. It was a curious day.

**Protesting in Palestine**

After three months we arrived in Istanbul, where we joined an annual bike protest on the Bosphorus suspension bridge, calling for the installation of a cycle lane to connect the Asian and European halves of the city. Some of our group turned back here, lacking the money or time to continue. Our numbers were down to twelve.

Our route ahead was unclear. By June 2011, the pro-democracy uprising in Syria was receiving violent repression from the Assad government. The death toll was mounting. Refugees were pouring over the border into Turkey. Should we head

east across the plains of Turkey and travel through Syria, or south to the coast in search of a ferry across the Mediterranean? It was a split decision: some took a 24-hour, nervous bus ride through Syria to Jordan; others (including me) an expensive boat from Cyprus to Haifa in Israel.

Both groups reached the West Bank, where we would remain for two months. We met with community groups, farmers' unions, university students, and dissenting Israelis, all resisting the ongoing occupation and annexation of Palestinian land.

Our bikes were mostly retired in the August heat; we travelled around in shared taxis. But one village in Bil'in invited us to their weekly protest against the large concrete wall that cuts off villagers from their farmland. The protest was bicycle-themed. It was humbling to see these community activists – many of whom had been imprisoned, injured or lost family members – borrowing our bikes as we rode and marched together through the tear-gas and stun grenades fired by the Israeli Defence Force.

With each group we visited in Palestine, we shared stories of our travels and of the communities we had visited. My bike was eventually stolen whilst locked up a checkpoint near Jerusalem – a happy ending, as I was trying to sell it anyway and the insurance paid out back home.

We still talk of our time on the road. The sense of freedom, independence and physical fitness that travelling by bike brings was coupled with a sense of purpose about why we were travelling. It was about solidarity rather than charity – and a desire, shared by so many others, to see a just peace in the region. ●