



# Jordan by Bike: My Personal Journey

#NORA IN JORDAN

**Nora & Dimitar Mihaylov**

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**Jordan by Bike: My Personal Journey**  
**#Nora in Jordan**

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A leading character in a story has often been an iconic female: throughout history and over many literary genres. This book, a fusion of pictures, travelogue, and poetry, is an extension and unique interpretation of that long cultural tradition.

This time, our heroine is my Nora: a courageous and highly determined lady, and of course, a proud Bulgarian and European with a deep affection for the Middle East. The piste is her adventurous biking journeys around many areas in Jordan, close to our base in Amman, the capital city. In some ways, the format is actually more like a vinyl LP, not a collection of songs, but a series of short chapters, carved around images and impressions that have often been featured in well-known movies, such as "Lawrence of Arabia".



This book is as much a celebration of her spirit and determination, as it is an appreciation of the generous Jordanian people. The book also is especially dedicated to Nora's loyal and enthusiastic admirers on her social media channels.

أشجع النساء العربيات هي خوله بنت الأزور بن أوس بن خزيمة الاسدى التي عاشت ابان فترة الخلفاء الراشدين، و هي شاعرة و مقاتلة و قدوة للناس

This written project began as a mere suggestion of transforming Nora's biking experiences into a message of vision, poetry, and philosophy. The main inspiration was our deep affection for the land and the people. Jordan walked into our hearts as if it had always belonged there.

Gradually, the text and imagery evolved into cultural communication, a tool in the master box of public diplomacy, if you will. In a time of post-truth, when autocrats are proliferating manipulated content to deceive and foster enmities, ours is a message of connection, hope, and empathy. We believe that nature and people may inspire, bring together, and unite. We further believe that cultures mutually enrich, educating us to build bridges that enable us to move easily toward each other than might otherwise be possible.

The book's message is inspired by Prophet Isaiah's vision of peace: that swords should be beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:4), and by the Quranic vision that God created us male and female, and appointed races and tribes, that we know one another (Quran, 49:13). With this vision in our hearts and minds, we got to know Jordan and its people.

This pro bono and non-profit project could not have been completed without the efforts of valuable friends and like-minded birds of a feather. Antonia Stoyanova was our perpetuum mobile that elaborated with texts and pictures 24/7. Dr. Haidar Ibrahim generously provided "Panorama Printing House". Yvette Shumacher and Dr. Laurence Weinbaum helped with authentic English rhetoric. Brian O'Rourke and Reni Mihaylova rendered precious advice and suggestions. So did Haneen Abu Jamous.

Last but not least, it was my #Nora in Jordan and her love for the Jordanian people that provided the main spring of inspiration. Please be invited to enjoy it and join our ranks of lovers of Jordan.

***Dimitar Mihaylov***

Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria  
to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan



My name is Nora,  
but most people know me as „Nora in Jordan“!  
I would like to express my gratitude  
to the generous people of the blessed land of Jordan!

**"Spake he, in calm, - O hameh-bird,  
Well I know thy voice: I heed"  
"Hameh" by Henry D. Muir**

March 2020: It all began out of the blue. As if it was the beginning of the end. My heart started to thump louder and louder. I could not even hear anyone or anything. I was able to only make out the whisper of death creeping toward us quietly. Belatedly, I realized that fate had destined it to be just this way. That we could see and feel the golden sands of time running out. Our loved ones were on the verge of reaching their lives' demise. Inadvertently, the kiss of death was to be laid upon all of us. Dystopian as it may seem, this was totally different that the life we were used to having.

The Arabs call this *Maktub*. This is rather the colloquial word, the one in Islamic tradition would be *Qadar*, i.e., "it is written and destined to be as it is". Muslims believe that God decrees everything and that everything that happens is predestined. People make their free choices, but God knows what they will choose to do. "The Lord has created and balanced all things and has fixed their destinies and guided them." (Quran, 87:2-3)

Initially, I couldn't accept *Maktub*. I was laying in bed for a long time. Time crept along slowly; I procrastinated. The hours dragged on. From prayer to prayer with the sounds of the neighboring mosque, and the heartfelt and self-pitying voice of the muezzin echoed in the distance. It felt like a light at the end of the tunnel. That life somehow still exists outside these walls. Suddenly, I realized that the muezzin was inserting into his sacral call to prayer some other phrase "*sallu fi-buyuticum, sallu fi-buyuticum*".





These were not the usual words to call to prayer, “*dua*”. I jumped out of bed and asked my husband what exactly he was saying. “Pray at home”. People were not allowed to go outside, even for prayer!



Sadly, agonizingly sadly so, the days dragged on... As a *hameh*-bird hovering in the sky, crying with the crow of Edgar Allan Poe’s „The Raven”, Nevermore... Nevermore! My conscious mind refused to accept reality. I couldn’t distinguish day from night. And in my mind, the past, present, and future collided. I started to think more about the choices I made that brought me here, where I am now. I began to think if I should just leave, as my mind was definitely in another place. My mind was home, but where is home?



Diving into a deep sleep was my only escape. My dreams became my realm, where I could travel through time, return to my memories, and hug my loved ones. Time, that great judge, had sentenced me to endless solitude. There were people with me, but in my mind I was alone. My thoughts soared for a long time in my head - never finding where to land. It's like somebody was chasing them away like birds. Crying birds. The ancient Arabs called them *hameh*: a bird that vaults from the blood of a murdered victim, as they believed. Like my thoughts, *hameh* would not rest until it had drunk the murderer's blood.



In my mind, I dove into un-lived adventures. Closing my eyes, screaming silently out of joy for the adrenalin that was swirling in my veins. But then, again, who was the murderer: this pandemic that chained us to our homes, or our own weakness that caused us to be helpless, hapless, and unable to overcome obstacles?

Then came the pain of thinking that I might never see the faces of my loved ones again. Faced with the war in my mind, a creeping feeling of guilt was embracing my existence. Am I to blame for the decisions that I have made so far? Am I the reason that we are so far away from home?

I never knew just how meaningful the airports in Amman and Aqaba were to me until they were closed. I felt as if I were stuck in prison - serving a long-term sentence. The last glimmer of hope - that I could see my loved ones and return home - was extinguished. *Dum spiro spero*, the ancient Romans used to say, as long as I breathe, I hope. - But do I?



***"And I tell myself,  
a moon will rise from my darkness."  
Mahmoud Darwish***

My world was in some sort of trance. I fell asleep. I woke up. Prayer time. Then sleep again. Deep, deadly sleep. Without memories, with memories. The memory of the past was slowly being erased, day by day. As the memories faded away, I was left alone with my current thoughts.



Was I one of the Seven Sleepers, described both in the Holy Quran and Christian tradition, and known as the Sleepers of Ephesus and Companions of the Cave? The Seven Sleepers were plunged into deep perennial sleep to evade the persecution that the Romans were imposing on the Christians. What was my reason to sink into oblivion, to evade reality? Or hopefully, to wake up to a new reality?

Only a few white spots remained in my mind. They were reflections of a few bright personalities. They filled the vast space of silence that surrounded me. Thoughts raced madly through me. I'm alone. No, there are the two of us. There were the two of us, but I was alone again, with all my fears.

The loneliness made me live my past pain over and over as if it were my present. Loneliness is sacrosanct; loneliness is a mystery. Prophet Muhammad spent long hours in loneliness in the Cave of Hira before he heard the call: "Read in the name of your Lord, the Creator.." (Quran, 96:1). And the soul that sees beauty, as Von Goethe once said, may sometimes walk alone.





All that remained was the memory of the March 8, Women's Day that we celebrated at the residence, and the beautiful pink flowers which were given to all the dear ladies who came for the celebration. And the memory of my speech on equality:

"We, the women, we can and must emancipate ourselves. We must be equal with men! In any of our deeds, professions, and endeavors."

The more distant my voice got, the more the silhouettes of the world around me blurred. And the color of the pink flowers were changing as if it was fading in silence.



***"We blame our time though we are to blame.  
No fault has time but only us.  
Yet, we scold the time for all the shame."  
Imam ash-Shafi'i***

Day Four: my first opportunity to go outside. The bird may fly out of the cage. I went out for my skin to touch the sun, my eyes to meditate on the beauty of everything that I can see, and just to breathe. I took a deep breath as if I were breathing for my inner survival, my inner soul. But I still could not shake the feeling of that creeping, painful fear that something might hit me.

People were out; there was a ban on cars, so the streets of Amman were filled with people on bicycles. My friends approached me and asked, "Are you going out somewhere?" I couldn't trust my ears. I stayed another day at home while surrendering to the emptiness that filled my heart.





After the great fear, the emptiness followed suit. My face had lost its former spiritual features. My smile was frozen. I didn't know that a smile could freeze just like that, all of a sudden. I tried to force a smile on my face; alas, it turned out to be a failed grimace. They say the eyes are the window to the soul, but the light in my eyes was long extinguished. Only two large slits remained, hungrily absorbing the light from outside. Maybe I don't have much time left. How long do I have left till the end? But what is the end? *Maktub*. Is this the end? In the evening, I heard again the warnings sirens that assiduously emptied the space for silence to reign.

And then, again, came that menacing voice that warned people to avoid going outside. It was as if the voice were scolding someone. It definitely scolded me. I waited every evening. I waited for the alarm and the threatening voice. Was this the beginning of the so-called Stockholm Syndrome that embraced me? I'm starting to like being locked up; I'm starting to like the alarm. The sound of the strange policeman who had some assurance in his voice, I am to follow his instructions, and we will be safe. I've grown to like all the restrictions. To like the world which I have created in my mind, to accept my pain, which started to fade, and to have a whole new beginning in my soul and mind.



My mind was focused on a single self-rescuing thought – to survive. I exist. I exist.

I used to love wandering into the neighborhood shops in Amman and looking at the quirky wares in them. I remember the last pair of shoes I bought before the stores closed. Those shoes were the most beautiful I owned, with gold high heels, all covered in crystals. They are still in a box in the closet, unopened. The shoes I was planning to wear to a reception were now so unnecessary. It all seemed too absurd. Only the memory of those noisy parties with colorful dresses and evening suits lingered on. Vanity fair?! However, it seemed to be from another era. Lost in oblivion. Scents also disappeared. I remember the smell of food in the neighboring streets, the most edible dish was *shawarma*, not to mention *mansaf* for excessive celebration.



***"The journey, not the destination matters..."***  
***T.S. Eliot***

I woke up at dawn. I took my bike and snuck out pedaling through the desolate streets of Amman. The town had become a ghost place. A town with no people. Cars and people: nowhere to be seen. Then my thoughts flew to the stray cats. Do they realize what actually happened? Where are the people? The cars? There was no one outside.

There was no one on the Abdun Bridge. I rode, with all my might, as I desperately strived to take the first breath of freedom. This breath made me become alive again. As if I were dead, a live body with no soul in it.



I reached the much-acclaimed Rainbow Street. It was now desolate. I looked up: a few colorful pennants fluttering alone, swaying in the wind. In the distance, I could spot a beautiful red-haired girl and an old man staring at her lone silhouette that was slowly fading away. A cat moved past my bike. Finally meeting a living creature. The shops were closed. The vast emptiness that reigned around and silence. Time seemed to have stopped forever. We were lonely. A little further in the distance, people walked like ghostly shadows. No one was talking to anyone.



I went crazy on my bike. I rode faster and faster, going as fast as I could, trying to reach, with no specific place in mind, some point of destination. Finally, I took my hands off the bike and closed my eyes, feeling the wind touching my skin.

The bike was just riding itself as if I were its passenger, not the driver. Could freedom sometimes be harmful or suicidal? And, what to do with freedom once you get it so suddenly. After the so-called "Arab Spring", many in the neighborhood were asking this question.

I found myself reaching the old Roman amphitheater. The main street was deserted. Before, I barely could cross the street itself because of the endless swarms of cars, and could barely breathe from the exhaust fumes. I wanted to see my friend, but I was afraid of carrying the infection, so we met on the stairs outside. She brought the coffee. We talked for a long time. We tried to go back to everyday topics, but we actually kept coming back to the main issue again and again. Furthermore, we had changed in those few days. As if we had nothing to talk about; as if we were total strangers to each other.

The news in the Bulgarian and international media was spewing Covid information, 24/7. You and I have changed, my friend, not the old fellows anymore! Was this pandemic a transformational factor? I felt tears welling up in my eyes. In one of those moments, I was struggling with myself in despair. I could no longer count on our daily meetings. Our conversations faded away. We fell into silence. It seemed to me that we were afraid to speak about what was unthinkable to speak about before. Words were not sufficient. Words no longer meant anything. We were happy until the first shadows of the crisis forever changed the direction of our friendship.

Another day. Perhaps that frantic thirst for life is tearing me apart. Where did this brave courage of mine come from? In a world that is too static, here I came to break the stereotype of behavior, the paradigm of mores. A foreigner, a woman alone on a bike throughout Jordan? Strange, isn't it?







***„One does not attain everything he wishes for.  
Winds blow counter to what the ships desire.”  
Al-Mutanabbi***

This peculiarity of mine.... Perhaps it all started a long time ago. And I love these parts of me, the parts which come out as if they were new, but no one knows that I had them living inside me. Perhaps they need the right timing to come out.

Thirst for life or self-destruction, the madness of some sort, escape from reality? Or is this all about my inability to accept reality itself, or it is the freedom to do what I've always dreamed of? What is the freedom of the free? Or perhaps, this was my desire to inspire confidence in others that nothing had changed. The same old story, life remains the same. Nora is the same person, with no incarnation into a different person so far.

The day was rolling back slowly like a bicycle tire. Then it gained momentum, descending deeper and deeper into the heart of Jordan. Each of my bicycle journeys was gradually becoming an ever louder cry for freedom. As if we are the kings of the world. As if the world were in our hands.

I was learning to be free. I was writing my first pages of freedom. But does freedom have limitations? Rule number one: always have enough water! Little did I know that this mad thirst for freedom would turn into a mad thirst for water, for this blessed vital fluid.

I cycled through the dusty streets on the outskirts of the city of Madaba, after seeing a dear friend, Madaba Tourism Director, Wael Janini. My lips were cracked with thirst. I bit them harshly to teach myself a lesson not to forget. When you go on the road, you always have to calculate the amount of water you will need. I cycled straight until black circles started appearing in front of my eyes. I was looking for one of the small shops that were still open. But I didn't find anything. At one point in the distance, I spotted the shadow of a veiled woman. I asked her about water, "*Fi moya?*" (Is there any water?). It is surprising that to this day I have not learned to properly pronounce water in Arabic, which is *maa'*. Instead, I would always be mumbling, *maya, mya, moya*...and other oddities. I was mumbling the words, hoping that she could understand me, feel me, and help me.



Instead of directing me to a nearby store, the woman asked me to wait, and after a while brought out a large water bottle with ice cubes in it. As if she handed me the world in a bottle. To revive me to new life. It was as described in the Quran: "And Allah sends down rain from the skies, and gives therewith life to the earth after its death..." (Quran, 16:65). I was almost dead, and I was resurrected. I completely forgot about the Covid-19 pandemic. I forgot the social distance imposed on us. I drank water until I felt a great pain in my throat. The liquid flowed all over my body, and after a while, the horizons became crystal clear before my eyes. I felt the water going to my heart, pumping it into my veins.



I kept on biking as long as I could. While riding the bike, my pain started to subside, and the fear gradually disappeared. Riding helps me focus on my goals. It makes me see the world through the eyes of a cyclist; it helps me carefully calculate the strength that will propel my next big climb! Riding my bike is my belt of salvation.

Every step forward is bolder than ever. In sports, there are no boundaries, because human abilities are unlimited. Sports make us bolder. Sports have no age, gender, race, or affiliation because in the sporting arena, everyone is equal! Sports brings us together.



***"The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother."  
Matthew 14:9-11***

My trip to Mukawir. Mukawir, which in the Greek language is Machaerus (Μαχαίροϋς), the Black Fortress, is the place where, according to the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus, John the Baptist was imprisoned and executed. The order came from king Herod Antipas. Herod was so impressed by his daughter, Salome, with her dance and performance, that he promised he would give her anything she asked. And Salome, instigated by her mother, asked for nothing but the head of John the Baptist.

My journey started early in the morning. As if I woke up earlier than usual to beat the traffic. So, I careened down the road from Madaba. The only thing that guided me was my GPS; it was my "pillar of cloud". (This pillar was a wonderful sign of God's presence, a theophany, that guided the Israelites through the desert during the Exodus from Egypt – Exodus 14:24 and 16:10; Numbers 12:5, and through their wanderings in the wilderness.) Later on, I learned that in Islam, there is a belief that Prophet Muhammad was constantly protected by a moving cloud hanging over him while he was traveling in the desert.

The pillar I mentioned above was cloudy by day: to show the way to the Israelites, and fiery by night: to give them a guiding light (Exodus 13:21,22 and 14:19,20).

Prophet Isaiah, symbolically, wrote about God’s protection over the church, in the form of a cloud during the day and night (Isaiah 4:5). I was moving along on my bike while constantly trying to identify my “pillar of cloud” or my “cloud protector” in the sky. Alas, none were seen. I was overtaken by fear, fear that I had dared to be different. Then I felt exhilaration at the opportunity that I could bike at will. Did I know what fear was? In the evenings, I secretly drew plans and stretched my sight to detect the pillar of fire at night. Alas, our time was not an epoch of revelation.

And I was afraid, yes, terribly afraid, of the unknown. I was even scared of myself, scared of my audacity and courage. Furthermore, I was apprehensive that if I didn’t succeed, thousands of voices would scream as one in my mind, “Haven’t we told you so!” I was afraid of meeting someone. I was afraid of not meeting anyone.



I was afraid I would lose my way. Sometimes, I even lost it. It was hot. When it is hot, my mind boils and boggles. My mind refuses to function, like a badly tuned GPS...



I'm back on my way to Mukawir. When I started, I didn't know if I would have enough strength to make it to the end. I rode the bike for a long time. My heart seemed to stop at a certain moment. My eyes stared into the depths below because I was hanging over a precipice. My legs wobbled. I was scared to death as if the fear was surrounding me all over again. At the same time, I felt exhilarated. I was exalted by the wilderness of desert nature that conquered my heart. And my heart belongs to adventurous cycling.



My eyes devoured the surrounding beauty. No pen of a poet or brush of a painter can be eloquent enough to convey the sight that unfolded before me. I felt like a tiny grain of sand lost in the wasteland. I kept on moving. A car or two passed by me. The last drops of water were running out. I hoped to find water... I hoped to find water... These were my only lonely thoughts... Like the Biblical Hagar, I waited for a miracle to happen and for God to open my eyes so I could see "a well of water" (Genesis 21:19). Like the thirsty Hagar and her son Ishmael in the Quran, I was desperately hoping to find my Zamzam well, running back and forth through Safa and Marwa hills.

I passed through some dilapidated and deserted houses. It was as if I was in the village of Pripjat where the terrible Chernobyl nuclear accident happened on 26 April 1986. My lips cracked with thirst, my eyes burned with fever, and the sun burned my skin. I got off the bike and looked for shade to hide for at least a moment while recovering my breath. I went up the steep slope, again.

First ascent, then descent. This was a real test of will. Was I at the boundaries of human abilities? Are there actually limits to human abilities? In the distance, as if it were a different world, I saw a gas station. I fell in a mood as the lyrics of the Eagles' "Hotel California", *Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light, my head grew heavy, and my sight grew dim, I had to stop for the night.*



Mukawir is commonly known as the "Castle of the Gallows" due to the fact that John the Baptist was beheaded here.

When I arrived, the guy working there gave me a bottle of cold water. The life-giving liquid poured into my veins and the shadow of fear that hovered over me dissipated. I continued on my way. There, in the middle of the desert, in the middle of nowhere, I found a toy store open. It seemed almost absurd. But it was not: Jordan is full of children. The fact of the matter is that the child population in Jordan is a bit less than 4 million, constituting about 40% of the total population.



I continued down to Mukawir Fort. There were several dilapidated ruins around, they say from the first century AD. The gate to what remained from the Mukawir fortress was closed. The strangest thing I spotted there was a hotel built to welcome the pilgrims. The look at the Dead Sea from there is worth making your way to it.

Yet, the hotel stood there somewhat grotesquely in the middle of the desert, moreover during this time of Covid-19.



The land was desolate and without people; “formless and empty”, as the Bible describes it at the very beginning (Genesis 1:2). The earth was taking the load of the poisonous car fumes off its chest. The earth was taking a break from us all. The sky was insanely blue, and the air was crystal clear. Silence! Engulfed by this emptiness, I hearkened to the sound of silence as I drove through the desert lands. The fear was giving way to a kind of supernatural calm.

***"Personality is reduced and deformed with depleted thoughts and stagnant mind."  
King Hussein of Jordan***

Depleted thoughts and stagnancy always scared me. This is not my cup of tea. Freedom to move and explore the world is my loadstar. Amman seemed too narrow for me, locking me inside its frames like a bird in a cage. My inner horizons were wider. My soul soared through the vast wheat fields of Madaba. One day, as I was biking through the Madaba region, I heard the song of wheat. I listened to it as if I were in rapture.



I began to understand the true value of the immaterial, intangible world and also of freedom. I began to feel hungry, hungry for adventure. Furthermore, I hadn't talked to almost anyone in a long time. Words began to lose their meaning. I attached more importance to the opportunity to communicate with nature. I felt a kind of reverence for nature. It was as if I merged with it, melted my soul into its fold. Alone among the wheat fields, alone among the olive trees. The wind and the sun were my companions.

Why did I keep riding anyway? Because my purpose is to meet with ordinary people in Jordan countryside? To melt my soul into nature? Jordanians are good because they teach their children to be good to all people. Because kindness is their primordial essence. Are they an extension of nature? Or maybe they follow the admonition of the Prophet, "Verily, Allah has sent me with the perfection of noble morals and completion of good deeds." Or another one that, "Righteousness is good manners."



Another time I stood in amazement staring at some beautiful sight. Nature in Jordan conquers me with its majestic beauty. Whether in the middle of the desert or by the Dead Sea, whether by some forgotten village or taking a long look at the wheat ears, I always found another reason to go somewhere with my bike. These forgotten villages have history, a story I will surely discover in one of my next adventures.

Nature in Jordan is eternal, springing from the primordial past and preserving the divine creation from its very first moment. And a close encounter with such nature is only possible when you're on a bike, not when you're watching from behind the window of a car.

Therefore, I completely understand why Gertrude Bell, a 19 and 20th-century English writer, traveler, administrator, and archaeologist, a daughter of a wealthy British family, lost interest in London's splendid life and preferred to be Queen of the Desert.

Insofar as I contemplate nature in Jordan, I cannot miss the day I found my way to the King Talal dam. I rode for a long time, sometimes stopping to look at the map to see if I was on the right path, riding without roads until I reached the majestic view from above the dam. It felt like I was on top of the world.













My name Nora comes from the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen's play "A Doll's House", where the main character is called Nora: Nora Helmer – wife of Torvald, mother of three, and an exemplum of the 19th-century housewife, but one who leaves her family at the end of the play. Nora is a symbol of a rebellious, independent woman. She rebels against the limited ideas that chain women in society. She fights and wins her independence. Her character is a symbol of free will and bold determination. Perhaps by nature, I am also a rebel who fights for her place in the world. Thus, on May 17th, Norwegian Constitution Day, I found myself cycling to Scandinavian Forest.





I was trying to avoid Jerash highway. For the first part of my cycling, I was climbing many hills. For a moment I was breathless. The only problem I faced was that my phone lay in my satchel and I couldn't look at the map more often to get oriented. Where am I indeed? I passed by some interesting places and villages until I ended up in the Scandinavian Forest. It was closed as usual, but I just continued downhill until I reached the Thailand forest. I sat there for a while watching the blue sky and the white clouds. It was just an amazing day! #norainjordan #CyclingJordan #bikewithme #Scandinavianforest #ScandinavianforestAmman

P.S. If you go for a bike ride to the Scandinavian Forest, I definitely recommend switching to the Google Map walking regime. Enjoy! That's how I celebrated Norwegian Constitution Day, "Gratulerer med dagen!" (Happy Constitutional Day!).

On the road again! This time I chose a different destination, the Um ar Rasas historic site. It is a complex of churches half-destroyed by time but protected under the auspices of UNESCO. I would ride the bike when it was steeper, and I would get out of breath, stop the bike and push it ahead while walking next to it. There is always one more hill to climb in Jordan.

I kept riding my bike, sometimes reaching speeds of up to 50 km per hour. Bold and daring. My wheels rattled rhythmically, but I was used to the noise as if it were the rhythm of my heart. In fact, the rattling noise attracted all the dogs in the vicinity. Sometimes, the bike and I merged into one. Sometimes, to encourage myself, I would talk to my bike as if it were alive. I spiritualized it as long as it was my companion. My bike is my comfort, always there for me, at the best of times, or the worst of times, as Dickens said.

I forgot to tell you that my bike had a given name. Vorsh, as the old dog in Fredrik Backman's novel. Maybe my bike and I had become so bonded that I felt as if it were a close friend, my only friend in my adventures. How much does one person need, - a GPS, some water, and a bike?

The road to Um ar Rasas is about 40 kilometers, measured from the starting point of the road to Madaba. The road I took was picturesque. I passed through quiet villages. It was as if life had stopped there. Then my itinerary wended through rocky areas where there was probably water once, for there were the remains of fortresses.

ΚΤΙΣΘΗΚΕΤΕΝΩΟΙΟΝΟΑΓΙΟΕΝΑΟΣ  
ΗΝΗΔΙΟΤΙΝΔΕΤΟΕΤΟΥΣΥΠΛΑ



When I reached Um ar Rasas I saw only one policeman guarding the site. He promised to look after my bike, and I went in to explore this extraordinary place, which was eerily deserted inside. It gave me goosebumps, the chills, hearing the place telling me a story, only to me! But it was as if the entire complex were engulfed in light. In one of the churches, I noticed remnants of beautifully inscribed mosaics. But I left the most beautiful church for last. It was the church of St. Stephen. Inside, I marveled at the extraordinary wealth, particularly impressed by the topographic and urban mosaics. I walked alone in the silence. No, I was not afraid, not even for a moment. I was filled with an indescribable feeling. Not only was I to discover the place, but I also was revealing some hidden parts of myself.



***"Cognito, ergo sum."  
René Descartes***

A glimpse of hope. I gradually started to ride my bike to new adventures. Years ago, while I was in the region of the Middle East, I listened to an interesting lecture in which it was mentioned that Christians look for the Savior in life. They live with the hope that they are saved, while the Jews, a suffering people throughout history, are only interested in the fact that they exist. This existential question troubled me for a long time. To survive at all costs, regardless of the circumstances. I exist! I am alive, I breathe the air of this earth! I EXIST.



Likewise, I rode my bike into oblivion. I ride my bike; therefore, I exist. Every day I discovered new and new unknown horizons. One day I set out for Mount Nebo. Mount Nebo is the location where Moses first saw the Promised Land and, according to the Bible, God told him that he would not set foot on it. Later on, I learned that the Quran also talks about Prophet Musa and his people wandering in Sinai, "My people! Enter the holy land which Allah has ordained for you; and do not turn back, for then you will turn about losers" (Quran 5:21). How deeply related and close to each other are the three monotheistic religions, these were my thoughts while standing in Mount Nebo. Then, I went back to Madaba.



The ride was very pleasant, yet the streets were still deserted. Cars hardly passed. The best part of the road was the last kilometers because the speed I was developing on the descent reached over 50 km per hour. When I first arrived at Mount Nebo, everything was closed. It was desolate and sad. During the days before, you could barely pass on your way ahead because of the busloads of tourists. Now, there wasn't a lost soul around. Silence. Like I'm the only survivor on planet earth. I was reminded of Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince" who, in a cry of desperation, howled, "Where are the people?... It's a little lonely in the desert..."

On the way back, the GPS took me down a different road. At one point I realized that it was spinning me round and round in one and the same vicious cycle. I felt that it was a kind of merry-go-round, looking at the same things from different angles and seeing them for the first time. I was looking at the map and hoping to get out of this vicious cycle. Not only that, but I was spinning, turning left, then right, then left again. I tried my best to rid myself of this vertigo, but I couldn't get out. There was no way out. I stood under the shade of a tree and called my husband on the phone. "Come and find me, I'm lost!" A lost soul?



***"Of all the public places, dear  
to make a scene, I've chosen here."  
Simon Armitage, "Give", "The Dead Sea Poems"***

Perhaps one of the most interesting bike trips I have ever taken in Jordan was on the way to the Dead Sea. Several times I tried to overcome all the hills. Alas, with no positive result. I rode even when it was raining. I rode even when there was no one on the road.

It is a psychological frontier for me, but I promised myself to take this challenge to another level. And I will make it before long. I rode because I wanted to get to the end. When I first reached the cherished goal, I found my Zen place! By Zen, I mean a place of solitude and peace of mind.

It is located almost on the very shore of the Dead Sea. It is a small bungalow complex called Mujib Chalet. One of the most beautiful places I've ever been. It is so wild that its beauty conquers me. No coincidence that the resort is run by the Wild Jordan foundation. It is located on the middle of shores of the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea is a place full of soul, a place full of unspoken stories from the past. There, John the Baptist and the Essenes [a mystic sect that flourished from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE] introduced genuinely different ideas that were to change the world. There, at the dawn of the new era, came the new identity of Messiah. It introduced Jesus as the savior of all people. From there came the idea of acceptance of the Gentiles as God's people, through baptism.

Here I can do whatever I want: I can stack pebbles, ride a bike, float in the water, and explore new unknown frontiers. Every pebble seems painfully familiar to me. Every stone narrates to me a story, from the distance past.



One day I was walking along an open, uninhabited beach. The water was crystal clear, so clear that you could see every pebble on the bottom. The colors of the sea were emerald blue. In the evening, I used to watch the sunset and listen to the howl of the wind as it intended to sweep away everything. As the long-forgotten tribe of Ad, destroyed by a furious, bitter wind – *sarsar*. I imagine that I am on a ship floating in the middle of the endless ocean. The curtains of the bungalow in which we are staying are billowing like the sails of a ship. When all is quiet at night, I watch the passing cars in the far distance on the road that appear and disappear like fireflies in the dark. In the morning, I wake up before dawn and plunge into the salty waters. This is my wonderful, unique, and solitary place!

As the beggar in Armitage's poem "Give", I have found my unique place, my shelter at the Dead Sea shores. I have found my Zen shrine there.



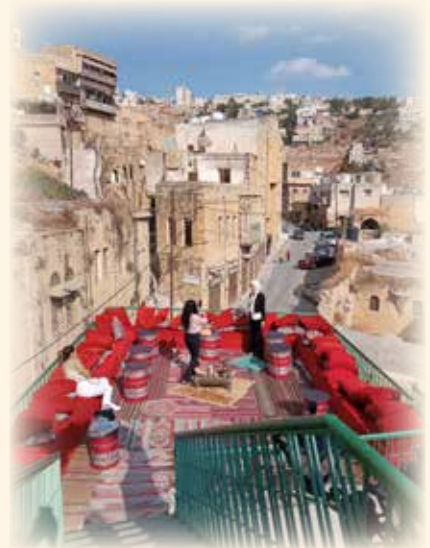






My trip to Al-Salt. The first capital of the Emirate of Transjordan, from which the present-day kingdom would emerge. For the first time, I set out for Salt without a pre-rendered route. I just followed the GPS from Google Maps. My route was not marked. That's why I ended up on the highway. These kinds of not previously marked itineraries are my best kind of trips. Cars were speeding by me on both sides. I decided to continue, despite the difficulties. On the way, I met some cattle sellers. To them, I must have been a strange sight, a surreal silhouette - a woman alone on a road with heavy traffic. I don't know how long I wandered until I found the right way. But what is the right way? Eventually (all roads lead to Rome). And also in the Quran, is written about the straight path, *huda*. Where was my *huda*?





I climbed various hills. I was panting, getting off the bike, and pushing it in front of me. Then I kept on moving. At one point, I went off-road. The weather was hot. But I was determined to reach the fabulous city of Salt. Salt with its two neighborhoods: Harra and Akrad.

As I approached the city, I saw that the streets were deserted. There was no one around. I left the bike and entered the Archaeological Museum, which was under renovation. The museum is housed in a magnificent home built in 1905 for the wealthy local Toucan family. Inside, I met the director, who offered me a cup of coffee. We talked about bygone ages, history, and people once inhabiting this place.

Salt turned out to be a magical city built entirely of limestone. An ancient city, known since Roman times, its name originates from the Latin word "Saltus", which means forest. One of my favorite sites in Salt is Al Khader Orthodox Church. Al Khader actually stands for St. George of Lydda, venerated by Christians and Muslims alike. Al Khader means the "green prophet". The church with the holy cave in it was built in 1682. Many believe that miracles have happened here. My miracle was that I came alone on my bike to Salt unscathed.



On the road, on the road again! As if the road is my destiny. Nothing could stop my drive to conquer new heights, to meet new people! You see much more when you travel by bike than when you travel by car. In the car, you are like a bird in a cage; on a bicycle on your way, you are a free bird. You simply "*spread your wings and fly away, far away*", as Freddie Mercury sings.



In my encounters with strangers, I felt the kindness of Jordanians. When they passed by me with their cars while I was riding my bike, they always greeted me, and honked their horns, displaying benevolence towards me.

Ordinary Jordanians were always ready to help me. It is in their very nature. While I was passing a field in Madaba where people were picking vegetables, they would stop me and give me fresh cucumbers. They were delicious as if I tasted them for the first time. A farm-fresh cucumber.

They would choose the youngest ones among the pile, and also fresh carrots. If I asked to pay them, they would hastily reply, *haram*, it is a sin to take money from a stranger. I later found out that the Quran commands good treatment of *Ibn Sabeel*. It is generally accepted that *Ibn Sabeel* is a traveler who does not have enough money to support his journey. So, in Islamic Law, he is entitled and eligible to receive alms, *Zakat* in order to finish his journey regardless of his ethnicity, religion, or skin color.

Was I *Bint Sabeel*, a female of *Ibn Sabeel* in the eyes of the good Jordanians? Or just a foreigner who lost her way?



Once, on my way to Iraq Al Amir, I was greeted by a swarm of children who had strung necklaces of flowers on themselves. They had invested a lot of love and labor into making them. I always had a few dinars: coins or small bills with me. I stopped and gave them pocket money for chocolates and drinks because I knew that would make them happy. And it's always nice when *Bint Sabeel* receives and gives to others. It is more blessed to give than to receive, as a great teacher shows us the way.



Jordanians helped me even when I lost my way. They would see that I couldn't find the right way. They would give me advice on everything. I also learned the word *Bismillah* - in the name of the All-Merciful God. When you're faced with a challenge, you say this magic word, and things come to order. As if God is everywhere in Jordan! God is in the hearts and minds of men, whether they call the Almighty: God, Lord, or Allah. People are good, and while goodness radiates from them, they share what little they have at the table.





Once we were walking in a canyon. There, we met a man who was making bread and tea using the water from the canyon. Immediately, without hesitation, he broke off the bread and poured us tea. In Jordan, the guest is sacred, as if sent by God. The greatest mercy is if you are kind to the foreigner and stranger. Later I found out that with the Arabs, the guest stays for three days, eats and drinks, and no one asks him for what business he has come. Only when the third day is over, the hosts can ask why the guest is there.



I felt this sincere hospitality both in the home of the richest and in the home of the poorest. Jordanians do not do it ostentatiously, with a sense of superiority, but give their best spontaneously. If you sit down for a cup of tea, even with the most unlearned shepherd, you will feel how all the wisdom has gathered in one gesture, uttered by a few simple, but frank and heart-touching words. What beautiful, generous morals I have found in these people!

Sometimes I have this overwhelming feeling that I want to escape to their world, to be a daughter of the desert, cut off from the whole civilized world, living the ordinary life of the Jordanians. They know everything about herding, about the seasons, about life. Even though few of them have a Ph.D. from top universities, they pass their wisdom and life guidance to each new generation, by telling stories to their children. They are possessed of the wisdom not to complicate life as most of us do in our post-modern world.



Recently, I came across another soulmate, a British - Rebecca Lowe, who boldly crossed the whole Middle East, single and on bike. She published an article with a BBC News website embellished with a title, "Is it foolish for a woman to cycle alone across the Middle East? I have to confess: The same question sometimes haunts me. Such courage and audacity to crisscross the whole Middle East I have none, yet with one of Rebecca's thoughts I couldn't agree more, "Throughout the Middle East, it was the same. Doors were forever flung wide to greet this strange, two-wheeled anomaly who was surely in need of help, and possibly psychiatric care." God is my witness: Everywhere I cycled in Jordan the doors were wide open to "the strange creature on a bicycle". However, psychiatric care was out of the question for my soul always rejoiced in Jordan.



When you travel for a long time, you inevitably come across stray dogs. Important rule: how to protect yourself from dogs on the road. I'll be honest, I met a lot of dogs on the roads of Jordan while cycling. The first time I was chased by dogs, I was very scared and continued to ride the bike at a furious speed until I managed to escape from them. Of course, I was yelling the whole way. It seems they were defending their territory or just running after the moving wheel, which stray dogs occasionally do.



It happened to me that when a dog chased me, cars on both sides of the road would stop and Jordanians would rush to help me.

***Here are my tips for protecting yourself while cycling when dogs attack:***

- 1- Firstly, don't panic!
- 2- You have two options. The first one is to ride as fast as you can. But sometimes that doesn't work.
- 3- Stop the bike and walk slowly. Remember, dogs are following you because that's their territory. Dogs like to bark at the wheels of the bike. Don't be afraid! Barking dogs seldom bite.
- 4- Usually, dogs stay close to a flock, so look for the shepherds they might be helping.



Dogs chased me as I climbed from Moses Springs to Mount Nebo. Then I faced real danger because there was no one around. I tried to throw a stone, but that just made them angrier. The situation was almost hopeless. Suddenly, a bunch of children jumped out of the nearby tents trying to help me.



One began to push my bicycle, the others drove the dogs away, and so on, until we climbed almost to the very top of Nebo. The Jordanian children in the area rescued me from the angry dogs. I do not know why, but I got the feeling that most children here are raised on manhood as if they do not live their full childhood to the fullest.

When there is no way, I am the way! I was trying to find alternate routes to avoid riding on the expressways. Then I set the path on my GPS and followed a “walking regime”, but sometimes I found myself going in a completely different direction. As often happens in life, good intentions not always translate into actions.

Spring in Jordan is filled with the scent of almonds, tinted by the color of red anemones, crowned by the grace of black iris! The black iris is the national flower of Jordan. It is one of the rarest and most beautiful flowers worldwide.



Red anemones are also very graceful. It has been said, since Biblical times, that even King Solomon, in all his splendor, was not dressed "like one of these" (Matthew, 6:29). One of Van Gogh's most famous paintings is named "Blooming Almonds": a symbol of early spring and emerging life. Indeed, springtime in Jordan comes with a rich palette of colors. Animal life is also present everywhere. Herds can be seen, even in Amman. Sometimes, it is a surrealistic vision. Earth is reborn for a new cycle of life. The rhythm of nature with all its cycles is nowhere to be seen so conspicuously and clearly as in Jordan!





After all that has been said, I intend to introduce to you another topic, borrowed from my friend. Homes in Amman. When you look from the outside, every home seems to be designed as if it is calling you in.

I encountered so much warmth and humanity among the Jordanians in their homes. They are ready to warmly welcome every guest. I tried their traditional *mansaf* dish, which consists of lamb cooked in fermented dried yogurt and served with rice or bulgur. Initially, *mansaf*, which means "large platter", was prepared by the Bedouins as a dish of camel or lamb meat cooked with broth.

Now, it is almost the Jordanian national food served to foreign guests as a token of respect and a symbol of friendship towards them. I proudly learned how to cook *maqlubah*. For that reason, I bought two glazed pots: one for Jordan, and one for my kitchen in Bulgaria.



This sense of hospitality is everywhere. A glass door stands in front of the house to provide a sense of comfort and hospitality. It's as if the owner will come out and invite you to tea. Amman doors create an impression of open space. *Ahlan wa sahlan*, welcome!!! Welcome, as if only God can invite you into His paradise, as if He opens His gates to you, and embraces you. Welcome! Perhaps God is closest to the Jordanians because they are good. To the stranger, to the foreigner, to *Ibn Sabeel*.



The divine manifestation finds its way not in the proud, self-forgetful, all-having people but rather in the ordinary people of Jordan. And if you don't believe me, go where God has many magnificent manifestations because goodness always has many faces. Homes in Amman are peace of Paradise, or *Jannah* in Arabic (جَنَّة): the final abode of the righteous, which also could mean a hidden, for the human eyes, eternal garden.

The magnificence of God is manifested in many ways, because goodness has many faces. So many good Jordanian friends; so many doors opened with generosity to host and comfort us. And always starting with cardamom-spiced Arabic coffee. There is a secret here: first small cup, *finjan*, is for *heif* – to taste and quench your thirst; second *finjan* is the obligatory one, for *dhaif* – to honor the guest; third is for pleasure, for *kaif*; but if you are to drink the fourth one, it will be for the sword, *saif*. This means you entered into alliance with your host, so you will defend him, with arms if necessary, in time of ordeal and trouble.



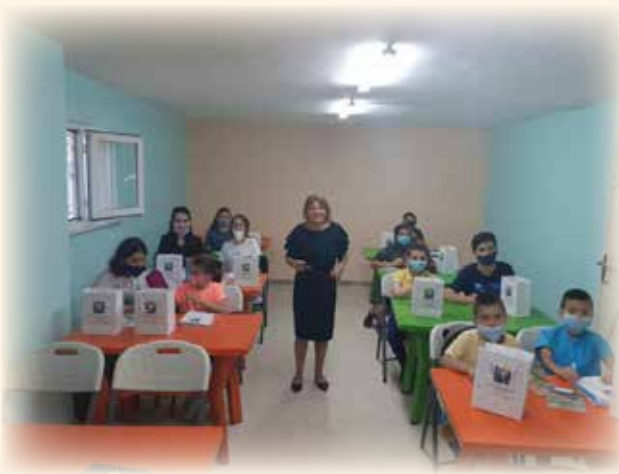
I cannot enumerate the names of all the friends who made us *walimah* (a feast) in their homes, but it would be unfair to leave out Mr. Jamal Abu Issa, President of Omnix International with Nabeel Bakri in the fairy-tale mansion *Sidra* in Na`ur, and Ali Al Fayez and his family in their home in Al Lubban.







I am back in Amman again. The dusty Vorsh, my trustworthy bicycle, rests after a tireless run through the fields and rocks around Amman. Outside, the flowers are still redolent. Spring breathes its last gasps, then comes the hot summer. Today, while I was riding, I was mentally mapping out my next cycling adventures! A last breath of spring, the orchids are in bloom. Impossibly yours!



Where do I start first? In my world, there are no dates and days... The first marked day would be Sunday! Then I'm a teacher at the Bulgarian Sunday School that we opened at the embassy. I have to devote myself to the children and teach them the Bulgarian language.

I must for a little while forget my Vorsh and the wild longing for travel. Therefore, I think now about you and me. In fact, you love me more than I love myself. No dates, no days. We live in a chain of sunrises and sunsets, with days and nights in between. I remembered Alan Parsons' song, *Days are numbers, count the stars (remember), we can only go so far, one day, you'll know where you are*. Do I know where I am? In Jordan, the eternal Jordan... If I'm sad, you just stand there worried. You don't know what to say, you never knew.

Then, ready to travel again. The bike is waiting for me, tight and polished, like a saddled horse shuddering to be reined in by its rider. I ask myself, am I a nomad who rides on the wings of my bike? Is my life similar to the one of the nomads? I left my home, my mother and father, my children, and my friends. I am almost like the ancient Arab poet Shanfara, who was sa'luk (صعلوك) brigand-poet, abandoned by his tribe to wander alone in the desert. Shanfara lived his life alone with wolves, leopards, hyenas, and other wild animals as he describes in his "Lamiyyah", an ode that ends with the Arabic letter "L" as rhyme. I ride my bike alone, and if I have to write an ode, it will be about my loneliness in the desert where really you know who you are.





## BIKE WITH ME, MY FRIENDS

The wildness of travel... wanderings of the free spirit. As a Bulgarian poet wrote almost a century ago, "And that wild longing for the Philippines, for the big stars over the city of Famagusta..." This wildness and obsession for freedom were obviously in my blood. I imagined how the great medieval Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta, a master of the world's best genres of travel literature, the Rihlah, was riding his camel cutting long distances to meet people, places, and cultures. More recently, as a part of the Western counterculture, free travel was one of these elements that opposed the established conservative norm. As Jack Kerouac writes in his cult book, "Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road."



Suffice to mention the image of Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper) riding their Harley-Davidson motorcycles in search of spiritual truth to the sounds of "Born to be wild" in "Easy Rider". All these epitomized in my mind the longing for the freedom of a disobedient soul. And what better than the magnificent Jordanian landscape to make this idea a reality.

## BIKE WITH ME, MY FRIENDS

***The moon is full,  
mounts and saddle frames secured  
for distant crossings.  
Michael A. Sells, Six Arab Odes – Shanfara***





## BIKE WITH ME, MY FRIENDS

***Travel! You will find a replacement for what you have left.***

***And strive! The sweetness of life is in striving!***

***I've seen that water stagnates if still becomes pure  
if it runs, but not if it doesn't flow***

***If the lion doesn't leave his den, he cannot hunt,  
and the arrow will not strike without leaving its bow...***

***Imam ash-Shafi'i***



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## BIKE WITH ME, MY FRIENDS



***„A man is a true man when he is on the road!“***

***Penio Penev***

## BIKE WITH ME, MY FRIENDS

Bike with me, my friends! Seeing the world through the eyes of a cyclist, boldly calculating the forces for the next big climb! Every step forward is bolder, bolder than ever. As Sting sings, "*every breath you take, every move you make*". All these will get you stronger. All these will open up your horizons.

A Thousand Splendid Suns! I could not count the moons that shimmer on my roof or the thousand splendid sons that hide behind my walls, as Khaled Hosseini writes. I could only give their moonlight and sunshine to you. Because of you, my friends! You give me the strength to open my eyes every day and know that there are new adventures ahead. How much does a person need - a bicycle, some water and thousands of bright suns! Ride with me in rain and shine! My name is Nora! #Nora in Jordan





10:10

**Ride**

**Nora Mihaylova**  
 Today at 6:30 AM · Amman Sub-District, Amman

### Airport road

Distance: 44.43 km      Elevation Gain: 543 m

Moving Time: 2:51:06      Avg Speed: 15.6 km/h

Max Elevation: 962 m      Max Speed: 49.4 km/h

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