

# THE *in between* PLACES

---

**Rebecca Lowe** was more of a journalist than a cyclist when she decided to ride from London to Tehran. She wanted to show people back in the UK that, after the Arab Spring, the Middle East wasn't the hive of extremism the British press would have you believe. This is the story of what she found.



In December 2010 pro-democracy demonstrations began in Tunisia that ended with ousting of the then President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. These protests, dubbed the Jasmine Revolution, catalysed the Arab Spring that would sweep the Middle East and North Africa for the next two years. From her office in London, Rebecca Lowe watched on as a journalist at the International Bar Association, documenting human rights abuses and the rule of law in the region that had fascinated her for so long.

As the situation evolved, she grew frustrated by the sensationalising of the Western press, knowing that the daily reality in these countries was far from the radical, terrorist, fundamentalist one that was permeating British sensibilities. Looking for a big adventure before settling down with long-term partner Patrick and starting a family, the seed for an 11,000km cycle trip from London to Tehran was planted. On July 29th 2015, she set off from her home in London to meet the people living their lives in the wake of revolution.

## On a Jolly

“The more I wrote about it, the more fascinated I became by the region. I travelled around the region prior to that but I really developed quite a strong fascination and also a frustration with how I felt the Middle East was often depicted in the Western media. It's not a criticism of the media, it's just the nature of the media is that it will write about conflict or write about crises or write about bloodshed, because it has to write about event, and it has to write about things that people are interested in reading about. But the issue with that is that, when all you ever read about in the Middle East is conflict and crisis and violence and bloodshed, you tend to believe that that's all that's going on, and you associate the region with that. You don't learn about the general population, what the people are like. I wanted to have a big adventure and the Middle East was the obvious place for me to do it. I wanted to quit my job at the IBA and go freelance, so I thought that would be great to meet some people in the area to make some good contacts, to find some good human interest stories, and to justify it to my mother that I was doing something that wasn't just a giant jolly.”

The decision to cycle came less from a lifelong passion for the sport but the desire to spend time in the ‘in between’ spaces, where ‘normal, everyday life happens’. It also allowed her to indulge in her self-described ‘terrible kebab habit’, which other options like a motorcycle might not have been so forgiving of.

“I didn't do any training for the trip at all, actually. I just really didn't have much time because I was working full time ‘til about two or three weeks before I left and it takes quite a lot of time out of your day to go on long cycle rides and build up your fitness. I just thought ‘well, I'm going to be cycling for a year so I may as well get fit on the road’. I wouldn't do that again. It was terrible. On the map, France looks really flat and it seemed like a good way to build up my stamina and my tolerance. It's not at all flat when you when you actually get there, it's just constant rolling hills. My bike only arrived the day before I was leaving because it was really kindly given to me by Kona, and it was the 2016 model and it was fresh off the production line. I didn't have time to practice on it or to get it configured to fit my body or anything like that. I only had time to practice loading it up with the panniers which I'd never used before either, so the first time I'd used panniers was the night before, loading them onto the bike and physically trying to pick it up, which I couldn't do. It was definitely a very steep learning curve.

I thought by the time I got to Iran I'd be so fit and healthy I'd be just teleporting between cities. Actually the last cycle I





**Above Left**  
Riot police in Turkey

**Above Right**  
The Rrapsh Serpentine winds its way up in the Cem Valley in Northern Albania

**Left**  
Taking a break from the relentless heat while admiring the sun-baked mountains of Iran on the horizon

**Far Left**  
Celebrating her arrival in Tehran following an incredible 11,000km ride from London



did between Qom and Tehran was about 160km and one of the hardest cycles of the whole trip because my inner tubes were totally worn out by then, my tires were paper thin and it was burning hot and I was just getting puncture after puncture after puncture and the wind was like a furnace, like flames in my face. I managed to make it to Tehran about five hours late, at about 10 o'clock at night, and I didn't have any lights. It was pitch black with a flat front tire and massive traffic. I took a little film on my GoPro that's on my website ([www.rebecca-lowe.com](http://www.rebecca-lowe.com)), and I look at it now and can't believe what I was thinking. I found out a lot later it was 48 degrees. It was my own fault, really, because I intended the whole trip to be seven months, which meant that I would have got through it before the heat of the spring and summer kicked in. But because I was so slow I realised that if I didn't want to kill myself, and to have time and flexibility, I'd have to extend it. So I extended it from seven months to a year, which was a slightly awkward conversation with Patrick. I hit Sudan and the Gulf and Iran at the hottest time of year, which was brilliant planning."

## Little Rebellions

Traversing 20 countries by bike meant that as soon as Rebecca adjusted to life on the roads in one country, the crossing of a border meant everything changed. The one common thread she found on her uncommon trip was the hospitality.

"There was only a few places I knew where I was going to sleep for the night but that's what made the trip exciting. There's something exhilarating and thrilling and a little bit scary about that. I did a lot of couch surfing and also Warmshowers (.org), which is like the cycling equivalent of couch surfing. There was couch surfing networks in places I never expected. Like I arrived in the first town in Iran, Bandar Abbas, thinking 'I have nowhere to stay, I don't know what I'm going

to do' and I was on a dodgy visa so I was quite nervous about lots of things. I thought, 'well, I'll just check couch surfing, just to be sure' and there was like 600 hosts in Bandar Abbas, which is banned in Iran. It just shows how desperate the people are to connect outside the country, because you can really get in a lot of trouble if they find out that you're hosting foreigners and yet 600 people in just that one city were willing to host. So I contacted someone and they wrote back within about four seconds like, 'yeah, come and stay!' I realised very quickly that I didn't have to worry. I could literally just stop cycling and because it was such a curiosity, seeing a Western female cyclist on their own, I would attract people who would come over and say hello, chat and give their food and water. When I got to a new country I was always a bit scared and inevitably that would dissipate over the next few days. Nothing is ever as scary as you envisage it to be."

Rebecca, despite her trip having journalistic intentions, highlighted a few times how much of a privilege it was to be able to drop everything and cycle around the world. She borrowed fellow cyclist Kate Rawles' terminology 'adventure plus' - meaning adventure with a purpose. As she continued to tell stories from her trip, of the incomparable hospitality, relentless punctures and, of course, kebabs, the frivolous and the serious (the adventure and the plus) seemed to become inseparable. Her discovery of 600 couch surfing hosts in Bandar Abbas being a perfect example of this; a little rebellion against the state found on a niche website for cycle tourers. The reality seemed to be that frivolity under dictatorship was a little rebellion in and of itself.

"In the Middle East they're not massively into cycling - pretty much anywhere you go, there'll be somebody that rides a bike but they aren't really made for cycling these countries, not yet. I got to Beirut and I had been given a very good set of tyres by Kona which by then were completely worn out, so I needed to get a new set. Beirut had I think two cycle shops and I went to what I was told was the best one and asked



them for their best set of puncture proof tyres. They came out proudly with these two fairly flimsy looking tyres, and I was like ‘they’re your best puncture proof tyres?’ They’re like ‘yes, yes, yes. They’re completely puncture proof. Don’t worry’. I, without exaggeration, got about seven minutes away from the shop and got a puncture. I just got so many.

Beirut was probably better equipped for cyclists than almost anywhere. In Tehran, there were also some people who were cycling but it was quite niche. One cool thing in Iran, actually, was when I was there, there was some ambiguity over whether women could cycle or not - I was fine because I was a foreign woman so I was seen as almost a separate species - but for local women it was a bit ambiguous. Then, just after I left, the Ayatollah came out with a fatwa which said explicitly that Iranian women could not cycle. As evidence of how feisty Iranian women are, immediately, just through that one fatwa, he managed to inspire a whole new generation of Iranian female cyclists who came out on bikes and they had this hashtag #Iranian-womenlovecycling. Hundreds and hundreds of women, some of whom had never cycled before, hit the streets on their bikes in an ‘F you’ to the Ayatollah.”

## Devastated, Hostile and Foolish

Before leaving, a lot of the people in Rebecca’s life considered a solo, female, bicycle-powered trip to the Middle East as good as a suicide attempt. In her TED talk on the subject, she summarised an email

from her mother that consisted mostly of the words ‘devastated’, ‘hostile’, ‘foolish’, ‘risking life and limb’, and ‘robbed and raped’. These kinds of reactions were perhaps influenced by the British press that references extremist Muslims versus moderate Muslims at a ratio of 17 to one, but also a reaction to the reality of being a woman in many places across the world. Ultimately the relationship between place and gender, and to some extent race and gender, were the defining factors of the trip.

“On the whole I found [being a woman] a huge advantage because it opened up the whole country to me. If I’d been a man, I would have been seen as a threat to people and I don’t think I would have been so warmly welcomed in the same way. As a woman you are un-threatening. If you’re not seen as a threat physically or politically, generally people are kind. And if you’re on a bicycle, you’re seen as particularly vulnerable - maybe you needed some kind of psychological help - so people really group round you and help.”

Despite the friendliness she encountered, she described a few occasions where the patriarchal structures of some of these nations worked against her. In Egypt, Rebecca was an oddity as a woman, particularly a white woman, riding a bike. Young tuktuk drivers would reach out and grab her from behind and she would constantly have to fend them off. One particular incident, as this happened, a police car drove the young driver off the road and beat him, likely then confiscating his tuktuk and only source of income. Having been followed by a police escort for most of

### Left

Despite resenting the Egyptian police for their brutality, Rebecca was warmly welcomed by the locals

### Middle

Rebecca cycled on gravel roads in remote regions on her ride to Iran

### Right

It’s important to keep it simple on the road; food, shelter, wheels and water

her journey down the Nile, Rebecca had grown to hate the Egyptian police for their brutality and found herself stuck between the brutishness of pervading sexist attitudes and the violence of the state.

“Being completely honest, it is bad out there, these are patriarchal systems of government and society and I think they've got a long way to go - less so in the big cities, but it's still a problem. I met so many women on the journey, who were just phenomenal, really strong, courageous characters that are really pushing those boundaries and fighting back against that sexism.

Ultimately, I think a lot of people thought I was some kind of adrenaline junkie but it was the opposite. I wanted to go there not because it was dangerous, but because I thought it was safe. I wanted to show people. If I genuinely thought it was dangerous then I wouldn't have gone because I'm actually a bit cowardly.”

## New Routes

Through her many tales of hospitality, dodgy policemen, and being rescued from the brink of dehydration in the Sahara, Rebecca's journey captured the nuance and complications of life in countries either recovering from or still in the grips of authoritarianism. As she predicted, the top-down political approach of the Western media failed to elucidate the experiences of the population, perhaps because rarely do they roll into these towns on a bike with a flat front tyre looking for somewhere to sleep.

Since returning from her trip, Rebecca has written a book about her experiences, *The Slow Road to Tehran*, and welcomed two little girls who are currently pausing any further exploits into the region. Still following the developments affecting the people and places she visited in 2015 and '16, she's sad to know that the route she took is no longer possible.

“Unfortunately, what we've seen is the politics get that much worse and turn into open warfare in some places, revolutions being crushed in others. You can't go through Sudan now, it's probably the biggest humanitarian disaster in the world. It's deeply sad because, when I was there, revolution was brewing and there was this great sense of excitement in the air. The Sudanese people were astonishing in their resilience and their courage, what they went through to bring down a dictator like Omar al-Bashir. It's just astonishing. To have that revolution and then to be in a situation like they're in now is just absolutely, totally heartbreaking.”

As the region, like every other region on earth, continues to evolve, what Rebecca's journey serves as a reminder of is that, underneath the headlines of revolutions, militaries, dictatorships and conflict, are 600 people in Bandar Abbas offering their sofas to sleep on, a community in the Sahara ready to save someone from dehydration, sheep farmers who can fix a puncture and deliver you to the next town over, and many women riding bikes for the first time simply because they've been told that they can't. 



---

NOTHING IS EVER AS SCARY AS  
YOU ENVISAGE IT TO BE

---

