



Carlton Reid has travelled extensively in the Middle-East. He lived for one year in Israel after cycling on his Claud Butler Majestic from Norwich to Jerusalem. In early 1986 he went back to the deserts and mountains he so loves. He travelled by ATB from Ankara, Turkey to Cairo, Egypt. Here is his account of 4 days away from metalled roads in the Sinai desert - on tracks never before witness to a bicycle...

Not so much a “psst” more a sort of “whoomph”. I’ve punctured; a large, rigid thorn has ripped through my front knobby tyre and has penetrated the soft rubber of the tube. A thick pink gunge splurts out. Not even Muddy Seal can bind this size of gash. My spare tube is in a similar condition because of a series of punctures a few hours earlier. It means an impromptu repair job. Easy enough in temperate latitudes but here I am many miles from any form of civilisation in the middle of the scalding Sinai. No patch would have a chance of adhering in this heat. I’m done for. It means an unexpected delay - a wait until nightfall and prevailing coolness. But my food and water supplies are low - my water bag had split and precious pints were lost. I’ve been away from the desert form of civilisation for two days now. I must carry on cycling. A delay is hazardous to say the least!

Steaming globules of sweat drip down my wet face - or are they tears - tears of frustration,

tears of hopelessness?

I try, against the odds, to make a patch stick. No luck. The hole is too big anyway. I look longingly at the map - no villages for miles, absolutely miles.

Covering 40 kilometres a day is hard work in the yielding desert sand so I’ve no chance of making contact. I’m following a wadi - a dried up river bed. My destination is the famed Mt Sinai and the fabled Santa Katerina monastery but now I may never reach that destination: I may never reach any sort of destination ever again.

I’ve had many setbacks. The bike doesn’t like the heat; the desert cacti have ripped my tubes nearly to shreds. Time is running out. Water is running out. I had planned for the trip to be completed in three days. I carried enough water to last four. Precious liquid had been lost into the thirsty sand and now there were increased delays. I was in trouble.

My only chance of survival is for me to reach an American army outpost that I know to be

somewhere ahead. Further back the wadi, near where the last road finished and two days previously, I had talked with US soliders at a United Nations Peacekeeping Forces lookout point (simply called OP 36). These observation posts are remote, self-contained units home for about ten men. They are situated in strategic but secret positions throughout the Sinai. For the most part they are located on high ground so as to enable them to spot any illegal Israeli or Egyptian troop movements. Nothing much usually happens so they amuse themselves by aiming their binoculars and rifles at passing Bedouins or the odd camel! A lone cyclist was to say the least a rarity and the GI who first spotted me nearly jumped out of his skin. He hadn’t seen a Western civilian for weeks so to see one pedalling towards him on a mountain bike was a little bit startling.

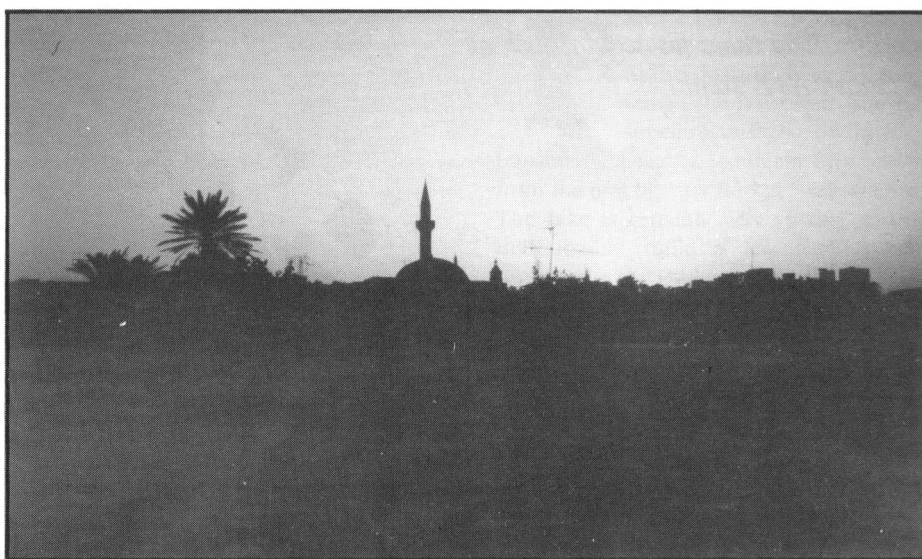
After the hand-shakes, back-slapping and orange juice guzzling was over, I had a chance to talk with all the soldiers. They tried to put me off going any further but realised I was

adamant so told me that if I ran into trouble further down the route I could try and reach a small five-man observation post that lay at the end of the Wadi Nasb. They could not show me its position on their map because it was restricted information - after all I could have been a foreign spy cleverly disguised as a nutty English cycle-tourist - but they did tell me it was well hidden away on top of Mt Abu Hamad, a perilously steep mountain that blocked off the wadi...

Two days later...I was in the trouble prophesised and I needed help. The US cavalry would have to be my saviour. In front of me at a distance of about two miles stood Mt Abu Hamad. I could see the summit but no signs of habitation. A rough track led half way up the side but then petered out and it would mean a rock scramble. It was my only chance so I picked up my injured inner tube, a repair outfit and my patched up water bag and set off. My tongue and throat were parched, my lips chapped and my hands torn by the sharp rocks but after what seemed hours (and most probably was) I reached the top. About 200 yards of stony ground lay between myself and a narrow opening in the rock, crammed into which was a whitewashed stone building with the red letters "OP 37" stenciled on its walls.

This time an even more surprised American greeted me and declared me to be the luckiest man alive - I had just walked through an uncharted minefield! Not an efficiently laid American one thankfully but a slightly slipshod and slightly erratic Egyptian one. I calmly disbelieved him but his serious looking face modified my opinion and I wobbled at the knees. A cold sweat formed beneath my hot one. The rest of the soldiers joined us and began to ply me with plenty of lukewarm orange juice and even warmer drinking water. A couple of them kindly mended my tube in the shaded hut and after an hour or so I was ready, fit and able to continue my journey.

The Americans showed me the safe path to cross the minefield and then waved me off down the mountainside. I was refreshed and replenished now so happily hopped down the scree, rubble and brushwood. Once back on the wide valley floor I thought my troubles



Typical Middle-Eastern evening view

were over. But after walking about two miles in the approximate direction I had previously followed, my trusty steed was nowhere to be seen. The Sinai is hard to describe. The wadis are made up of soft sand and gravel with many alternating channels. These grooved channels are covered in brittle desert plants which make it hard to see objects lying behind. I had put my bike in a high position but still the brushwood and cactus-type plants obscured it from view. I backtracked and after much searching eventually spotted the tell-tale yellow glint of my Pakit pannierbag reflectors. We were reunited and the repairs could be made. The glaring heat still burnt down relentlessly but after five minutes of nifty mechanics the bike was ready for action again. I fervently hoped for the rest of the journey to be puncture free. Quite likely as it happened because the wadi was now leaving the thorn-strewn valley floor and starting to climb up into the sparse Sinai mountains. The cycling was now much harder going and I was continuously in my granny gear. Uphill in sand is not easy. No more halts though and a high energy level could be maintained because the army food and water would last me until civilisation. Bliss! A day and a half later I reached the tarmacadamed road I had set my heart upon,

Santa Katerina was now only a few hours away and could be completed on well-metalled roads. A luxury well-appreciated by a weary cyclist. In the hazy distance I could see an air-conditioned tourist coach, the occupants of which were stretching their legs and some answering the call of nature. I pedalled up and summoned up enough energy to greet them.

A barrage of cameras clicked and buzzed. I was the celebrity of their day. Amazing, truly amazing: how on earth had I managed to cycle in the extremes of heat and on such badly surfaced roads they muttered en masse in German. But for me this was now the cool of the day and these roads were a mammoth improvement on the tracks and wadis I had just been on. Little did they know I had just spent four days slogging through sand, heat, thirst, hunger and exhaustion to reach this road. I said nothing but smiled weakly and then pedalled off into the beginnings of a pink sunset feeling as content as I had ever felt in my life. This was cycle-travel at its best - pure unadulterated joy. Fifteen miles of relative smoothness lay ahead...Santa Katerina and sleep beckoned.

The beautiful Santa Katerina monastery - right in the middle of the Sinai



Every cycle-tour has its adventures. My trips to the Middle-East have always been stimulating and often tantalisingly tinged with the suggestion of danger. I could fill volumes of memoirs with the various escapades...the fly-encrusted dead body in Egypt, the rape attempts in Syria, the pointed guns in Turkey...and so on. But that's enough of my travels how about yours. If you've been on an exciting expedition why not put pen to paper and send your memories to BICYCLE TIMES and we will tell everybody about it. It doesn't have to be ATB pioneering up Mt Everest or jungle-bashing in Ecuador. Any hair raising trip will do. Just as much adventure and excitement can be found in Britain so get scribbling (or typing preferably!) What's your pen for, then?