



Jayme in Al Qusayr



Coffee Wadi Gemal style



The first cyclists to pedal Wadi Gemal

PHOTOS: JAYME OTTO

Fat Tires in the Land of the Pharaohs

Egypt is now open to cyclists

I'm squinting, despite wearing the darkest sunglasses I own. There's no trail here, only sections of sand beaten down by jeeps and camels, signs of the nomadic Bedouin tribes that inhabit this desert. The sweeping Red Sea Mountains fail to block the sun that's turned our sandy path into white glitter. Despite that blinding glare, I keep pedaling—lose momentum in the sand and you come to a screeching halt. If we can just keep moving, our group of five will be the first to bike Egypt's Wadi Gemal (Camel Valley) National Park.

When we started, the park ranger proclaimed: "There is no way you guys can bike this." Two hours later, we've only covered 16 K. But we keep at it.

Ironically, our desert expedition was the brainchild of a skier. Colorado Springs resident Doug Lofland started Beyond Boundaries in 1991, conducting ski trips around the globe. He expanded to include biking about a decade later, because "skiers need something active and fun to do in the off season."

The industry agreed, and 53-year-old Lofland soon found himself running "bike and barge" trips everywhere from Turkey to the Netherlands. He'd put boats into the mix to make the trips more appealing for spouses and newbies who may not be so keen on riding every day. Plus the convenience of having a floating hotel following your bike route is hard to beat.

After cruising the Nile, Lofland couldn't stop thinking about Egypt. Why not bring some bikes? Initial research proved discouraging. Security is an issue in the non-tourist areas along the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. "Finding the right official and

knowing the right bribe to ensure our protection wasn't something we could do on our own," Lofland says. "That process may sound strange to an American ear, but that's how it's done there."

It was only by melding minds with FlashTours in Cairo that Lofland was able to get through all of Egypt's red tape and nail every bribe necessary. The two travel companies partnered to create Egypt Bike and Sail (egyptbikeandsail.com) this year.

"Up until this point, tourists have never had the ability to bike in rural Egypt," Lofland says.

Which brings us back to Wadi Gemal National Park, where five of us finally churned fat tires through sand in 112 degrees to become the first to bike this remote park.

—Jayme Otto

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