

RACING IN ISRAEL!?!?

Absolutely! I traveled to Israel last month with Nancy Morgenstern's family for the traditional Jewish ceremony to unveil her grave marker in the cemetery, which is done 30 days after burial. Although Nancy, a CRCA category 4 bike racer on Team Axis, died on September 11, 2001, her remains were just recently identified by the Medical Examiner's office; her family had been waiting for this to have her funeral. It was an emotional journey, and I know why Nancy was such an amazing person... because her family is also. (Go to www.nancymorgensternmemorial.org for more info about the memorial fund that her family has set up and to read letters about Nancy, or write your own to her family).



My trip to Israel was limited to only five days, and I debated whether or not I should bring my bicycle, I know Nancy would have had the same dilemma. In the end I decided against it, too much to schlep! And if I was meant to ride in Israel, I would somehow get a bike while there. Of course, I was also under the impression that riding conditions in Israel were less than desirable -- was I ever wrong!

Before I left I asked Nancy's father if it was possible to rent a bike, and although he seemed to think it unlikely, he promised to look into it. He contacted a fellow named Eitan, who had read about Nancy in an Israeli newspaper article and was a cyclist himself who often leads bike tours for kids in his spare time. In the future Eitan would like to organize a bike race in Israel in Nancy's memory. Eitan was excited that one of Nancy's cycling friends would be coming to Israel to visit and without so much as meeting me arranged for a bike shop in Talpiot, a suburb of Jerusalem, to lend me a bike. Eitan is a wonderful spokesperson for cycling in Israel--he was so helpful. This quality is something I noticed about everyone I met in Israel- everyone was very generous with themselves and their time. People went out of their way to help me, a stranger, on a daily basis. They are incredible people. Eitan asked if I would talk to some local racers about racing in the US, which I did as best as I could. Does anyone know about cycling scholarships to US colleges? The 2 time Israeli National Champion (a Mr. Doron Amitz) would very much like to come here to race.....

I borrowed a brand-new aluminum Schwinn road bike from Eldar's bike shop, which fit me perfectly and through Eitan I learned of a few group training rides. Interestingly, it turns out that Ramat Bet Shemesh, where I was staying and south of Jerusalem, is the hotbed of both road and mountain biking, with rides meeting there most days of the week.

On Friday I met Erez, who is a physical therapist and helps train disabled athletes- he has even been to New York for the Paralympics! We rode his tandem mountain bike on the single track around Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Saturday happened to be the Volvo Challenge, one of two big UCI mountain bike races/festivals held in Israel each year. It was a partnered race, where partnered riders must check-in at points along the course and cross the finish line together. Erez was doing it with a blind partner, Orly, on her tandem, but offered to take me to the race if I rode out to the main road to meet them early in the morning (a brisk 20 km ride). What a great opportunity, so on Friday I traded my road bike in at the shop for a mountain bike, and then rode the 80 kms home through the mountains south of Jerusalem. The roads there are perfect for riding, hilly and beautiful with not much traffic and good shoulders. Everything that Eitan said was true... the great roads... the little traffic... the amazing weather (10 months of the year!).



Off to the races! As with all excellent adventures there were a lot of 'firsts' on this trip... this was the first time I have ever been security-wanded in order to enter a bike race!

Remember that this is a partnered race? I didn't have a partner of course, because Erez was already partnered with daredevil Orly, and the only other person I "knew" going to the race (besides Eldar from the bike shop who was going later to spectate) was Gila, a friend of Henoah Getz's (a New York cyclist). I had never met Gila before, but we had been in email contact since I knew that I was going to Israel. Unfortunately, she had oral surgery two days before and was in NO shape to race. I went to registration with Erez and Orly anyway. As I arrived at registration a guy looked at me and started speaking Hebrew and I knew he must need a partner. When he realized I could not speak Hebrew, he quickly switched to fluent English, and I found a race partner. The race required a UCI license, but I had left mine at home. I hadn't even been sure if I would be able to RIDE in Israel, let alone race, so why bring it along? Luckily, they didn't seem to care so much that I didn't have my license, and Alon and I were registered as a mixed pair. It was a huge race, with 300+ racers in our group alone.

I, of course, don't mountain bike race, but the race began on a long uphill. "Hey", I thought, "this isn't so bad, it is a lot like road racing!" After passing many riders on that first challenge, I soon became challenged- over the rocks and down the gullies. But I had only one small mishap while going down a particularly scary-looking drop-off, and the rest of the course and the single track flowed well, with Alon leading on the descents, and I leading on the climbs. We turned out to be well-matched partners... so much so that after we crossed the finish line and the results were tallied... we won in the mixed partners division! And were 5th in the all male division – I know this because they first had us registered as both men- I was listed as Alon's partner who bailed the night before

because of an injury. And just like in the US we had to go to the officials to protest. Luckily, they believed that I was a girl!

On the podium I received my first medal that I had to have translated for me (it was in Hebrew!), and I took the opportunity to say a few words and dedicate the race to Nancy. When I returned back to Nancy's family's home later that evening, Avi, Nancy's brother-in-law, said it best, "I can't wait to go to Shul (Synagogue) tonight, walk in, and say, 'We Won!'"

Shalom!