

Cycling in Iran in the summer of 2009



From upper left: Espen Brouwer, Inge Bjart Torkildsen, Helge Robertsen, Bjørn Myhrvold, Lasse Efskind, Kaja Kierulf, Kaja Efskind, Janne Kristin Kjøllesdal og Asle Terje Johansen. (©Photo: Espen Aarethun, Lærdal Sport & Recreation)

A tour with a group of 9 Norwegian riders in Iran 13.6-6.7 2009 was very interesting, but a bit much of media coverage like if it was a long time since they had some foreign cyclists visiting. Was even a segment on *BBC World* about "*Vikings in Iran*" so they clearly used our presence for what it was worth, but we also got some positive experiences among a welcoming population. Does not hurt to be diplomatic.

We landed in *Tehran* on a Friday night, while there was as an election of the "new" president, only with candidates who slipped through the so-called *Guardian Committee* of *Ayatollahs* which is the only *Election Committee* they have in *Iran*. It's effective in relation to the mess they have in *Norway*. Incumbent *President Ahmadinejad* was re-elected. A little fuss in the evening with burning car tires and demonstrations as a part all over the country the four weeks we were there, with a retinue of security guards, police in front and ambulance in behind so it was like a *Tour de Iran* in miniature!

Sunday 14. June was the first bike day and we were driven in a minibus 60 km *West* of *Tehran* to get away from the worst traffic. About twenty *Iranian* cyclists met us, both boys and girls and we did about 70 km road to *Qazvin* city where we had the first of many sports conferences with local athletes, not just cyclists, but also martial arts practitioners.

Old fighters like *Iranians* know the martial arts in all variations you can imagine, the most popular sport besides soccer. It could come in handy in the home and during demonstrations. Some women use sports as one of the few areas they can assert themselves. The women are also in majority among the university students, but most of course have to get a permission from their immediate male guardian if they want to use the education to something sensible.



Monday we biked about 200 km mostly down by the river from the height of *Qazvin* through some valleys that got more fertile the closer we got to *Rasht* by *Caspian Sea*. We had time to take a shower in a hotel before we were taken to a beach hotel further *West*. The reason was a planned demonstration in *Rasht* which we were supposed to be protected against, but we did meet the mayor who said that we were brave who came for a visit in a foreign country. The beach hotel was a good choice, I really wanted to visit the *Caspian Sea* that is salt and has a surface 28 m below the world's ocean level, a geographical hot spot. The only other foreigner in this hotel was a *Russian* that we had no contact with.

Tuesday we went about 200 km via *Astara* at *Azerbaijan* border to *Ardabil*. Great to cycle in the tailwind along the sea and after *Astara* it was over a hill of about 2000 m above sea level, the only decent mountain ascent of about 30 km length we had on the tour. The field was of course a bit scattered, with light ones in front and heavyweights ranking behind. Some of the support crew sat down in the car, they were not obliged to ride a bike all the way. Unfortunately we had an accident before *Astara* where one of our rides got hurt with bruises and had to sit in the car, while *Asle Tornado* rode on with a broken little finger. He is a pain therapist and advise you should do without pain relief medications if pain is manageable. Someone takes a pill for everything and it's close to becoming a drug addict.

In *Ardabil*, we were living in a kind of sports hotel on a hill by a lake with excellent views of a mountain that was not *Ararat*, but the *Sabalán* mountains 4800 m above sea level 41 km from *Ardabil*. It is an inactive volcano with a beautiful lake near the top. It is said that the name *Ardabil* comes from "*Zoroaster Artavil*" which is a "*holy place*". *Northern Iran* is said to be the most beautiful part of the country with summer temperatures that also fits cold *Norwegians*. *President Ahmadinejad* has been the *Governor* of the *Ardabil province* and is a popular man in what he did to improve much of the infrastructure.

The next day, we cycled to *Zanjan* further *South* and made more than 100 km to *Duzdüzan* where we had lunch and sat in the car afterwards. We had a steep downhill with fine asphalt where *Espen* and I drove close to 100 km/h just before lunch. On the road to *Zanjan*, we were faced with a terrible hailstorm that definitely had not been something to cycle in. In fact the only day with bad weather on the entire trip, besides smog between *Qom* and *Tehran* the last bike day, otherwise hardly a raindrop. Nice to get into a great hotel that had a wireless network in the room so we could get updated on *Facebook* and *Internet*.



Zoroaster (about 1,700 years BC.) the first Theist, creator of a dualistic religion?

The trip out from *Zanjan* went by a *mosque* a few kilometers *South* of the city and we were tourists for an hour before we found a great way up a small hill and rolled down on the other side towards *Hamadan*, *Sufipoet Omar Khayam* 's birthplace. Every time I was interviewed on TV about why I was in *Iran*, I always replied that I was particularly interested in *Zoroaster* with his *God Ahuramazda* and the *Sufis* with *Omar Khayam* which I read already in the 1970 's. By the way I got a collection of poems by him from one of our *Iranian* cyclists who was a teacher and had contact with him a couple of years after the trip.

On the road to *Hamadan* we were driven by *Ali Sadr* caves which is among the world's biggest and accessible for tourists with small rowing boats that were paddled around in the underground waterways. We also went a few steps up and down in the cave. A great experience.

On the way in to the city itself we also saw a *U.S. radar station* on a mountain which was built while they were friends. It is supposedly still in operation and they have figured out how to maintain it, skilled engineers like *Iranians* are.



Arak next city target and had some nice downhills where we actually cycled all the way, about 150 km, only interrupted by a few delegations who handed out food and drinks in a *Tour de France* feedzone style. Young children would even like to have our autographs, TV celebrities as we were and it's not exactly something we experience in *Norway* where we hardly have TV coverage of *Master championships*. We made obviously a few friends on the road and symbolized perhaps a hope of freedom and joy in the fact that *Iranians* also have friends outside the country despite the *Islamic Republic*. For some a symbol of mismanagement, among other political and religious fundamentalists the perfect system that does not exist. *Freedom under responsibility! Think by yourself, it's not likely someone else does it for you! The thoughts are free. ...*

From *Arak* we were taken to *Khomeyn*, the birthplace of the famous or infamous *Ayatollah* by that name. Here he studied in a *Theological Institute* run by his grandfather. We actually received a diploma that confirmed our visit and it can come in handy if one would search a retirement job in a *mosque*. Then some mess with a map reading as the *Olympic Committee* had decided that we were going to meet a delegation a few tens of kilometers before *Esfahan*. We found our way eventually, back on the bikes and were pretty hot and thirsty when we got some small snacks and drinks from a crowd of new friends. Bicycled into *Esfahan* which is one of the major cities in *Iran* and got a bit crowded when we approached the city centre so we were finally driven to the hotel in the car rather than getting run over.



In *Esfahan*, we had our first rest day because we were not there just to exercise a bit, but increase the cultural understanding of this ancient country of *Aryans* that supposedly came from *South Siberia* just like the *Vikings* so maybe we are actually relatives? Here we also visited a hospital and while doctors greeted the patients we other boys went to the nursing sisters home (that's a joke..). A couple of teenage girls had split their legs when they fell out from the balcony. Some say they jumped to avoid marriage, and got the feeling that something uncultural is going on here. Forced marriage is hardly better than a regular marriage? Relatively well equipped hospitals and it seems that health care is in order with clever doctors, but an unusual number of traffic victims so we obviously needed all the protection along the road we could get.



Monar Jonban the shaking minarets

We had a funny guide and retired engineer who took us by some *mosques* and other cultural centres. He obviously had a program ready on the clock, was a bit impatient and said all the time: "*The more dynamic you are the more you will see!*" We were also down in a driedup riverbed as they naturally had dammed up the river to save water which is not flowing freely in a parched *Iran*. A small *mosque* that was built shortly after year 1316 to cover the grave of *Amu Abdollah Soqla*, a hermit. The two *minarets* were built later on by the architect *Sheikh Baha'i* and ornamented up throughout the ages. One of the great attractions in *Esfahan*. The guide stood and shook in one tower and then the other shook more or less synchronously. I guess it's what we call the propagation of energy in physics? He was perhaps a structural engineer?



The master sits and plays drums for keeping the fitness ritual in time

We were also at a martial arts centre with some age-old rituals and impressive powers some of the students demonstrated. We also had a little stroll around on our own in the vicinity of the hotel to get a taste of the area's folk life. A lot of nice smiling and friendly people, but behind the friendliness there seems to hide an impending cruelty to those who stand out slightly from the adopted standard. It's a phenomenon we have also in *Norway* where not everyone is as tolerant and the rule of law is on shaky ground according to some lawyers. We don't execute people like the *Iranians* and the *Chinese* do, but freeze them out and bother them with laws and rules when they differ from the *Norwegian standard*, whatever that is. Looks like *Norwegians* adds a "*special love*" at immigrants and emigrants. We don't need to hire a "*moral police*" in *Norway*. They work for free...



The Mulla in Abadeh and me in flower brotherhood for peace



It went well with both bikes and passengers

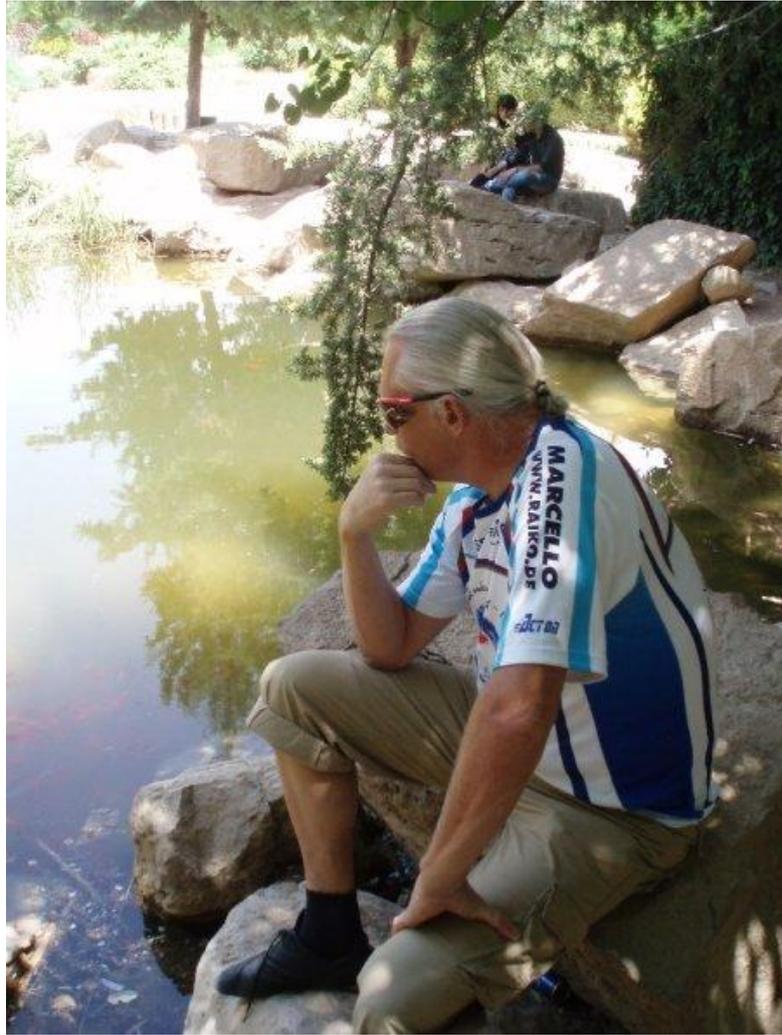
The next day was the big day. We rode first in relatively comfortable pace down to *Abadeh* where we were served lunch together with the *mullah*. Then we were on the historic place *Pasargadae* where *Cyrus the Great* had been buried. The *King of Kings*. *Xerxes* called by *Greeks* who fought against him. Then we were driven down to *Persepolis* by *Marv Dasht* for accommodation.



Today's Persepolis by Marv Dasht

Next morning a great tour among the ruins of *Persepolis* with a good guide from *Shiraz*. *Alexander from Macedonia* (not called Great here, of course) was visiting and ravaging on his trip. He destroyed large parts of what was the ceremonial capital of the *Achaemenid Empire* about 550-330 B.C. It was mainly built by *Darius the great* who was the father of *Cyrus* who finalised what his father had started. The ruins are well described by scientists and also had some great tablets with an old *Persian cuneiform* font similar to *Sumerian*.

After the guided tour we biked about 70 km to *Shiraz* with a group of new *Iranian* cyclists and here we were stopped by a populous delegation at the ancient city gate, complete with TV interviews again. I saw it later and looked like a mad professor with my spiky white hair and talked about my cultural interests with *Fargo accent* as if I came from *Dakota* or *Minnesota*.



Natural philosopher Inge Bjart by carpe pool in Shiraz (© Photo: Lasse Efskind)

Shiraz is also one of the major cities in *Iran*, a beautiful city that carried the mark of much culture and seemed as if they had a great time there before the *Islamic revolution* in 1979 which set the country back. Now it is not even allowed to dance there and when *Asle T.* did a *joik* as a cultural fixture on tonight's dinner, the host was afraid that he was going to start dancing when he waved his hands! We met by the way a lawyer girl from *Notodden* in *Norway* who was travelling with around ten people from *Europe*, *New Zealand* and *United States*, some of the few international tourists we met in *Iran*. In *Shiraz*, it was again a sports conference and we got handed a collection of poems by *Hafez*, one of the major poets in *Iran*. The *mullah* accompanied us to the plane we took to *Kish Island* and we got candy which *Lasse* called "*mullahsweets*" on the journey. Noticed that we along the sightseeing tour was shown many bathrooms and reception rooms that were not in use, but now history. Says maybe a little about the cultural shift?



Kitch Island is a more appropriate name for a free-trade zone that would like to become a business centre and showcase ala *Dubai*, but then the *mullah* has to soften up the moral standards a bit to attract people from the *West*. It is alleged to be the third most visited site by *Westerner* people in the *Middle East* after *Dubai* and *Sharm El Sheik*.



Separate beaches for men and women is something that belongs to the middle ages. In addition, it doesn't work with a computer and mobile network that is constantly crashing and some places are kept closed in the *siesta* of the *system administrator*. If they absolutely should monitor people it can be done automatically. You do not have to stand behind their backs. We visited a water park a day with a *dolphin show*, but not that impressive compared to what I've seen elsewhere. At all seems like *Kish Island* is an artificial construction without much content. One evening we visited some ruins of the underground city of *Kariz* and had dinner there which was a more cool experience.

A nice touch was a *Medical Department of Shiraz University* that settled here. Talked with three female students among which one had to pull back from the *United States* to *Iran* to study. They were also a bit desperate to be assigned only a *2 Mbps Internet line* to the mainland. Gets a little crowded on the data bits. We also met a nice guide couple who took us out in a pleasure boat to dive and snorkel at a reef where we likely could swim naked without anyone being bothered unless the *mullah* had us in the binoculars. Integration is one thing, but limits on what can be accepted by the cultural differences if you want to attract wealthy foreigners. The only that reportedly have moved to the island are some *German* abstainers and vegetarians who don't brew alcoholic beer. Shopping centers were full of *American* brands and one can wonder where they come from? *Made in China?*

The official program was a "*highball tour*" of about 60 km around the island with a handful of local cyclists in 45 °C and high humidity that made us very thirsty. We survived and ate as usual a lot of *kebab*. Generous of the government to spend this trip on us, there will hardly be any immigration of *Norwegians* to the place, but who knows?



Yasd - 10 km out of the city in all four directions

We left *Kish Island* and flew back to *Esfahan* where we had been a few days before and spent the night at the same hotel. Early the next morning we cycled towards *Yasd* with lunch after well over 100 km in about 40 °C, but dry. After lunch we rode towards *Ardakan* and when it got extra hot we took a seat in the car and drove into *Yasd* which was a hub on the *Silk Road* and trading centre near the desert *South of Tehran*. Was particularly impressed by the wind towers that you see to the right at the cross road on the image. Here they have used the *laws of thermodynamics* with the wind cooling effect against the wind and run out hot air in the other direction, supplemented by cool running water in the basement. All based on experience. Empirical science in practice.

We also visited a horse farm and a hospital and some cultural centres in the city. Then one of us took photos of a butcher, the butcher got angry and later was accosted by the security guard that we called „*the shadow*“ who called somebody, hopefully not to get him arrested. It's not so easy for photo tourists to know the local customs, but also no reason to punish someone who reacts to the tourists' ignorance. We all have our system.

A day of rest in *Yasd* and then cycling back *North* the same way we came *South* and went as far as luncheon before we sat in the car on the rest of the way to *Ardestan*, a cosy little village. We all spent the night in the municipality's guest apartment, somewhat cramped after we had been spoiled by two-three people on each of our hotel rooms. *The Mayor* bought us ice cream in the Park and we got to mingle freely with local people in the evening. An elderly gentleman told me *that "We can't even think freely!"*, but got the impression that most *Iranians* express themselves freely and like to discuss. As long as they are not making noise during demonstrations they are left in peace by the police, like in the "democratic" *Norway* and similar countries.



On top of the ruins after an approximately 5,000 year-old civilization in Kashan

The next day the trip went to *Kashan South* of the *Holy City of Qom* and here it was also some sightseeing in the afternoon and evening. One visit to remains of an about 5,000 year-old civilization on a hill in the city. We also dropped by some great palaces and parks, including a very stately house that was sold and the owners moved to the *United States*. In the evening, we were involved in a wedding party at the hotel where it was a bit of disturbance as some of them did not like to be taken pictures of, but it calmed down and we were received friendly.



Interesting. Similar to a Native American Dreamcatcher and a Tibetan namkha



Abyaneh – mountain village

Then came a day with a small blunder. We thought we were going to *Qom*, but after about 60 km cycling in that direction, we got a phone call that it was the day after so here was someone who had trouble reading the *Iranian* calendar. Ok, we cycled back the way we came and was run up the mountain to *Abyaneh* village in about 2000 m above sea level that literally was a highlight and great compromise due to a so-called misunderstanding. Here we got to see how natural and ordinary people lived simply in a mountain village. The mountain hotel had the character of international visits so maybe some nuclear physicists were staying there once in a while?



On the way up and pedaling down again we namely passed the well known nuclear power plant in *Natanz* we constantly see on TV when there is any talk about the enrichment of *Uranium* in *Iran*. It was well guarded with manned air defence artillery so here the *zionists* should not feel overzealous if they try to attack them with airplanes and rockets. You can also ask them why *Iranians* are not allowed to exploit nuclear power. That's not to say that they make nukes like *Israel* and the neighbors in the *North* and *East* do? *President Obama* and *Security Council of the United Nations* has finally gotten a deal with them again so we'll see what is being implemented.



Qom mosque Hazrate Masume

On the way to the sacred city of *Qom* we got lunch at something resembling an *American Way Inn* and even got a *hamburger* there! We had to park the bikes and drive into the city itself in the car as we looked a bit obscene in our bicycle suits. We were photographed by a TV team and looked at the story later in the evening at the TV in the hotel reception. We looked a bit fat on a wide screen TV even after around 2,000 km on the bike the last few weeks. It could be caused by *kebab* for breakfast, *kebab* for lunch and *kebab* for dinner?

The contrasts in the *Holy City* reminded of a gust from the middle ages. Reportedly 50,000 priests and theology students in a city of about 1. million inhabitants! It should give a good coverage to the extent that it has some importance for the natural state. It was emphasized that women can also study theology, but may not be ordained as priests like in *Norway* 50 years ago too. We are not so far ahead of *Iran*.

Fatema Mæ'sume, sister of *Imam ' Ali ibn Musa Rida* (789-816 A.C.) is buried in the *mosque* we visited. The city is the largest institution of *Shi'a Muslims* in the world and therefore, the subject to a flood of pilgrims. Frightening to see how men and women are separated in *mosques* and darkly dressed women looking at us "*infidels*" as if we came from an alien planet. It was, however, interesting to drop into a mirror glass *mosque* that reflected images in all directions and it's really a good symbol of the universe's characteristic in which everything is reflected in everything if that's the meaning. They also have a space centre in the vicinity and know about making and launching rockets.



Hundreds of shador dressed women in their own compartment in the mosque

The last bike day was plagued by *smog* and difficult for some of us to breathe properly with snot in the sinuses. We took to reason and packed the bikes at the *Airport South of Tehran* and was rushed to the *Olympic Academy* where we started. The men relaxed by the swimming pool and next day a last *sightseeing* and *shopping* tour downtown.

The *Iranian women's national team* in some martial arts, think it was *taikwando* lived at the *Academy* at the same time as us. A week after they crashed with a plane on their way to *Armenia*. Tragic. There were many disabled war injured athletes at the *Academy* so we got the impression that they take good care of their injured people through sports.

We got a good deal of gifts along the way and much more than we could carry on the plane so our excellent driver *Magic* was given the task to dispose most of the gifts as a bonus for an excellent effort. In spite of the politically unstable situation we had a great stay, were well protected against internal conflicts as is customary for guests in the *East*. None of us were attacked or harassed for being disbelievers. The people followed us on TV and some even came on the street and greeted us friendly. Sad that the people should feel so trapped and be exposed to sanctions from other countries. A difficult governance. That issue has the most of us that are exposed to manipulating bureaucratic nationalists, also in *Norway*; "*the world's best country to live in*".

This was the way to be allowed to ride a bike around 2,100 km in this historically interesting country that was once one of the world's greatest powers and who still are seemingly trying to become one with their *Aryan* pride. There is freedom of religion in the country, you just have to accept that it is an *Islamic Republic*. In 1971 *Shah Mohammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavi* celebrated the country's 2,500-year-old tradition as a monarchy. Strange how it changes from one dictatorship to another. We just have to put an end to the "radical" practice of executing different thinkers. Any religion or political sect that does not respect human rights needs to be corrected. No one has sole rights to the "absolute truth" or right to manipulate other people. Hopefully *Iran* will develop in a positive direction with more transparency in the contact with the *West* and the people get the freedom they need for self development without official control disease.