Inspiration came like a dream, at the end of a wild night of visiting taverns and playing music at people’s houses. I was back in the city and catching up with friends. Around one, six of us ended the evening at the harp player’s house, singing “Behind Blue Eyes” and trying to write a bluegrass ode to bike messengering.

A half-hour later I threw the pillows off the couch and prepared to sleep. The harp player, Moshe, said: “You know, I’ve always wanted to do a bike trip. We should do one sometime.”

“Where do you want to go?” I mumbled drowsily.

“Israel. It’s kind of my home.”

“It is?” Moshe looked severely Nordic.

“Yeah. I was a soldier there for three years.”

“In Israel?” I shook off the sleep that was overtaking me as I contemplated the life of an Israeli armed fighter.

“Yeah. Maybe we could ride around Israel sometime.”

Most of my trips had been to wild and empty places, so it had never occurred to me to tour the Middle East. But a ride through the Holy Land sounded great. Pedaling past The Dead Sea, Jerusalem, and a thousand other biblical names I had long ago forgotten would be the historical, religious and cultural pilgrimage of a lifetime.

But I needed to take it a step further.

“Not just Israel, Moshe.” I shouted, “Let’s see the Pyramids! Mount Sinai! Petra! We’ll end up in Mecca for Ramadan. And we’ll hellbike the whole thing!”

Moshe whooped, then caught himself. “I don’t think they’ll let us ride our bikes in Saudi Arabia,” he cautioned.

“All right, we’ll finish in Jerusalem!” I was still shouting.

Moshe stared for a long time. “Drew, do
Floating in the Dead Sea, Drew pretends to read a "prop" Israeli newspaper, pulled from the trash for this occasion.

Sunrise over Saudi Arabia, as seen from Dahab, Egypt, on the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula.

“I know. Don’t worry about money. I’ve got money.”

“You do? Since when?”

“Don’t worry, I will.” His voice trailed off. “I’ll get money. I’ll call you in a week and we’ll go right after Christmas.”

A month went by. Moshe hadn’t returned any of my calls. I scolded myself for getting my hopes up.

The phone rang again.

“Drew. We’re going.”

“Moshe?”

“Yeah. Listen, I got the money. We’re going.” He let out a long whoop. Then the receiver went quiet as I digested the news. Could this be for real?

“A month in the Holy Land. I’ll cover all our expenses and you make sure we have the adventure of a lifetime. How soon can you leave?”

Two weeks later I arrived in Tel Aviv with two brand new VooDoo mountain bikes, one for me and one for Moshe, the triumphant result of an inspired last-minute sponsorship plea. The bequeathing of these dream machines seemed to symbolize a new wave of serendipity rolling over my life. And just as I was wondering if I had gotten into a rut, reduced as I was to riding you know that you just described the path Moses took out of Egypt?”

“No, what does that mean?”

“When Moses led the Jews out of slavery, they went through Mount Sinai and Jordan and got lost in the desert, then found Israel — the Promised Land.”

“That’s so cool! We’ll, like, follow in the Footsteps of Moses.”

“Footsteps of Moses!” We cheered.

Then Moshe frowned. “Moses didn’t make it all the way to the Promised Land, you know. He died in Jordan.”

“Okay, whatever.”

We went to sleep.

The conversation had been casual, as easily fantasy as reality. I forgot about the Holy Land for six months.

Then the phone rang in December.

“Drew.”

“Moshe?”

“I still want to do that trip.”

“What trip?”

“Footsteps of Moses.”

I held the receiver and gazed into space. “Oh yeah, Footsteps of Moses.” I twirled the phone cord around my index finger before continuing. “I won’t have money for a long time. Especially not for a trip like that. The plane ticket alone would cost like a thousand bucks.”

Moshe recuperates from a day-long battle with headwinds in the Sinai Desert at the Spring of Moses, 100 miles east of Cairo.
clunkers, both literal and metaphoric. But now someone had given me a new bike, and someone else was paying for a fabulous trip.

Israel is very small, but equally intense, like a caper. Within the last 30 years, it has fought wars with (and taken territory from) all of its neighbors, an unfortunate situation that Moshe was intimately familiar with. During the long bus ride from Tel Aviv to Cairo, he explained, “At one time or another I shot at people from every country that borders us.”

Israel borders Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Palestine. Moshe’s worry was that, in one of these small countries, we might come face-to-face with someone he had faced in combat. Moshe’s tall blondness stood out even in the States; in the Arab world he would be a phenomenon. There was also the likelier possibility that Moshe, who was traveling on his American passport, would be exposed as an ex-Israeli soldier. And, should we encounter anti-Israeli sentiment, unarmed bicycle touring in the hinterlands left us severely exposed.

But such worries seemed distant as we crossed the black Nile and entered Cairo in the dark. We were riding a wave of cash I had never seen deployed during a bike tour, and when we reached town Moshe asked, “Does this town have a Hilton?”

I knew people traveled like this, but I had never had the budget nor the inclination to do it myself. The luxury was fun, but I missed the network of budget travelers and the bonding properties of a little hardship.

Our journey was simple. The plan was to start at the pyramids, then pedal east and south down the Sinai Peninsula and camp atop Mount Sinai. Then ride to Dahab on the far coast, and pedal north into Jordan before turning west and visiting the Dead Sea and Jerusalem. There were many places where we were restricted to pavement, but there were also opportunities to follow dirt roads and camel tracks for long distances.

After one last room service feast, we pedaled to the Great Pyramids of Giza, and in some ways it is the most glorious bike ride I have ever taken — 20 miles of insane traffic, no signs, five lanes of cars fitting into enough space for two lanes, and a negotiable center line. In Egypt, it is illegal to honk your horn, but in Cairo, every driver seems to delight in flouting this law. To be fair, Cairo has a road system to accommodate a city of two million. Unfortunately, that is a milestone Cairo passed about thirteen million people ago. Oh, the humanity!

Our arrival at the pyramids was marred by the constant sleeve-tugging of hustlers, but once we got into the park, the pyramids eclipsed anything I had ever seen. It is one thing to read about the scale and complexity of the undertaking — over 2,000,000 stones went into the largest pyramid, called Khufu. It is quite another to see it. The nearest place to mine the rock was 20 miles away. I read that it took 20,000 workers 20 years to complete Khufu. How was such a civilization possible?

There were nine pyramids — three big ones, three smaller ones, and three that were in ruins. After trading our bikes for a pair of camels, we raced our Bedouin companions across the sand. We then traded our camels back for our bicycles and fended off more friendly hustlers. Soon I led Moshe to the small pyramids.

“How fast do you think we could climb that one?” I pointed to the middle-sized pyramid.

“Fifteen or twenty minutes” he said. “That is, if you could get up there at all.”

I snorted in a blatantly macho fashion. “More like three.” We made a bet that I couldn’t climb it in five.

Unlike the large pyramids, these rocks were uneven and dark. I ascended in a series of jumps three or four feet high, and within two minutes, found myself more than halfway up. The view of the other pyramids rising about the surrounding desert was stunning. A moment later, however, a soldier with a machine gun came up, with the top only 50 feet away. The conscript waved his firearm and shouted as I descended. When I faced him he yelled at me, but didn’t seem mad. He eventually started laughing at me for taking the bike up there, saying, “Agala, bike, it’s very nice.”

Behind the pyramids were extensive tombs, where we met a Bedouin who offered, for 20 Egyptian pounds, to get us into Khufu to spend the night. Moshe and I had a curious discussion about taking the Bedouin up on his offer, but Moshe was having none of it.

We eventually left and had an exhilarating ride back through the streets of Cairo. We didn’t know it, but a vital group dynamic had been set. Moshe was apprehensive, both about taking his first bike tour, and about traveling through hostile territory. I was not worried about hostile territory, and felt that “everybody loves a dumb, friendly American.” For me, this trip was manna from heaven, and for both our sakes, I wanted to make the most of it. I well knew that the most challenging aspects of a trip are the parts likely to be celebrated later.

Our first night out, we camped in utter barrenness, an aimless blight of stony sand across the road from a rocket range. Negotiating military checkpoints twice a day provided a constant reminder that 70 Western tourists had been killed in Egypt the year before. The next day, we crossed the Suez Canal, near where Moses parted the Red Sea. The whole place was unimaginably desolate. But south Sinai had dramatic peaks that soared above the rising desert as we
made our way toward the peninsula’s namesake peak.

We had been climbing all day toward the town of St. Catherine, and Moshe, who was something of a religious scholar, had been filling me in on legends of the surrounding landscape. For instance, I knew that Moses received the Ten Commandments while he was at the summit of Mt. Sinai, but Moshe related that God later picked up Mt. Sinai, and held it above the heads of the Israelites until they pledged undying devotion to Him. We vowed to camp at the top to see if anything supernatural happened, but, just in case, I decided not to ask for any big favors while we were up there.

As we continued to ascend, we came to an easy section that was almost flat. Moshe began exulting about the downhill in front of us.

“Moshe, we’re climbing a valley.” I said. But he wouldn’t believe it.

To prove me wrong, Moshe had me stand by the road. He took three hard pedal strokes in the direction we were headed, and coasted to a stop 50 yards away. He then turned around, took three more pedal strokes, and waited. By the time he reached me, he was beginning to realize he wasn’t going to stop. He went a quarter-mile past me before admitting defeat.

This made us even, since I hadn’t reached the top of the pyramid.

From St. Catherine, we pedaled up the trail toward a menacing tower that loomed 3,000 feet above town. Along the way, we encountered little huts with Bedoin men selling chocolate bars, water, and Cokes. I was proud that I pedaled the entire climb without walking. But we had to dismount at the bottom of the Seven Hundred Steps, which were hewn out of the rock, and seriously undercounted.

I expected to be disappointed at the summit; after all, many historic places fail to live up to one’s imagination. But the apex of Mount Sinai is a place of stupendous majesty. The tallest mountains in Egypt are laid out in a ring. As part of that ring, our peak had a clear view of all the others. Together, we towered over the rest of Egypt. Oceans of red rocks exploded below into lesser summits, and lines of dwindling ranges marched to the horizon. On every hill, and in every valley, were ancient monasteries and outposts. Monarchs had journeyed and camped here for thousands of years. There was a tiny priory atop the cliffs we occupied, but it was surrounded by a high fence that no one dared climb.

The big thing at Mount Sinai is to get a camel to carry you to the bottom of the stone steps, then hike to the top for sunrise or sunset. Several dozen tourists made their way up that afternoon to witness the coming of dusk. Most began
the long scurry down before the sun actually set. We sat in the summit hut with Mohammed, buying chocolate and water, and practicing our Arabic until long after dark.

We slept uneasily at the top, rattled by the ceaseless wind. The next day, we woke to freezing temperatures, and watched as the bare rock bloomed from black to red.

We carried our bikes down the tortuous steps and shredded the trail down — one of the most enjoyable descents of my life. Even at St. Catherine, we were close to a mile above sea level, and we planned to lose all that elevation on the 80-mile road to Dahab, the next town. Unfortunately, many rolling hills stood in our way, and darkness closed in 15 miles shy of civilization. But we had to get to Dahab, a freewheeling backpacker resort/diving center on the east Sinai coast. We pedaled through five military checkpoints that day, the last at almost eight o’clock at night.

A line of jagged mountains hems Dahab to the coast. Across the water lurk the forbidding shores of fundamentalist Saudi Arabia. Dahab was barely a Bedoin village 30 years ago; now it is the least Egyptian town in Egypt. Taken over by European backpackers, Dahab has no swimming or surfing, but truly warm winters, and good diving. It also features amazingly cheap food, lodging, and other pleasures. Thatch cabins on the beach rent for $1.50 a night.

Moshe and I could see ourselves living here quite easily, and stayed three days longer than we planned. The only productive thing I did in almost a week was run on the beach, and learn how to snorkel at an amazing coral reef called the Blue Hole.

Eventually, we were seriously behind schedule and had to leave, taking a camel track along the coast that challenged our riding skills to the utmost. Beach, rock and mountain came together on our precipitous secret pathway, which led to the upscale resort town of Nuweiba. We stayed at the Hilton, of course, and dined on one of the most lavish buffets I have ever seen.

So far, Moshe had avoided discovery of his true identity, and I thought our worries were behind us. But Moshe confessed in Nuweiba that if he returned to Israel he might be arrested, and definitely couldn’t leave the country for a while. He had unfinished business with his military unit that I didn’t want to ask about. The upshot was that we had to take a speedboat around Israel to reach Aqaba, Jordan. From Aqaba, we would visit the ancient city of Petra. It turned out to be quite a whirlwind affair.

Our first taxi driver in Jordan drove us in circles for an hour and dumped us with his cousin, who drove a second
car. Then both cousins followed each other to a place that turned out to be a police station — where they were arrested. Coincidentally, a small bus stopped, and its driver offered to take us to Petra. The third driver got us there. On the way, he scandalized us with stories of his several young mistresses. Apparently, male braggadocio is the same all over the world.

Petra was at 5000 feet and pouring with cold winter rain. We walked down the next morning, and spent the day in old Petra, an ancient city carved from the vertical walls of a 600-foot-deep canyon. Ancient cliff dwellings over 1000 years old, and accessible to the public, looked like great camping to me, but Moshe didn’t see the appeal. We decided that it was a crappy day, hell, let’s just leave. We took a taxi back to Aqaba and pedaled less than 10 miles into Eilat, Israel; Moshe had decided to risk detection.

The next morning, we hustled out of Eilat, climbing all day through empty desert. The road started descending the next morning, and by afternoon we reached the Dead Sea, the lowest point in the world. The Dead Sea was eerie, its quiet blue water backed by a wall of mountains. I was surprised that such an attractive spot had no people living in it, aside from at one resort. I floated in the Dead Sea water, ten times as salty as the ocean, and read a newspaper.

We slept below where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, but to our dismay did not have time to explore them. My plane was leaving the next night from Tel Aviv, and we needed time for the 3000-foot climb to Jerusalem that lay ahead.

Upon reaching Jerusalem, we went to the old city, and marveled at the passion this place held for so many. Moshe confessed that, as a soldier, when he was drunk he walked through the Arab parts of the occupied city “locked and loaded,” his machine gun ready to fire, hoping somebody would mess with him. Fortunately, no one ever did.

Unfortunately, someone did mess with me. We had a 40-mile ride to Tel Aviv. Moshe was sleeping, and I was shopping for souvenirs. I had locked my bike to a flimsy rail, and returned to find the rail pulled out and the bike gone. A frantic day of filling out police reports for unconcerned officers and canvassing bike shops ended up in my being charged double the normal cab fare to get out of town.

Every trip is a little like a dream — now my bike was, too. I entered Israel with two chariots and left with none. Like the trip, my VooDoo exists only in photographs and memories, nimbly climbing steep ridges and following camel tracks through the sand.

Adventure Cycling member Drew Walker wrote about a tour of Mexico’s Copper Canyon in the November/December 1999 Adventure Cyclist.