



» Marathon runner Jakub Zmuda and half marathon runner Barbara Bryzek, both from Poland, run along the graffiti-covered separation wall in Bethlehem

A Marathon in Bethlehem

The race that's building bridges and connecting runners in a divided land

By Tania Haas

TIVIET NGUYEN isn't the type of woman to let a little law prevent a good race. Tiviet, an Israeli, was set to run in the Palestine Marathon in April. In order to get to Bethlehem she had to bypass security. Israelis, unlike tourists (who can travel very easily), aren't allowed in Palestinian-controlled Bethlehem without a special permit.

"Getting out of Jerusalem isn't tough," she said while at the race. "The challenge is getting back. But there's a whole industry of taxis taking Israelis back from the West Bank. We'll be fine."

While Israelis like Tiviet aren't allowed in, many of those living in the West Bank aren't allowed out. While the restrictions, including the Israeli-built separation wall, were created in an attempt to reduce violence, many Palestinians feel trapped.

"I've never been to the sea even though it's only 60 kilometres away," said Musa Abo Sbaeh, 37, a social worker, and first-time half marathon participant.

Roadblocks and checkpoints aren't the most inviting ingredients for a city race. But that's exactly what race organizers set out to change. Now in its second year, the Right To Movement Palestine Marathon was created by a pair of Danish humanitarian workers.

"The idea to organize a marathon came to me one day as I was waiting at a checkpoint," said co-organizer Signe Fischer. "I'd just moved here from Denmark and Palestinians' inability to move was what struck me the most." Together with a group of Danish and Palestinian volunteers and organizations, she helped create the inaugural race in 2013 for 650 runners.

A year later, that number jumped almost five times to 3,200 runners from 39 countries. The organizers were particularly pleased with the female turnout: 35 per cent. In a culture where women participating in sports is still an anomaly, that number was a success.

The race course swerves between religion, politics

Opposite top» A runner supporting the non-profit humanitarian organization Welfare Association runs by a police officer and a security tower along the route in Bethlehem in 2014

Opposite centre » Local Bethlehem boys pose before running the 10 K race through their home town. Their face paint reads "Palestine."

Opposite bottom » Marathon co-founder Signe Fischer from Denmark speaks with a Palestinian official before the race begins

Photos: Philip Smith



and unique Middle Eastern experiences. Runners started in Manger Square where the Church of the Nativity and the city's only mosque stand face to face. The route then travels alongside the wall, which is covered in graffiti and poetry. Children extended their hands for high fives as men drink coffee along the roadside.

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“Yalla! Yalla!” screamed young boys on bikes as they trailed runners. The route passes through two refugee camps, now the permanent homes to thousands. Donkeys and sheep are a common sight as you run, as are orchards of dates and olives. Runners run through an industrial centre with factories and storefronts on either side. Bananas, oranges and gel packs were handed out by Palestinian Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. The half-marathon route ends back in Manger Square. Marathoners do the loop twice.

At the end of the race, Abo Sbaeh, a Bethlehemite, took a gulp of water, ate a handful of dates and admired his olive wood medal. Then he lit a cigarette. Smoking is still common here, even among runners.

He said his first race experience was amazing. He said he experienced the fraternity of running when he had to stop running to catch his breath. A runner from Europe stopped to check if he was all right. “That felt very good. Everyone was looking after each other. The way it should be always,” said Abo Sbaeh. “Today we are one family. Leave the politics to Ramallah.”

Meanwhile, Tiviet Nguyen, the Israeli, was on her way home. She ran the 10K race and finished in the top five of her age category. She and her husband ordered an Israeli cab, with Israeli plates, from Jerusalem. They were able to enter back into Israeli territory without a problem.

Nguyen will return again soon, she said, via more legal means. The next time will be with Visit Palestine, a non-profit organization that organizes trips with people from both sides of the wall to “break the mental walls” and to foster more understanding.

She said she had a great race and it's all a part of a process. “Running and working together are all part of peace building on the ground level.”

That sentiment was echoed with one phrase painted on the separation wall: “Build bridges, not walls.” Step by step, that's what a group of runners are trying to do on both sides of the divide. **R**

