



Expedition: A Decade of Exploring Afghanistan on Two Wheels

FIELD: EXPLORATION, CONSERVATION, AND ADVOCACY

SUMMARY

Investigating the gender barriers that prevented Afghan women and girls from riding bikes and its effect on equal mobility and transportation access, human rights activist Shannon Galpin had already become the first person to mountain bike in Afghanistan in 2009 in the remote mountains of Panjshir province. After five years of working in Afghanistan and exploring the country on her mountain bike, Galpin traveled to Bamyan, Afghanistan, to continue the investigation of gender barriers in a Hazara community, survey landscapes, and determine safe riding routes. In the 2000s Afghanistan, bicycling was still taboo for women and girls in Afghanistan. It was considered obscene and dishonorable. In 2011, a handful of women in Kabul and Bamyan provinces began to challenge the gender barriers, risking their lives to ride.



Galpin supported the emerging 'right to ride' movement in Afghanistan including the Afghan Women's National Cycling Team, the first women-founded and women-led cycling teams that developed in Bamyan, and multiple bike clubs. Her work was recognized by National Geographic Adventure, International Olympic Committee, and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Galpin's work over eight years in Afghanistan and her ongoing efforts since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021 evacuating and safeguarding over 150 cyclists and their families ensures that a decade of cycling revolution will not be lost.

THE EXPEDITION

In 2009, Galpin became the first person to mountain bike in Afghanistan, exploring both Panjshir province and the hillsides within Kabul. In 2010, she rode through the Panjshir Valley, stopping before the Anjuman Pass. From 2011-2016, she continued to ride and explore gender barriers in multiple provinces, including Bamyan, Fayrab, Jawzjan, Balkh, Parwan, and repeat visits to Panjshir and Kabul. Each ride expanded the engagement with Afghans as a foreign woman on a bike, challenging the gender barrier through visibility and open communication with questions meant to interrogate their opinions and perspectives. In Istalif, she exchanged bikes with a local man who declared, "It takes a lot of intelligence to ride a bike, that's why we never see women doing it." During rides through towns, a small crowd of young boys would trail after her. Many would excitedly share that they were going to go home and teach their sisters to ride a bike.

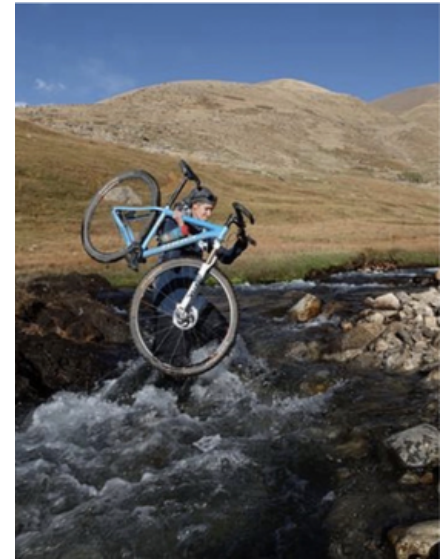




THE EXPEDITION (cont.)

Afghanistan was a country typically cut off from American-Afghan engagements outside of structured meetings or specific purposes. The bike became an ice-breaker for connecting human-to-human and having authentic conversations, which Galpin did not achieve in the meetings. Invitations into Afghan homes came from these bike rides, which allowed access to family members, particularly women in rural communities who were not often accessible in public. Without the bike, the information she gathered in public was highly gendered, as most of her public interactions were with men.

Bamyan is populated by the Hazaras. The Hazaras are one of Afghanistan's largest ethnic minorities, accounting for up to 20 percent of Afghanistan's 30 million inhabitants. The Hazaras are said to be descendants of Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongol empire, and the Mongol soldiers who swept through the region in the 13th century. It was an oasis of stability and peace throughout the turbulent post-Taliban recovery. Tourism, both domestic and foreign, was actively pursued. Afghanistan's first national park, Band-i-Amir, is located in Bamyan and became famous for its international ski race. Foreigners came each year to compete in the Ski Challenge, in which local men and women participated against visiting competitors worldwide. The views of women participating in sports and outdoor activities were more progressive than in other areas of the country, even more than in the urban capital, Kabul. In Bamyan, boys and girls supported each other in sporting endeavors not seen elsewhere in Afghanistan: skiing, hiking, even paragliding, and, thanks to two young women, Zahra Hosseini and Zakia Mohammadi, biking.



Crossing a river in Panjshir Province near the Anjuman Pass, 2009

Zahra is the first woman to bike in Bamyan and perhaps the first to officially bike publicly in Afghanistan since the 1960s when, according to at least two Afghan women Galpin tracked down, a handful of women reportedly rode bikes in Helmand and Kandahar. Zahra learned to ride a bike as a refugee in Iran. She was frustrated that only boys rode bikes once she returned to Afghanistan. At the same time, Galpin had begun working with the first Afghan National Women's Cycling Team in Kabul, a small group of girls that had learned to ride in 2011 and 2012 on bikes borrowed from their male family members. She supported the team financially and began training with them in Kabul. Her goal was to establish Bamyan as a safe location to conduct the first training camps due to its overall security, progressive acceptance of women participating in outdoor sports, and safer road conditions.

Zahra and Zakia taught their peers to ride and formed the the Shamama team, named after the western Buddha, Shamama, which means "Queen Mother." The men named their team Salsal after the eastern, male Buddha. Team Shamama was the first women-founded, woman-led team in Afghanistan. It remained independent of the Afghan Cycling Federation, and the women would go on to develop the first cycling races for women in the country's history.



In 2013, I delivered over 65 brand-new road and mountain bikes and over 500 pounds of cycling gear to the Afghan National Team and the Bamyan Club to support rider development. I also supported two new Kabul bike clubs that had formed. I took them to the Kabul bike market and introduced them to a mechanic who agreed to work with us. He would assist the girls in buying commuter bikes, empowering them to buy their own with the money I donated versus donating bikes directly. Raising women's visibility in the male-dominated bike market and giving them autonomy over the type of bike and color they wanted to ride.

WHO: Shannon Galpin

WHAT: A seven-year human rights and sociology investigation and expedition.

WHEN: 2009-2015

WHERE: Panjshir, Kabul, Jawzjan, Fayrab, Parawan, Kandahar, and Bamyan Provinces, Afghanistan.

WHY: First, to survey and evaluate landscapes while mountain biking in Afghanistan. Second, to investigate gender barriers in cycling for Afghan women and girls across different regions of the country.



EXPEDITION GOALS

Initial expedition goals in 2009-2012 investigated Afghanistan's cultural, societal, and ethnic barriers and attributes that kept cycling taboo for women and girls while exploring Afghanistan's landscapes and geography for mountain biking and road cycling as a foreign woman to interrogate that gender barrier firsthand. Parallels between the suffragettes a century earlier in the US and UK that linked bicycles to the fight for equality were at the center of the investigations of mobility justice and public visibility. Wide-ranging interviews with men and women in positions of power in Parliament, heads of NGOs, rural community leaders, youth activists, artists, musicians, and athletes, as well as women jailed for morality crimes, yielded a nuanced and complicated story of Afghanistan's developing culture post-Taliban.



Galpin mountain biking above the Buddhas in Bamyan, Afghanistan 2014





EXPEDITION GOALS (cont.)



Riding with the Bamyan Cycling Team, Shamama, led by co-founder, Zakia Mohammadi in front, 2015, Bamyan, Afghanistan

As outdoor tourism was developing in Bamyan and Panjshir province for Afghans with an eye on internationals in Bamyan through skiing and climbing, the first national park was created. This park, which boasted female park rangers, played a crucial role in promoting gender equality in adventure sports and tourism beyond traditional sports like football and cricket. The question that arose was, how was Afghan society viewing these changes?

Visits between 2013-2016 explored the country alongside Afghan's first-generation cyclists. The focus remained primarily in Kabul and Bamyan, where the national team and the first women-led team were formed.

Occasionally, Galpin took solo bike trips to revisit previous locations and scout new provinces to explore how the media attention and awareness of women's cycling were changing attitudes and permissibility. She crossed Bamyan's landscape by mountain bike, road bike, snowshoe, ski, motorcycle, and on foot. These visits had multiple aims. The first was to explore the outdoor and UNESCO culture embedded in Bamyan, which was changing this province as a tourist and cultural destination both locally and internationally. The increase in tourism had an influence on the Hazara communities identity, it's perception of its role in attracting tourists, and the role of outdoor industry to thrive in a rural community through jobs and education unlike anywhere else in the country.

The second purpose was to identify if future mountain biking development would be suitable in this area, as Bamyan was actively developing outdoor adventure sports as part of its tourism plan and for its local youth sports outreach. This would align with the current ski program and tourism as a parallel summer program for local athletes and potential international tourism and income generator.

The third purpose was to interrogate the differences that access to cycling had within Hazaradominant communities for women. How could that help support the movements in other areas of the country? Hazara communities existed outside of Bamyan, neighboring Daykundi for example was less known due to its lack of UNESCO cultural sites but a match to Bamyan in terms of population and security. These communities could be a blueprint for cycling and outdoor sports as a successful model not just for the betterment of youth, but for local tourism and community stability in regions that often had little income generation.

The final purpose was working in tandem with the ongoing work in Kabul with the national team and bike clubs to support the burgeoning bike team led by Zahra and Zakia. They were creating something unique and independent, in the spirit of women suffragettes a century before, they were using bikes as a tool for social justice.





EXPEDITION RESULTS

2009-2012: Galpin successfully mountain biked throughout multiple provinces. Interviews and homestays encouraged her to continue to explore the country by bike. None of the interviews led her to believe that she would find families that would allow their female family members to learn to ride. They accepted her as a foreign woman, as having different culture, riding a bicycle. Galpin was met with curiosity and openness. Women's participation in sport was growing, as was their participation in all forms of Afghan society: arts, journalism, activism, education, government. Social media and internet access was a major asset for jumpstarting a lot of change in 2011. Women and girls were still facing harassment, abuse, violence, and widespread oppression in comparison to other countries. Visits to women jailed for morality crimes in prisons in Kandahar, Balkh, Fayrab, and Kabul provinces along with the burn recovery center in Herat illustrated the reality of the risks women lived with in Afghanistan, but there was also an upsurge of support to challenge gender barriers, often by their fathers who were their biggest champions. As barrier after barrier fell, bicycling was the only remaining country-wide taboo, not legally, but obscene enough to keep them fixedly in place.

2012 – Galpin met the first Marjan Seddiq – the captain of the National Women's Cycling Team.

2013 – Galpin brought 400 pounds of cycling gear, 5 new road bikes, and initial funding for the national team. She also brought an all-woman film crew to document the team. She rode with the team for the first time, after 4 ½ years of riding bikes across Afghanistan. She returned twice more in 2013 to train with the team and deliver more equipment, fund passports for international racing and strategize with the federation who asked her to become an official advisor. I met Zahra Hossaini in Bamyan, the first woman to ride bikes and co-founder of the Shamama women's team.



Training Camp ride with Afghan National Cycling Team in 2014, Bamyan, Afghanistan
Left to Right: Galpin, Nazifa Hassani, Masomah Alizada, Zahra Alizada

2014 - 2016 - Galpin delivered 60 road and mountain bikes and 300 pounds of cycling equipment from Liv Cycling for the national team and Team Shamama. She created the first training camp with the Afghan National Womens Team in Bamyan. After the camp she continued to explore safer training routes for the national team in Kabul. Galpin hoped that the introductions between the Kabul-based national team and the newly formed Bamyan club would develop mutual cooperation for future training, racing, and development support for the Shamama team. The Afghan Cycling Federation President wanted to control the Bamyan team, but the girls refused. The two teams remained separate until the country's collapse.

Her exploration of Bamyan by mountain bike and road bike confirmed its accessibility and safety for training, racing, and tourism development. Bamyan became the first province to be declared





officially cleared of landmines, primarily due to the work of an all-female de-mining team, including Zahra Abassi, an original Shamama cycling club member.

It took years to build cooperation between Bamyan and Kabul, but eventually, a change of leadership within the Afghan Cycling Federation was orchestrated by the men's team. The newly formed Afghan Cycling Federation began to expand both the men's and the women's programs. Galpin supported the cyclists in a corruption and abuse investigation against the ACF President who had sold bikes, stolen donated money, and used the Federation as a human trafficking ring. When the UCI failed to assist the cyclists with sanctions, Galpin assisted them in filing a civil criminal case, which succeeded in a guilty verdict against the former ACF President. The national teams collapsed for a time, but the new President helped rebuild. The Bamyan team and girls' clubs were insulated due to their independence. The Tour de Bamyan stage race created by cyclists in Bamyan became a centerpiece of Afghan racing, not just for Bamyan riders but eventually becoming the race the Federation used to establish placement for cyclists on the national team.

Galpin was chosen as a National Geographic Adventurer of the Year, and the following year, the International Olympic Committee awarded her an Honorary Diploma for promoting women and sports. In the fall of 2015, the National team was nominated as National Geographic Adventures of the Year for their work breaking gender barriers and nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The women who deserve the most recognition for women's cycling in Afghanistan are the ones who have received the least, Zahra Hossaini and Zakia Mohammadi. When awards were given or the press wanted a straightforward story, the National Cycling Team was chosen as an easy-to-digest package. Even if it was full of women who had just started learning to ride. The women who spearheaded the right-to-ride movement, who negotiated with mullahs when challenged, who developed the first races for women cyclists.

UPDATE NOTE: In 2020, the northern province of Fayrab started a women's bike team. Their two strongest riders, sisters, Fariba and Yulda Hashimi, were evacuated 2021 by an Italian woman and handpicked by UCI to mentor. They competed under the Afghan tri-color flag in UCI World Championships in Glasgow in 2023 and the Paris Olympics in 2024 - the first time Afghan women competed as cyclists under their flag. Masomah Alizada, who was an original member of the national team, received asylum in France in 2017. She raced as a member of the Olympic Refugee Team in the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 and was appointed as Chef de Mission for the team for the Paris Olympics. By 2021, road cycling, mountain biking, and BMX were competitions for men and women in multiple provinces. A nonprofit, MTBAfghanistan, had established a mountain bike race in Bamyan, the Hindu Kush, and trail-building initiatives. Women's clubs and teams organized rides and races in seven provinces.

When Galpin first started riding in Afghanistan in 2009, there were zero women on bikes that she could track down. When Afghanistan fell, there were over 200 registered federation cyclists and hundreds more riding to school and with clubs, despite the increased security risk and the Taliban's threats. Afghanistan had an entire decade of a women's cycling revolution before these women were forced to flee. She spent three years evacuating as many as possible, including over 150 cyclists and family members, including the original national team and leadership, who had been the highest profile women. They are now resettled into ten different countries and, unlike most sports, teammates were scattered apart, and most cannot ride in their new countries. Exiled and forced off the bikes that they risked their lives to get onto.





CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

There are no written records or photographs of Afghan women riding bikes, even though there are a handful of stories and a couple of women that have come forward to talk about riding bikes in the 1960s and 70s. But women riding bicycles in Afghanistan is not a gender barrier that has been broken despite the gains of women and girls in almost all other area of post-Taliban Afghan society. Women play many sports, including soccer, cricket, basketball, tae-kwando, and boxing, but cycling was considered taboo. Much like it was for American and British women over a century ago, riding a bike is considered dishonorable and obscene. Women risked verbal abuse, physical assault, and family dishonor. The risks they took to ride a bike were much more dangerous than Galpin's.

Riding a bike is a freedom of mobility; with that freedom comes distrust and fear. There was the belief that riding a bike could take a girl's virginity, which could prevent a family from allowing girls to participate in many sports aside from bicycling. But it was straddling a bike seat, motorcycle seat, or horse that was considered obscene. Afghan women sat sidesaddle when riding on bikes, motorcycles, or horses.



Learning to fish in Panjshir Valley with local men in October, 2009 after a bike ride.

Afghan girls navigated the cultural barriers by building alliances with their male allies and peers. In Bamyan, the women's team directly addressed concerns with local mullahs and conservative community members. The community supported the girls, the 'right to ride' community rides developed, and eventually, the first women's race was created. Step by step, the women established their right to be in the streets, on two wheels, with the men. One young woman, Nazifa Hassani, left the National Team in Kabul to go to medical school so that she could work to eliminate the culture of demeaning virginity tests, which contributed to issues around keeping girls off bikes and out of sports for fear their hymen would break.

Galpin's focus from 2012-2016 was to support the teams with equipment, financing, coaching, and training. She worked with the coach and Federation President to build a functional Federation that expanded out of Kabul and into the provinces, but he remained less supportive than he should have been of girls on bikes. Instead of seeing how the expansion of women's cycling supported the goal of the Afghan Cycling Federation and also gave him the depth to build the competitiveness of the national team, he saw the work of the Bamyan girls and clubs as a threat to his ego and power; something that Galpin would continue to negotiate and problem solve for years to come. Whether with Bamyan teams or emerging free-ride and BMX teams, girls' bike clubs, or mountain biking, his desire to control overrode the baseline goal of getting women on bikes. In the end, that toxic corruption extended into the evacuation and safeguarding of cyclists during the takeover of the Taliban.





While exploring the plateaus above the Buddhas, Galpin rode by a small UXO (unexploded ordinance), illustrating the dangers that still exist even in areas declared free of landmines. She took a photo and reported it. Due to the heavy snowfall in this area of the mountains, the landscape gets 'stirred up' and moved across with the snowmelt. Care must be taken no matter where you are in Afghanistan after 40 years of war.

Galpin explored several areas by mountain bike and compared them to other areas of Afghanistan. UXOs are an issue throughout the country, making mountain biking precarious. Heavily trafficked goat trails are the safest option. Mountain biking in Bamyan has many options, much like Panjshir, which has a similar security situation. There is more awareness and acceptance of outdoor sports in the mountains than anywhere else in Afghanistan because of the ski program and the national park. Band-e-Amir has incredible options for mountain or gravel riding as well. Road cycling is phenomenal. Roads are newly repaved, and there is very little traffic on them compared to the heavy highway traffic that the Kabul team has to deal with. There are multiple routes to take from the town center; the west roads head to Band-e-Amir or the Foladi Caves and Dragon Valley. Heading east takes you to The Red City, Shahr-e Zuhak, that guards the entrance to the valley. Panjshir province, in comparison, is a narrow valley with just one road following the river up a steady incline to the 14,000-foot Anjuman Pass. The northern provinces of Balkh, Jawzjan, and Fayrab are all great for road cycling. Galpin would love to explore mountain biking more, especially in Fayrab, where she first got the idea of mountain biking on a road trip in 2008.

In 2015 the Shamama team had 9 bicycles stolen by a local 'businessman.' Galpin recovered them with the help of two local guides before she could go for a team ride. She found a safe location to store the bikes with a guesthouse owner in the middle of town who was a trusted friend. She offered her protected courtyard as a meeting place for team meetings.

Local mullahs declared that the girls were riding in inappropriate clothing that went against Islam, and the girls went to meet with them several times in 2013. They negotiated a compromise. In 2014, the team organized a community bike ride during the UN's 16 Days of Activism to protest gender violence. Young men rode with young women while the community lined the roads in support. After that, women's racing became a regular occurrence.

UPDATE NOTE: By 2021, both Balkh and Fayrab had their own women's teams. That same year, Bamyan had an additional women's team, team Oqab, and the streets were flooded with cyclists. Several members of Bamyan's cycling community, both men and women, earned places on the national team.

ABOUT THE FLAG CARRIER

Shannon Galpin is a social justice activist, author, artist, and filmmaker. As the Founder of Mountain2Mountain, she spent over a decade working in Afghanistan with women on a variety of projects. She co-founded Endangered Activism with her teenage daughter to investigate solutions to wildlife conservation and extinction through the lens of youth activism. In 2017 they embarked on a 13-month long global journey of field research and storytelling to research local solutions within the global context of rewilding.





Galpin is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and member of the Society of Women Geographers. She was chosen as a National Geographic Adventurer of the Year in 2013. In 2009, Galpin became the first person to mountain bike in Afghanistan. She is a producer of the documentary film, *Afghan Cycles*, and is the subject of three short films about her work in Afghanistan. The International Olympic Committee awarded her an Honorary Achievement Diploma for promoting gender equity through sports. Galpin is the author of two books, including her memoir *Mountain to Mountain*, published by St. Martins Press in 2014. *Streets of Afghanistan* was published by Hatherleigh Press in 2012. She created and produced the Streets of Afghanistan public art installation in 2011 and installed it across Afghanistan's public spaces in 2012. Galpin is currently writing a book about the revolution of Afghan women's cycling and building the first Afghan Women's Sport's Archive to ensure the history of these women is never erased or forgotten.

To read more about Shannon's work in Afghanistan, look for her book, *Mountain to Mountain: A Journey of Adventure and Activism for the Women of Afghanistan*.



CONTACT INFORMATION
SHANNON GALPIN



@shannon_galpin



www.shannongalpin.com

Galpin carrying her bike up a Kabul hillside in October 2009



FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.wingswomenofdiscovery.org
info@wingswomenofdiscovery.org

