

9000 KILOMETRES OF LEARNING

Cycling to sustainable farms

Aisha Hassan and Lukas Paltanavičius set off from Wageningen on a cycling tour to visit European, Arab and African farmers who prioritize their soil and nature. The couple have been on the road for a year now. ‘When Aisha told me about her dream on our first date, I was startled. Had she gone crazy?’

TEXT TANJA SPEEK PHOTO CYCLETOFARMS

On 10 May 2022, alumni Aisha Hassan and Lukas Paltanavičius got on their sturdy touring bikes in Wageningen. Clad in zip-off trousers, raincoats and cycle helmets, they crossed the Rhine on the Lexkes ferry and pedalled to the Ketelbroek food forest in Groesbeek. It was the first day of their big adventure. Dutch-Somali and Lithuanian respectively, Hassan and Paltanavičius were aiming to cycle from Wageningen to Tanzania, visiting regenerative farmers along the way. These are farmers who produce food while paying a lot of attention to the health of the soil and to biodiversity. The couple’s mission? To learn from these farmers. They have now passed through 12 coun-

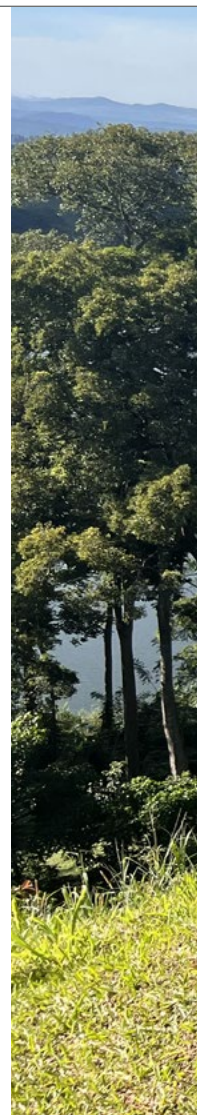
tries and covered 6500 kilometres by bike. They also flew two sections of the journey: between Greece and Jordan because there turned out to be no boat, and between Egypt and Kenya to skip some unsafe regions of Africa. No one has come up with a comprehensive definition of what regenerative farmers do differently yet. Hassan and Paltanavičius describe it in terms of a number of principles: taking good care of soil life and biodiversity, with crop rotation and minimal use of pesticides and fertilizers.

TENT IN THE GARDEN

‘This morning we cycled for nearly four hours and covered 47 kilometres,’ says Paltanavičius, speaking from Uganda via an

unstable audio link. ‘In the afternoons, we work. We write for magazines, make our videos, call our contacts and arrange the next leg of our trip.’

At the start of their journey, they cycled further in a day, admits Hassan. ‘We’d cover between 80 and 100 kilometres, but then we decided to take it a bit more gently. It’s fantastic to get to make this trip, but it’s not always as idyllic as it sounds. The travelling gets tiring. Sometimes we just long to spend more time in one place.’ They usually pitch their tent in someone’s garden every evening, adds Paltanavičius. ‘And people often then invite us to stay in their houses.’ From their bikes, the two travellers see constantly changing landscapes. ‘Now we are





‘We saw the effects of climate change in Kenya’

near Lake Victoria, the source of the River Nile, which we have been following for a long time. Beautiful. It is not as dry here as it is in Kenya, where we saw the effects of climate change,’ says Paltanavičius. ‘Lots of dead cattle, and even dead zebras on the road. That was shocking,’ Hassan adds.

They have passed a lot of monocultures of sugar cane or bananas along their way. ‘And sometimes mixed cropping, with bananas and coffee for instance. And grain, lots of grain. Uganda is the breadbasket of East Africa; the full trucks heading for Kenya keep on coming. Right now, everyone is

working on the land, tilling it and sowing. Most of the farms are small-scale, with the whole family working in their fields. We are learning from conversations with these farmers too.’

NOTE IN THE LIBRARY

The cycling couple exchanged their first glances in the library of the Forum building on campus, in the quiet area, where they were both studying. ‘Lukas slipped me a note saying “It’s nice to sit in silence, but let’s talk one day”,’ recalls Hassan. On their very first date, Hassan told him about her wish to do a long cycling trip one day, from Cairo to Cape Town. ‘I was startled. Had she gone mad? I was alarmed by the >



Aisha Hassan and Lukas Paltanavičius share their experiences on www.cycletofarm.com, Instagram and YouTube.

very idea of doing something like that,' says Paltanavičius, who was doing a Master's degree in Biobased Sciences in Wageningen. Hassan got the idea for a long cycling trip during an Experience Day organized for WUR alumni. 'There I met an alumnus who had cycled from Cairo to Cape Town. The idea of visiting the farms came to me later'. Hassan did the Master's in International Development Studies at Wageningen. 'I was born in Somalia. My mother fled to the Netherlands with me when I was two months old. I wanted to do development work in East Africa, and I went to Tanzania during my degree course. But sustainable agriculture is very important to me too.' It all comes together on their journey. 'And how often do you get the chance to go on a long cycling trip? It was now or never.'

They made a start on realizing their dream by writing a project plan. What was the goal, what did they need, and what were the risks? 'And we selected farms to visit, a list that goes on growing. When we arrive at one farm, we always get suggestions of other places we should definitely visit,' says Paltanavičius. 'Of course, money was a big problem, but once we had worked most things out, we figured that must be solvable too. So we attracted sponsors and NGOs to support us.' Meanwhile, they are also earning some money themselves from their project. 'We write articles about our trip. And we are making a series of educational videos about what we are learning, for the Wageningen Farming Systems Ecology chair group.'

Which images stay with you the most?

Paltanavičius: 'The start of the Rift Valley in Jordan was very impressive. We crawled up the mountain by bike in the burning sun, but once you get to the top, you can see the road winding down for kilometres through a breathtaking desert landscape.' Hassan: 'Jordan was altogether very special. It is terribly dry and yet the farmers there have smart ways of getting the best out of the soil and growing food. For example, they plant clay pots next to the crops, and the roots then grow towards the pots and get their water from them. We ate delicious food there. They share the best they have with their guests there. Big bowls of nuts, fruit and vegetables, terrific falafel, delicious desserts – and they kept

‘In Jordan, the farmers have smart ways of getting the best out of the soil’

plying us with more. Sharing food is very important in their culture.’

What kind of people practise regenerative farming?

Hassan: ‘They are all inspiring people. In Austria, for example, we visited Alfred Grand. He put it nicely: “Here we grow food, soil and people.” What he means is that it’s all about the community around the farm as well as the crops. And we soon found out that this is true for many of these farmers. They want to connect people, to supply them with healthy food and to learn more about this approach to farming together.’

Paltanavičius: ‘Faddoul in Jordan was another very special person. We intended to make a short visit, but we decided to stay there for a week. He used to be a banker, but he switched careers. Now he has a small plot of land and is busy planning what he wants to plant on it. We had wonderful conversations with him about your place here on Earth as a human being.’

Do you get into dangerous situations too?

Hassan: ‘I was very scared when a cow trampled on our tent. If we had been lying in it, I don’t think it would have turned out well. And I was afraid our tent would be completely broken. After all, it has become our home. Fortunately, the damage wasn’t too bad.’

Paltanavičius: ‘The roads can be dangerous too. We realized that when we were still in Europe. There aren’t decent cycle paths everywhere. Tunnels are particularly unsafe for cyclists. They’re very dark, and you can hardly see a thing. We try to avoid those now.’

You were at COP27, the UN climate conference in Egypt?

Paltanavičius: ‘Yes, we got tickets for it. Our main aim was to be the voice of farmers, especially the regenerative farmers we had spoken to. We talked about the problems they face and the solutions they can offer. They come up with particularly good solutions for drought-prone areas. There weren’t many farmers present at the conference, which surprised us. We were also surprised that agriculture was only a minor theme.’

What will you do when you arrive at your final destination in Tanzania?

Hassan: ‘We might want to cycle on, perhaps to South Africa. We still have a lot to learn from this continent. But we are certainly going to take a long break in Tanzania. Eventually, we want to make a longer documentary film about our trip, to share what we have learned more widely. What we will do after that, we don’t know yet. We definitely want to continue working on regenerative agriculture. It feels like we have only just begun.’

‘Farmer Guilherme Sobral from Kenya told us: “The best thing you can do is to establish a good food forest, the second-best thing you can do is to establish a bad food forest.” What he meant is that you learn how to do things better as you go along. That is how we approach our project now. We are just getting on with it and learning more and more as we go along.’ ■

www.cycletofarms.com



AISHA HASSAN (28)

After completing her Bachelor’s degree in International Studies at Leiden University, Hassan obtained her Master’s degree in International Development Studies at Wageningen in 2021.



LUKAS PALTANAVIČIUS (28)

After a Bachelor’s degree in Agricultural Technology in Lithuania, Paltanavičius obtained his Master’s degree in Biobased Sciences at Wageningen in 2021.