Below is a written account of the last 10 days spent teaching skateboarding in the West Bank, our journey home to London, and a few thoughts about the whole experience. There's some pics and video clips, and if you scroll to the bottom you can see an awesome video diary from Rachael Sherlock that covers week 3 of our journey—filmed on her GoPro and edited with her super skills!
The last ten days were in many ways the most intense of our whole trip. We'd expected a relaxed week, easing ourselves back into our normal lives - but the West Bank had other ideas. Looking back I'm absolutely stoked that things happened the way they did and I feel like it was one of the most important weeks in terms of what I gave of myself and what I gained from others.
We finished last week on a high, with some awesome sessions where we had a lot of kids progressing really well. Friday night was mad busy at the park and we were so happy when the boys from Zababdeh turned up with nine full set ups! It made a huge difference, but it was so busy that Rachael and I gave our boards out too, and I was still running lessons with five or six people having to share one deck. It's awesome that so many people want to skate, and frustrating when we don't have enough boards for them all. It's been one of the biggest challenges of being out here as it's really difficult to get things imported to Palestinian territories.

After all the stress of Friday, we took Saturday to chill and headed to Ramallah. We met with some of the local skaters, visited a few spots, and found a place with an outdoor swimming pool that served Palestinian beer!
The boys got to continue chilling on Sunday too, but Rachael and I were up at 6am to go and visit the girls' school with our contact Mohammed. He asked us to plan some lessons for the girls, as they're not allowed to go to the park when boys are there. He also asked us to paint three logos around the park - the SkatePal logo, the Palestinian House of Friendship logo and the Municipality logo. We only had five days left of the trip so we had to get straight to work planning the lessons, buying all the cutting knives, paints etc and making the stencils.
By Sunday evening one of the new set ups from Zababdeh had already gone missing, and whilst we were in Asira town a young girl came running over with it in her hands to show us. She was so stoked to have a board and she obviously didn't realise it had been stolen. When we asked where she got it from, some older men shouted at her and she ran away and hid it.

We eventually managed to get the board back, and we gave the girl some stickers and things to try to make up for it. We had to send a message that the boards cannot be stolen, but it was really tough and we felt so bad. It was probably one of the hardest things we did whilst we were out there, but it would be even worse if people stole all the boards and there were none left at the skatepark for others to use.

To smooth over the situation, we stayed in town for a few extra hours playing with kids, letting them skate our boards and making up our own rules for Backgammon in the coffee house.
Some people had also tried to break into the container of equipment at the skatepark. They smashed the padlock and we had to buy a new one to replace it. We never found out who it was, or why they did it, but my opinion with these things is that if you have to steal and break into things then something isn't right. Happy, fulfilled, content people don't steal from their own communities. And people with a lot of money don't need to steal a bunch of used skateboards. It's a testament to the desperation in the area, which is sad, and something that we also see in the poor and desperate areas of the UK.
We crashed out on Sunday night and on Monday we were up at 5am to climb a mountain with a local guy named Abood and his cousin. We took coffee and bread and hummus that Abood had made for us and we sat overlooking the whole of Asira watching the sunrise - it was awesome! Abood and his cousin were really funny guys and it was the perfect way to start the final week. Looking out over the different areas it started to hit me that we would be leaving soon.

It's strange that when I arrived here, I never even thought about coming back again in the future. It was just one month of volunteering, and then I'd head back home and carry on with my 'real' life. Now I found myself looking out over a town of people that I knew, that I had formed connections and friendships with. People I cared about. People I knew couldn't leave, couldn't come and visit me. Suddenly it seemed strange to just pop up in their world and then disappear forever.
We headed back down the mountain and spent the rest of the day at the skatepark in Asira. Josh and Christer left to go to Tel Aviv and then head back to London and Norway, and at the end of the day Domo and Robin travelled back to Zababdeh. Antoine stayed with us in Asira and thank god he did because we were about to have some of the busiest days of the whole trip!
Tuesday and Wednesday we had planned to do the lessons for the girls school. In the daytime it's really too hot to skate before 4pm so on Tuesday we went to have lunch in a local man's house. His family cooked for us a huge meal of chicken and rice and he told us about his experience in an Israeli prison, about his brother being shot and about his plans to hopefully leave Palestine in the future by studying and gaining scholarships abroad. Many of the people we have spoken too see educational scholarships as their only way out of Palestine. We were told that in may countries, the Palestinian school certificates are not valid, so once they finish school they have to gain qualifications from other places in order to be recognised as educated in the rest of the world. This particular dude was
26 and still had several years of study ahead of him before he could think about applying to leave.

After this we went to the park and laid out all of the equipment for the girls' lessons. We tried to tell any boys who turned up the day before that today was girls only, but of course they all turned up anyway, so Antoine sat at the entrance and kept them all from coming in.

The girls sessions were a huge learning experience for me. Before coming to Asira, we'd been told that they were not allowed to skate with the boys, but for the past three weeks of being here, we'd had mixed sessions every day and there had been no issues, so we assumed things were more relaxed than we'd expected.

What we found out now, was that for the girls who attend the all girl school, this is not the case. They come from very traditional families and are not allowed to mix with boys at all, even as friends. When they skated the park with us, after we had cleared the boys out, it was the first time they had had a chance to skate since the last girl volunteers came out here 5 months ago! And they won't be allowed to skate again until the next female volunteers come out in August.

We managed to give them two sessions, of two hours each, which means that in the past six months they've been allowed to skate for just four hours! Some of the girls have really fallen in love with skateboarding and even in this short time frame we've managed to get them dropping in, kick turning, riding fakie and beginning to practice ollies and cavemen.
Any skater will tell you how once you fall in love with skating, it's almost a torture to not be allowed to skate. It becomes your freedom, your release, your sense of expression and creativity.
What's interesting about the small villages in Palestine, like Asira, is that at first glance a lot of the oppression seems to come from the culture itself. Many things that women can't do aren't actually illegal, they're just seen as 'shameful' within the culture. This means that girls who come from relatively progressive, more modern families (more commonly found in the Palestinian larger towns and cities) can skate with boys in the park, but girls from very traditional families can't. By law, women are allowed to do most things, but because of the culture, they refrain as it would potentially be seen as shameful or crazy.

Many of the people we spoke to told us that Palestine used to be a rich, open minded and multicul-
tural place. There were many different religions, they had three international airports and lots of varied ways of life. Because of the Israeli occupation, Palestinians now only have 25% of their land left. This has meant that the culture has been saturated with strict traditions and, with no contact to the outside world, these traditions are not progressing or being diluted in the same way that they are in other places.

One of the amazing things happening with SkatePal is that it's injecting some modernity into these landscapes. People are seeing the skateparks as something new and exciting, with real potential to help change the areas. There's a brand new children's play area now built next to the park in Asira - one of only 3 ever built in Palestine - and there are talks of new shops and even a cinema being built there too.
The act of skating is capturing people's imaginations and allowing them to project new ideas. Some of the locals are even talking about starting their own production company to manufacture boards themselves (a dream that every skater has!).

One of my hopes for skateboarding is that the young girls who try it will love it so much that they will fight for their right to skate as they grow up. I'm excited to see some amazing girl skaters coming out of this area in the future and to see what other positive effects skateboarding can have on the local community.
In the evenings on Tuesday and Wednesday, after the girls sessions had finished, the boys came pouring into the park and we had some really busy sessions. Lots of families turned up and all the girls who were allowed to skate in the mixed sessions came down too. Antoine was so rad at teaching during these busy times and helped the kids to progress a lot - we literally wouldn't have been able to handle these sessions without him!

It was really emotional saying goodbye to so many people and all of a sudden everything felt super rushed, like there was no time to really absorb all that was happening.
We made some stencils of flowers, shapes, skull and crossbones, etc and sprayed images onto some of the old decks, that we then gave to some of the kids with messages on them to 'keep pushing' and 'stay rad', along with tshirts, stickers, pens and pencils, Bones wheels, a Girl deck, Vans merch, and anything else we had to offer. One girl gave us all bracelets made from paperclips and many of them asked when we were coming back - it was really sad to say that we didn't know.
Below is a little edit I made from the last week - the footage is pretty bad quality as my phone is
the pits - but it captures the feel of the last sessions we had, some clips of Robin and Antoine killing it at the Plaza and in the park, and some of the time spent street skating with the kids too!

On our final day in Palestine we said an emotional goodbye to Antoine and went with Abdullah to Qalqilyah, where we had a final skate on the mini-ramp and a farewell pizza.
Abdullah is one of the raddest people I've ever met, and at just 17 years old he's a super sick skater and a really intelligent guy. He told us a lot about his personal experiences in the West Bank, and was a big help with our whole trip.

He took us to the Israeli checkpoints that lead into Tel Aviv and waited for us in case we didn't get through (which was good because they didn't let us through the first one).
I felt really guilty walking through the checkpoint and into Tel Aviv, leaving Abdullah at a point where he, as a Palestinian, was not allowed to go any further. I think that knowing how many of the people we met are literally trapped inside the borders of Palestine is what made it feel so strange to leave.

Inside the checkpoint, the soldiers scanned our bags and found the bottle of water and mud that I had taken from the dead sea. They totally freaked over it and thought that it was a bomb given to us by some Palestinians. We had to spend around half an hour in a locked cell whilst men and women with guns surrounded us and checked out the bottle. It was nuts! I have to admit I was freaked out for a minute and it was a stark reminder of how serious these check points are and what many people have to go through on a regular basis. Being surrounded by people with guns from another country is scary even when you have nothing to hide.
When we finally made it through the check point - WOW! We were just two hours from the village of Asira where we had spent the last month, but being in Israel was like another world. The climate was perfect, everything was super modern and the beach was beautiful. It reminded me a lot f being in California or - as Rachael said - it was like being inside a Sims game. The difference between the Israeli and Palestinian states couldn't have been more drastic, and acted as another reminder of the complex situation over occupation. I'll be talking more about this in a separate blog post next week, so follow my Facebook page or IG to keep updated!

We spent the last day skating along the beach, chilling on the sands and planning what we'd be doing when we arrived home. We'd missed a whole month of hanging with our girls Nefarious crew so skating and chilling with them and some pizzas was top of the list!
As we head home, all that's left to say is thank you once again to SkatePal, thank you to skateboarding, thank you to everyone who supported our campaign to make the journey and to everyone who has taken an interest in what we've been doing. Thanks to LLSB for the pads, boards and support, thanks to Like A Girl for the grip tape and other supplies, Better Extreme for hosting the Jam, thanks to all the people we met who made our experience what it was, thanks to everyone who came and skated, to all the other volunteers out there with us, and to Nefarious for being our crew dem! And shout out to Rachael for telling me about this opportunity in the first place and being an awesome
travel buddy <3 Check out her video diary from Week 3 of our adventure below!

Watch this space for more blog posts reflecting on what we learned, reconnecting with some of the people we met, and making plans for the future. If you'd like to get involved with SkatePal yourself (girls are desperately needed!) then visit www.skatepal.co.uk and begin your journey today! It's been one of the most rewarding and educational and eye opening experiences of my life so far.