



# Woman's World



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Afternoon Despatch & Courier

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# BIKER CHIC

Forget pink helmets and lightweight bikes — women bikers in India are taking their passion for motorcycles really seriously! With several of them heading to India Bike Week in a fortnight, the **Woman's World Team** spoke to a few of these women bikers to get titbits of their adrenaline pumping experiences

➤ Riding pillion with riders such as Labdhi Shah (in picture) helps Ara Alexander combine her love for bikes and photography



Picture credit: Ara Alexander Photography

If you live near the roads that lead up to the Mumbai-Goa highway, you're likely to be treated to the roaring sound of bikes as they make their way to India Bike Week, which will be held in Goa from February 20 to 21. While you won't be able to see past their helmets and heavy gear, you should know that several of these bikers are women who have been breaking gender stereotypes about riding for a while now. According to Martin D'Costa, the president of India Bike Week, the two-day festival is expecting almost 12,000 people this year, and will offer film screenings, music performances and bike stunt displays. We spoke to some of the women riders to find out what it's like.

## HERE COMES THE HARLEY

Ever since she laid her hands on a bike as a young girl, Labdhi Shah knew that this was a hobby that she wanted to pursue. So, she bought her first bike, a Harley Davidson, in 2010. However, the Kawasaki V800 is also a favourite. She explains that bike-riding is an activity that comes with its fair share of obstructions, especially for women. The safety gear usually weighs at least 7-8kg and for a short woman, that can be quite a heavy load. "It's better to protect yourself with those 7-8kgs than risk your life without it," she says. Rash drivers and racers are another inconvenience that she faces on the road, but that doesn't stop her. She tells us that one of her most memorable biking experiences has been the ride to Udaipur with her biking group, Surat Superbikers Club, which she recommends to any bike-riding enthusiast. Riding to Leh-Ladakh is on her bucket list and while being a female rider comes with its cons, she believes that women also garner a lot of respect while riding. "People are usually awestruck when they see a woman handle a bike just as well as a man!" she laughs. Just like many other bikers, Labdhi has passed through several rural areas on her trips and she can assure you that the people in villages don't have any sexist misconceptions and perceptions about women who ride bikes. "When you do something that you nothing like it," she signs off.



Picture credit: Sangheeta Jairam

## YOU WILL LEARN WITH TIME

Sangeetha Jairam, who started riding when she was just 15-years-old, draws inspiration from her father, who used to ride a bike. She joined India Bike Week in 2011, simply to interact and share her passion for riding with people who have similar interests. As a woman rider, Sangeetha has received mostly positive attention from people when she is on the road. She tells us, "People are almost always helpful. So, the attention is more positive than negative." Women, especially in our country, are subjected to sexism in almost all aspects of life, so you can't expect bike riding to be that different. To tackle such situations, Sangeetha believes in maintaining an extremely low profile — she doesn't believe in advertising herself. After all, it's important to be safe rather than sorry! If you're wondering about how different it is to ride as a woman, Sangeetha explains, "I don't think there's much of a difference. I do face minor issues such as my hair sticking to the helmet or being subjected to occasional, unwarranted attention. But, you learn with time and after a while, these things don't really bother you."

Sangeetha shares an experience with us, telling us, "I was once riding a big bike with luggage and while taking a U-turn, my bike fell to the ground. Lifting it up wasn't an easy task. Nobody came to help me, in fact people were a little astounded because I was a woman biker. But, people in rural areas are generally helpful and mean no harm." Sangeetha drools over the Ducati Multistrada and her favourite biking route in India is the Himalayas. She explains, "The road to the Himalayas is challenging, scenic, and is filled with life lessons. I would love to ride through Tibet — it seems so fascinating!"

# ADC

## Afternoon

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Find out what we think of the newly opened Mexican restaurant Picante

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Find out new spa and salon Millik is worth a visit

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Picture credit: Sarika Mehta

>> A doctor by profession, Sarika leaves rural residents awe-struck with her hobby as well as profession

## DR. BIKER

38-year-old Sarika Mehta, who is a doctor by profession, loves riding as well as anything that has the word adventure in it. She also loves mountaineering, and took up bike riding as a challenge. Her husband, who is also a biker, is extremely supportive of her hobby and often accompanies her on road trips. But, as a lot of women who love bike riding, she faces some problems while on the road. Fellow bikers constantly want to compete in order to prove their superiority. The weight of the bike can prove to be a disadvantage as well. "I never argue with people who doubt my abilities. Instead, I show them what I am

capable of," she explains. A member of the all-women biking group Bikerni, she loves to go on long biking trips, and the route between Surat and Kutch is one of her favourites. "With such a large variety of bikes available, I wouldn't want to pick a favourite," she laughs. Thanks to her job, Sarika has been to several rural villages, where she serves as an inspiration for the people because of her bike riding hobby as well as her profession. "I want people to understand that you need to respect the rider, because they are doing something challenging and are passionate about it," she adds.

## IT'S LIKE YOU'RE A CELEBRITY!

You and a friend are both riding down an almost-empty highway in the rural hinterlands and suddenly, your friend's bike breaks down. You have no option but to stop, in order to try and fix the problem. Right then, you notice that a young man has stopped a few feet away from you. He whips out a phone and excitedly mutters something that sounds like, 'Come here, there are women on bikes here.' If this sounds scary at first, you know what Firdaus Shaikh's first reaction was. She is a founding member of the all-girl biker group, Bikerni, and if we were to go by her experiences, the worst that could happen is that the man will ask you to pose for a few pictures. Firdaus, who has been obsessed with biking for a long time, and was part of a boy's bikers club, before she and a few other female riders decided to start Bikerni, tells us that instead of facing creepy stares and sexist attitudes, she actually comes across awe and wonder. The guy in her story was so awestruck that he called his friends over to share this sense of wonder.

Firdaus, who currently rides a Pulsar as well as a Karizma and hopes to own a Ducati someday, has another tale to regale us with. She says, "When we ride in and park at tea shops, the *chaiwala* will initially dismiss us as just another group of guys, because he can't see through our gear. However, once we take off our helmets and he discovers that we're actually a group of girls, first he will be a little surprised, and then he will be all over us, offering tea (laughs)." All through our talk with Firdaus, it's easy to catch her passion for biking and the confidence with which she talks about riding through India, to destinations such as Ladhak (Bikerni holds the 2013 Limca Book for Records for being the largest all-women motorcycle expedition to Khardung-La, which is the highest motor-able road in the world), Malshej Ghat and Goa, is enough to inspire women. Of course, she tells us that as a woman, answering nature's call on a long ride can prove to be a bit of a problem. But, once you get some experience riding, you will figure out how to solve this problem.



>> Firdaus is one of the founding members of the all-girl biker group, Bikerni

Picture credit: Firdaus Shaikh

>> This picture by Meghna is super adorable! But, like she does, make sure to wear safety gear when you're actually riding!



Picture credit: Meghna Khanna

## THE BULLET GIRL

Like Sangheeta, Meghna Khanna's bike riding inspiration is her father, who was a fighter pilot at the Indian Air Force. Meghna started riding when she was 12-years-old and is participating in India Bike Week for the first time this year. She tells us, "When I was 12-years-old, I rode a scooter in an air force station in Bareilly. I switched to riding a Yamaha when I turned 13-years-old; at 14, I tried other bikes and finally at 15, I rode a Bullet. It's been 20 years since I started riding."

Women generally have low upper body strength and since the Bullet is a heavy bike, Meghna does find it difficult to handle. She explains, "Your feet need to touch the ground to balance the bike. Since I am not tall and ride a Royal Enfield-350cc, I had to get the seat modified for a smoother ride." Another bike that she loves riding is the Triumph, with its old-world charm. She has enjoyed riding on the road from New Delhi to Ladakh and from Bombay to Goa, and wishes to explore the North East and Rann of Kutch, because of the scenic beauty and excellent roads there. Meghna adds, "The only person I have to prove anything to is myself. I am doing this for myself and not for anybody else." Over the past 10 years (since building toilets at every petrol pump became compulsory), Meghna thinks that long ride have become easier for women. She adds, "Men can relieve themselves anywhere, but we can't. So, this rule has made my life easier." Meghna believes in the beauty of the rural parts of our country and feels welcomed by rural people. An unforgettable experience for Meghna took place a ride between Bangalore and Pondicherry. She explains, "I found a petrol pump run only by women. Who could have thought that in such an unexplored area, there will be women running a petrol pump. Now you can imagine what these rural areas can offer!"

Meghna is part of the Women Traveller's Meet, where different people sit together and share their experiences.

## THE MOTOGRAPHER

Regardless of how decent smartphone cameras are, no trip, especially a road-trip, is complete without that one photographer, obsessed with capturing the best shot. The next time you see of a group of women bikers and notice one of the pillions taking pictures with wild abandon, you may have caught a glimpse of professional photographer, Ara Alexander, who combines her love of photography and bikes to create motorcycling photography, or motography.



Though she would love to ride a bike, she's still in the process of learning and one day, she hopes to ride to Khardung-la. She tells us, "If you're a biker, the pinnacle of riding is the route to Khardung-la, the highest motor-able spot in the world. I would love to ride there and shoot." About the place that she has been to, she says, "I've been on very few routes... but my favourite route is Goa. The mesmerising bends and curves on the way have always thrilled me. The scenery and background that I get to capture is the best there."

## STAY SAFE!

Here are a few safety tips for women, shared by the organisers of India Bike Week:

- Wear helmets and knee guards.
- Carry a map and a torch.
- Install a safety application on your phone.
- Carry pepper spray and a safety knife.
- Carry extra batteries and ensure your emergency contacts are on speed dial.
- Pre-plan your stops.
- Always know your route.
- Stay visible — if drivers can see you, they are less likely to hit you.
- Do a quick test to check your brakes and wheels. Make sure that "quick release" wheels are properly secured.
- Assure bike readiness — Is your bike properly tuned? Is your seat comfortable and well-adjusted?