

The Ladies of Harley

The name Harley Davidson is synonymous with power and speed, a predominantly male arena. But women are taking to the road, and they are doing it on Harleys. Meet the ladies of Harley.

The throaty rumble of a large muffler signals the unmistakable entry of a Harley. Chrome gleaming in the bright sunlight, the bike rounds the corner, turning heads. Orange and yellow flames snake along the black petrol tank drawing the gazes of starstruck pedestrians. The rider coasts into a parking space and cuts the engine, the sudden silence overwhelming. Dismounting and removing the full face helmet, she tucks her hair behind her ears, pulls a small handbag from her panniers, and strides confidently into the Bikers Café.

The stereotypical image of a Harley Davidson rider is a burly, bulky tattooed man sporting an impressively long beard, a bandana and a combination of leather and denim, but about 12 percent of

all Harley motorcycle sales in the United States are to women. The statistics vary across countries, but as the barriers for women riders decrease, Harley sales increase.

Harley are smart, so they are producing more motorcycles that are lower to the ground so women can plant their feet firmly at rest. Many of the bikes now offer narrower seats and softer clutches. Handlebars and windshields are being adjusted to make bikes more comfortable for smaller riders. Move over boys. The women are hitting the road.

The women who choose to ride the powerful bikes are not all rough and tough. The four ladies I met were far from it - Sara Bianchi from Italy is compact with spiky hair and an



infectious grin. Angela Hallaschka from Germany was impeccably made up sporting a diamante in the crevice of her front teeth. Kirsty Lyons, hailing from South Africa is the tallest in the group, statuesque but baby-faced with a cheeky smile. Claudia Borg from Malta has a small frame and a neat plait snaking down her back.

The women come from different countries and different backgrounds. They work in different fields, and represent different age groups. Their marital statuses differ, as do their home addresses, their peer groups and their histories. But they share something in common – a passion for Harleys.





FROM LEFT TO RIGHT Claudia, Sara, Kirsty, Angela

Between the women there is the friendly camaraderie of an interest shared. Most were introduced to riding as pillion passengers. "I once was invited by one of the HOG members as a pillion rider," says Angela. "I said yes and we made a ride through the night in the desert. It was such a great feeling. Then he invited me on a tour in the south of France for two weeks. That was definitely the best vacation I ever had in my life, so after that I thought ok, now I have to do my own license and I need to have my own bike to get the same exciting experience." That was in May. In October she invested in her bike and she hasn't looked back, apart from in her wing mirrors.

Sara says: "For me it was something I always wanted to do, since I was a teenager in Italy. First I wanted a Vespa. Then I wanted a scooter. Then I wanted a small motorcycle. The answer was always no, no, no. My dad always said the only thing you'll ever be allowed to ride on two wheels is a bicycle. So I stuck with my bicycle. I tried twice to go as a passenger. The last time was last year with a friend who has a Harley. I thought 'I really enjoy this but I need to be the rider. It is not enough fun to be the passenger.' So I went to see the bike in June last year, started my lessons in July, got my license in September and bought the bike in October."

Kirsty has been in the driver's seat for a couple of years but her trajectory



into riding followed a similar pattern. "I was a pillion rider," she explains "... and then I had a conversation with a friend about whether to buy a Jeep Wrangler or something else for leisure, and he said 'Well, why don't you get a bike?' I said 'Because I don't have a license.' So he said 'Well, why don't you get a license?' From there I went and bought a bike and then got my license."

For Claudia the inspiration was her husband. "He is an experienced rider, and I was getting kind of bored on the back, so I thought maybe I should ride and I started my lessons," she starts. Her husband interrupts: "I said maybe she should learn to ride since she was falling asleep behind me!" Claudia giggles before continuing. "I started and had a sportster, a beginner bike, but then I ended up with this boy." She is referring to her bright orange fat boy Harley, a heavyweight beast. "I went to Abu Dhabi, to the store there," she explains. "I went to buy a bag and I ended up with the bike. It was a really good deal. It had only done 87 kilometres." Only a woman could walk into a shop to buy a handbag and justify buying a motorbike in the same sentence.

Women make up just over five percent of the HOG chapter these women belong to. "There is a designated officer for the ladies who organises rides just for women," says Sara. "I enjoy riding with the Ladies of Harley. The riders who don't stick to the lanes, the ones who accelerate and then brake and then over take from the wrong side, they are often guys," she notes, "...but the guys also encourage us, support us, protect us, and ensure we are happy, safe and having fun."

The women laugh and exchange knowing glances. Kirsty recounts a story of a ride she undertook with her boyfriend. "We stopped and filled up at the same time and set our



clocks," she explains. "On the same road we stopped at the next station and I had 20 kilometres less on the clock than he had, because he's doing this..." She waves her hands in a loose zig zag pattern. "He was going all over the road." Again the women laugh.

The women's comments show an underlying respect for the rules of the road and the training sessions they were put through to qualify for a license. "When you come from the training where you have to do everything perfectly, once you're on your bike you are confident," says Claudia. Sara is also quick to credit the training. "I did all of it," she admits. "I stalled. I fell. I skidded. During the class I tried it all and actually when I fell I was almost relieved that I did because before that I was worried about falling. Then I fell, it happened and I survived. I was only going 20 kilometres per hour, but I passed that block."

A Harley of any kind generates a lot of interest. A woman on a Harley

generates even more. "When I came this morning there were two cars beside me with small babies in the car, maybe three or four years old," recounts Angela "... and the father was saying 'Look, look' and pointing at me on the road. That was a really nice experience." Sara chimes in: "In my case you don't really know I'm a female," she says as she analyses her wiry physique. "Maybe they can tell because you're driving carefully?" I ask, alluding to our earlier conversation. Sara stops laughing to say "It's when I take the helmet off that people realise I am a girl. I like it. I like that reaction."

Despite the physical differences between the women, none have any problems manoeuvring the heavy bikes. Sara says: "For me, I try to watch how I park so that I don't have to reverse too much. The bike is heavy. I dropped my bike on the second day I had it when I was trying to park it because I had to keep going back and forth, back



There are no regrets. "It's the best decision I ever made," confirms Kirsty. "It's me. It's something I wanted to do. I don't want to be the type of person when I'm 50 years old looking back on my life and saying oh if only, and I should have, but I could have, but I didn't. I want to be the person that says I lived my life and went for what I wanted. So I've got a bike." "You are free," says Claudia. "I like that feeling." Sara adds: "It gets me into my zone. You forget about anything

else and connect with yourself. It's peace of mind." "Oh I just love the sound," interjects Angela.

I watch as the women kit up ready to ride into the distance. They put on their jackets, pull on their helmets, and wheel their bikes into position, giving me a nod as they gun their engines. Part of me wants to be one of them, instead of being left on the curb as they ride off into the sunset; the charming, independent and free, ladies of Harley.



and forth, but we know how to pick our little beasts up once they're down, on our own and in the span of a few seconds."

The women have had to adapt their lifestyles in small ways to integrate the bikes. Handbags become an issue, but the women wave this off with the maxim that you learn to carry a lot less. "I miss my skirt sometimes you know. My lifestyle did change a bit," confesses Claudia, but she quickly adds that she wouldn't change anything. "Sometimes I say 'Today I am going to be a girl' and I put on a dress and little shoes and I say 'Oh look, I am cute,'" says Sara.



For women interested in riding, see:
www.harley-davidson.com/wcm/womenriders