

## The lone female rider

WE ALL NOTICE HER. We do a double take and crane our necks to get a glimpse of the woman riding by on a motorcycle. When I hear the rev of a motorcycle engine approaching, whether I'm in a car, in a roadside

café, or on another motorcycle, I perk up, eager to see what and who buzzes by. If that rider happens to be a female, I stare ... and I'm a woman, for goodness' sake!

What is it about a woman alone on a motorcycle that invites looks and questions? While there are certainly more women riders on the roads, we don't often see a gal riding by herself. When I notice a leather-clad chick, her arms outstretched, her hair flowing in the wind, a hint of a smile on her face, I can't help but stare and hope that she sees me so I can give her the thumbs-up and smile.

It's fascinating to actually witness a woman controlling a big motorcycle riding right by you. As a woman rider myself, I gaze because I like to see how this girl looks on her bike, what she's wearing, what type of bike she's riding, if it fits her well, and how proficient a rider she is. If I'm observing and I'm a heterosexual female, I know that men are observing, too, most likely for different reasons. Either way, she's being watched by all of us. With all of this attention to female bikers, is it smart for a woman to embark on a motorcycle trip all by herself? Women are already prey to the wackos and sickos of the world. Throw in a motorcycle and some sexy leathers and she becomes an attraction like the Mona Lisa.

Carla King is a 40-something, single female from San Francisco who has motorcycled her way through at least a dozen countries, including China, India, and Greece, all by herself. It doesn't faze Carla that most people think a woman traveling alone on a motorcycle is dangerous and crazy. Traveling is her passion, alongside motorcycle riding and writing. Plus, she knows a thing or two about a motorcycle engine, and describes herself as a bit of a loner. Those qualities make her an ideal candidate for solo motorcycle travel, and she has no intentions of letting anything get in the way of following her dreams.

"We're such a fear-based society," explains Carla. "The biggest misconception about solo travel is that it's dangerous. It's no more dangerous than getting on your motorcycle and going to the store. It really isn't. You have to have a plan for the specific country you're visiting."

She says she's never feared for her life in terms of people. "I've learned that this is the least of your worries on the road," says Carla. "People are delighted



to see you. When they find out I'm a woman on the road alone on a motorcycle, they're curious and happy, and want to hear my story." If anything has ever made Carla fear for her life, it was a gnarly switchback that she hadn't planned for. "I really tested the tires on that one," she says with a grin.

In a recent survey of more than 500 women, 68 percent of the respondents said that they had traveled alone at least once in the past three years. The survey, sponsored by the South Carolina-based tour company Women Traveling Together, found that of the women who had traveled solo, 79 percent would not have traveled alone had they been able to find a travel companion. "While these women did not want to miss the experience of traveling, many had concerns about traveling alone, particularly in the area of safety," says Debra Asberry, president of Women Traveling Together.

With safety being the number one concern, how does Carla, a statuesque, attractive blonde, manage to hop on a motorcycle and putt across foreign lands without a partner? Her looks alone would invite stares and ill-fated favors. She admits to being nervous the first time, but she's overcome that, never dwelling on the negative. "As far as inviting attention," she says, "I have helmet hair most of the time, and I always dress down when I ride. I look a little tough. Guys are standing back wondering if I'm packing," she laughs, making a gesture with two fingers like a pistol.

Carla's desire to experience different worlds is a much stronger motivator than fear. She's usually gone for several months. Her freelance technical writing job allows her that freedom. Few people have that flexibility, so she travels by herself for now, knowing she'll have zero regrets.

"When I took my first solo trip around the US, I was pretty nervous," says Carla. "The first week, I knew that I did the right thing when this group of 80-year-old women came out of a restaurant where I was parked, and one said, 'I wish I did that when I was your age, but I was scared. Right on!' I looked at these women who were wise, and I was happy I was doing what I wanted to do. I won't look back and say, 'I wish I had done that at your age.' I don't ever want to say that."

And isn't that what life's all about? **AIM**