

Queasy Rider

At a Jersey Harley clinic, a self-proclaimed good girl nervously takes the hog by the horns.

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

Motorcyclists are fond of saying there are two kinds of riders: those who have crashed and those who are going to crash. So when I found myself kissing the asphalt one hot Saturday in July, I was thankful — on my first day as a biker babe — to have gotten that out of the way.

I was spending a long weekend in southern New Jersey at a 25-hour Harley-Davidson Rider's Edge course, a school for newbies. Just across the Delaware River from Philly in West Collingswood Heights, the dealership is one of many that offer this class for people who have minimal riding experience or none at all. For me, the course was a tryout for a hobby that might be more practical around Washington than some others I've sampled — like hang gliding and ice climbing.

And then there was the big-bad-girl appeal. I grew up taking ballet and playing first-chair clarinet, never used a fake ID and cried when I got detention for chewing gum in history class. So when a woman walked into my dance studio earlier this summer with a helmet under her arm, I envisioned myself on a motorcycle and thought: This could be my ticket to badness.

Riding also looked like fun in a girl-power sort of way. What's not to like about a world in which women have riding groups called Chics 'n Chaps, Devil Dolls and Women in the Wind? So I persuaded a Marine in my neighborhood to take me for a ride on his Harley. As soon as I threw my leg over the seat, I was hooked. "Hold onto my waist," he said, and we sped through Capitol Hill, my heart pumping so hard I forgot to breathe.

Being a good girl at heart, I decided to start my rebellion with some class time. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation offers its training courses at community colleges and select dealerships. An MSF certificate entitles you to a discount on insurance and, in some states, a waiver on your riding test. But I decided to make a weekend of it, and chose Barb's Harley-Davidson/Buell of Camden County because it's chick-owned and near my favorite town in New Jersey (Haddonfield).

When I told my grandmother about my plans, she said, "That's not very ladylike," and I smiled smugly. At last: My reputation was tarnished.

The class began Friday evening at the dealership. The six students — half of them women — ranged in age from 18 to 47. Everyone



else either owned a motorcycle or had a boyfriend or family member who rode.

After we signed waivers, we toured the dealership, and our instructor, Tom Mazzoni, reviewed our workbooks and showed us some corny video clips about protective gear.

"It's serious business," he said. "This is life and death. When you're going to put two wheels out in traffic and you don't have an attitude of safety, you're a statistic." He didn't bother with subtleties: He told us about a horrific crash that severed his chin, which had to be sewn back on (he ordered his next bike from the hospital).

That night, I met my loaner bike: the Buell Blast, a sporty beginner model that weighs 360 pounds, with a 500cc engine. We sat on the bikes in the classroom, practicing posture and getting familiar with the controls. Each of the four limbs controls something, but the first lesson was about our heads: "Your head balances the motorcycle. If you look down," Tom warned, "you're going down."

After class, I drove to my friend Rachel's house in storybook-cute Haddonfield, a few miles from the dealership. It was quaint and peaceful enough to be the perfect antidote for a weekend packed with engine-revving. The town has businesses as diverse as a violin shop and a snowboard store, great vintage and home furnishings boutiques and a collection of historic churches.

Saturday and Sunday were full days on the range, an open parking lot next to the dealer-



PHOTOS BY SARAH GLOVER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

At a motorcycle riding clinic at Barb's Harley-Davidson in West Collingswood Heights, N.J., instructor Tom Mazzoni guides beginning students. Left, the author negotiates the course.

ship with painted lines and cones for exercises. By 8 a.m., Tom had a cigar in his mouth and was reading to us from his instructor's manual. We started with the basics: mounting the bike, rolling the throttle and shifting to neutral. The first time we turned the ignition and the bike rumbled to life, I smiled so hard I thought my cheeks would burst.

By noon, I was feeling pretty full of myself: I was having so much fun, and I hadn't stalled yet. Over lunch, Tom — a man of few compliments — said to me: "You're doing fine. You're doing better than fine." I beamed. But I quickly learned that being overconfident on a motorcycle is the kiss of death. During an exercise that afternoon, I shifted up and popped the clutch, jolting the bike. I panicked and grabbed the brake, pulling to the right, and before I knew what was happening, I found myself sprawled on the ground, with my booted foot pinned underneath the bike.

Tom helped me up, bandaged my knee, iced my chin and reviewed what I had done wrong. Did I want to continue? I definitely wanted to get back on the saddle. But when I did, I found myself so worried, I was getting sloppy. "Relax," Tom yelled over the rumble of the engines. "You're thinking too much! And you're squeezing that thing so hard you're going to choke it."

That night, I met Rachel for a much-needed Italian feast at Nunzio's, one of the hot spots in newly revitalized Collingswood. I told her about the other students; a vegetarian salon owner, a soft-spoken construction worker, a woman who seemed to have every piece of Harley gear ever manufactured (and she bought the thongs that weekend) and a Gael Garcia Bernal-ish pre-med with Gucci sunglasses.

A class in which half the members are

women is typical, said Barb Borowiec, who bought the dealership 19 years ago. She said women are buying bikes differently today than they did a decade ago, when they'd be chaperoned by men. "Women come in by themselves, with their own money, and they know what they want," she said. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council, women now account for nearly 10 percent of motorcycle owners.

Sunday morning, I returned with my head back in gear. We learned to weave, swerve, stop in a curve, ride over obstacles (a two-by-four) and make a figure eight. Every time I did something right (hearing Tom say "atta-girl" would send me to cloud nine), I would congratulate myself for a split second but then berate myself for getting distracted. "I can't believe how hard this is," I said to the construction worker, who had taken to calling me Crash.

We rode all Sunday afternoon, even through downpours, and practiced for our road test, which we took Monday. "Just do what you've been doing, and you'll be fine," said Tom, holding a stopwatch. I think I stopped breathing during all four exercises, but I aced the figure eight and the swerving test. I was penalized for not stopping soon enough on the braking test, and I blew the curve test by riding out of the painted line. I squeaked by with a passing score.

Finally, we took a written multiple-choice test and were all awarded our MSF cards. As we celebrated over cake, I couldn't have been prouder. Learning to ride and not giving up after my fall were among the toughest things I can remember doing.

"Just remember," Tom deadpanned as I packed up my gear, certificate in hand, "keep the shiny side up."

Coming Sunday in Travel | Monhegan Island, Maine; migratory travels.

ESCAPE KEYS

GETTING THERE: West Collingswood Heights, N.J., is about 2½ hours from Washington. Take I-95 north to New Jersey Route 295 north. Take Exit 28 (Bellmawr) and then follow Route 168 (Black Horse Pike) north for 2½ miles.

MOTORCYCLE COURSES: The three-day **Rider's Edge** course at **Barb's Harley-Davidson/Buell** in West Collingswood Heights is \$300 (926 Black Horse Pike, 856-456-4141, www.harleydavidsoncc.com).

Bikes, helmets and rain gear are provided. Classes are held every weekend at least through November but fill up quickly. Other dealerships in the region offer the course at prices ranging from \$195 to \$350. They include: **Harley-Davidson/Buell of Annapolis** (410-263-3345, www.annapolishd.com); the **Harley-Davidson/Buell Store** in Baltimore (410-238-2003, www.hdstore.com); **Harley-Davidson/Buell of Maryland** in Elkridge (410-796-1044, www.harleydavidsonofmaryland.com);

Shenandoah Harley-Davidson/Buell (Staunton, Va., 540-213-7433, www.shenandoahhd.com); **Lancaster Harley-Davidson/Buell** (Willow Street, Pa., 717-464-2703, www.lancasterhd.com); and **Mike's Famous Harley-Davidson** (New Castle, Del., 800-326-6874, www.mikesfamous.com).

WHERE TO STAY: By day's end, you'll appreciate the serenity of historic Haddonfield, N.J., three miles from Barb's and known for its charming old houses with wraparound porches. The **Haddonfield Inn** (44 West End Ave., 800-269-0014, www.haddonfieldinn.com) has one of these porches and is close to the town's shops and restaurants. Weekend rates start at \$169, including breakfast. Also nearby is the **Hilton Philadelphia/Cherry Hill** (2349 W. Marlton Pike, 800-445-8667, www.hilton.com), overlooking the Philly skyline and the Cooper River. Rooms generally start at \$99.

WHERE TO EAT: The **Little Tuna** (141 E. Kings Hwy., 856-795-0888) is downtown Haddonfield's best seafood and steak house (entrees from \$16 to \$31), and **Nunzio's** (706 Haddon Ave., 856-858-9840) in neighboring Collingswood offers some of the area's best Italian (sandwiches and soups at lunch from \$7.50, dinner entrees from \$15 to \$21). Haddonfield and Collingswood are both dry towns, so BYOB to dinner. For a brew just outside town: **PJ Whelihan's Pub** (700 Haddon Ave., 856-427-7888). For coffee, milkshakes and gourmet takeout to eat during your long day on the range, stop at **Todaro's** (9 W. Kings Hwy., 856-428-8808).

INFO: **Borough of Haddonfield**, 856-216-7253, www.haddonfieldnj.org.