

autos

## Women Turning On to Motorcycles

More women than ever are buying and riding their own bikes. To what do we owe this growing trend?

By [Marc Lachapelle](#) of MSN Autos



[Click to enlarge picture](#)

Shelley Burkett took a Motorcycle Safety Foundation riding course in 1996 'just in case' her husband couldn't ride. She has now ridden over 100,000 miles by herself.

### Related Content

[MSN Autos: Why We Ride](#)

[Two Wheelers Hit the Turf](#)

[Popular Mechanics: Two Wheels or Four?](#)

### Long Riders

Historians tell us that women have been riding motorcycles for as long as their male counterparts, just not as conspicuously and not in the same numbers. At the turn of the previous century, motorcycles were the simplest of machines and little more than bicycles with engines. Families bought them for transportation, often with a sidecar attached, at a time when cars were beyond their means. Women would ride them, too. Henry Ford's Model T would soon change this as mass production brought car prices down radically and rising wages increased buying power, relegating motorcycles to a mostly recreational role from that point on.

Women have their motorcycling heroes, too. In 1916, for instance, the sisters Adeline and Augusta Van Buren, descendents of eighth U.S. president Martin Van Buren, rode a pair of Indian-brand motorcycles from coast to coast. There were few paved roads at the time, let alone freeways.

And then there was Bessie Stringfield, an African-American orphan raised in Boston by a proud Catholic woman of Irish descent. A free spirit, Stringfield rode motorcycles for 60 years, starting in the early '30s. She completed eight solo rides across the nation, including the South, long before the days of integration. Yet Stringfield and the Van Buren sisters are among only 18 women to have been inducted into the American Motorcyclist Association's Hall of Fame, out of almost 400 members.

### A Bike of One's Own

While the vast majority of motorcycle owners today are men, things are changing and changing quickly. Women now own 12.3 percent of all motorcycles in the country, up from 9.6 percent in 2003. That's a 28 percent increase in five years. To put these numbers in perspective, ownership levels were 8.2 percent in 1998 and 6.4 percent in 1990. Women also make up close to 23 percent of the entire population of motorcyclists, which was estimated at 25 million total riders nationwide for 2008. The proportion was 18 percent in 2003, for an impressive gain of about 27 percent in five years.

Among all two-wheelers, scooters were typically the first stop for female riders. "Scooters already enjoy a large percentage of women riders, around 50 percent," says Paolo Timoni, president and CEO of Piaggio Group Americas, who brought the iconic Italian scooter back to these shores in 1998. Scooters are popular with young women as a first two-wheel purchase because they are easy to ride, with simple controls and automatic transmissions, and clean-running with a fully enclosed powertrain. You just hop on and go. Just mind the potholes with the tiny wheels on smaller models.

Larger scooters are a solid trend, too, with engines up to 650cc in displacement on the pioneering Suzuki Burgman. Honda is also treading new ground with the spacey-looking DN-01, which it labels as a "crossover," powered by a 680cc engine and fitted with a dual-mode continuously variable transmission.

What type of two-wheel machine are women choosing to ride today? The MIC survey shows that 69 percent of them favor "on-highway" motorcycles while only 19 percent prefer scooters. Of the remaining group, 11 percent ride "off-highway" bikes and only 1 percent can enjoy riding on or off paved roads with their dual-purpose machines.

### Size Is an Issue

Longtime motorcycle rider and enthusiast Elke Martin, who started her career at *Motorcyclist* magazine and helped launch *Dirt Rider* magazine in the '80s, is quick to point out the crucial importance of seat height and machine weight for many women. Within the wide category of "on-highway" motorcycles — aka road bikes — custom bikes are popular with women for their rakish, chopper-like looks and a typically low seat that makes it easier to "flat-foot"

My daughter will soon turn 24 and has just completed her master's degree in architecture. For the past 12 years or so, this aspiring architect has been learning to ride and jump horses as a hobby and as a precious release from the stresses of her work and studies. Over time, she has also become an excellent driver, with a spotless safety record. She once had thoughts about skydiving but has now found a new passion: motorcycles. Let's just say her leisure pursuits are a bit on the risky side.

Her mom has never been all that fond of the horse riding, but she is simply petrified at the thought of her daughter on a street bike. I am, on the other hand, torn. Having ridden motorcycles of all types all my life and raced motocross in my younger years, I know about the absolute thrill of two wheels — as well as the serious dangers involved. If there is any solace here, it's in knowing that we are not the only parents concerned about their daughter's desire to take up motorcycling.

Women from just about every age group are coming to the sport more than ever before, whether for pure enjoyment or as an inexpensive and environmentally sound way to travel and commute. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC), women have doubled their presence among Generation X motorcyclists (turning 28 to 44 this year) to 15 percent since 1998. Meanwhile, motorcycle ownership has grown 62 percent within Gen Y (about 15 to 29) since 2003 and 14 percent are women.

them when stopped, for better control and easier parking maneuvers.

[Discuss: Are you a woman thinking about taking up motorcycling? What are your main reasons for doing so? What are your concerns?](#)

Every mainstream manufacturer has entry-level bikes that fit the bill, too. The Honda Rebel 250, Kawasaki's Eliminator 125 and Vulcan 500, the Suzuki Marauder 250 and the Yamaha V-Star 250 are good beginner's bikes with their low weight, low price and proven engines that combine good yet unimposing horsepower and excellent fuel economy. Smaller sport bikes such as the Kawasaki Ninja 250R or 500R and the Suzuki GS500 and SV650 also do a fine job as first mounts.

So does the U.S.-made Buell Blast, a "standard" or "nude" model that is used as a training bike in Harley-Davidson's Rider's Edge New Rider program. The Blast is powered by a 492cc single-cylinder engine that is rated at 69 mpg and can be fitted with an optional seat that reduces seat height two inches further, from an already low 27 inches.

[Click to enlarge picture](#)



Scooters are back in the U.S. market and women buy half of all new models. Innovative ones such as Piaggio MP3 500, a three-wheeler that leans into corners, are catching.

#### Model Ranges on Rising Scales

The leading Japanese manufacturers produce full model "families" built on a popular custom template. Lines such as the Honda Shadow, Kawasaki Vulcan, Suzuki Boulevard and Yamaha V Star offer engine size, horsepower, glitter and prices on a rising scale to match the rider's budget, size and proficiency.

Harley-Davidson itself has quite a fanatical following among women, too. The evergreen Sportster is the entry-level model for this charismatic brand, with a choice of 883 or 1,200cc versions of the archetypal V-twin engine. The Sportster 883 Low has a price to match, at a current \$6,999. Levels of luxury, size, comfort, engine size and chrome surface then go up all the way to the range-topping Ultra Classic Electra Glide touring model, as prepared by the Custom Vehicle Operations department, with a current starting price of \$35,499. This 924-pound motorcycle, powered by a 110 cubic-inch (1.8 liter) engine is surely not for beginners.

That said, the Milwaukee-based manufacturer is making great efforts in reaching out to women as potential buyers with a variety of programs. Among them are Women's Garage Parties held at Harley-Davidson dealerships across the United States. These free women-only events offer beginner information by combining workshops and various activities. Harley-Davidson has also recently launched a new Web site dedicated to women. This well-designed site contains a wealth of information targeted mostly at beginners or newcomers to the brand. This includes downloadable documents as varied as a guide on avoiding or minimizing "helmet hair," a glossary of motorcycle terms and tips on picking up your bike if it drops on its side.

The Motorcycle Industry Council has well-made and downloadable documents available on its Discover Today's Motorcycling site ([www.motorcycles.org](http://www.motorcycles.org)), chiefly "A Girl's Guide to Motorcycle Shopping" and the "10-Step Guide to Motorcycling."

#### Women Are Safety-Conscious, Gregarious

Equestrian sport has its risks, but our daughter is no daredevil. As a first step in the world of motorcycling, she will sign up for a full motorcycle riding and safety course. Women are currently enrolling in Motorcycle Safety Foundation courses in greater proportions than any other group, with a 53 percent rate. "Women are doing the smart thing," says Ty van Hooydonk, director of product communications at the MIC.

To be safe on a motorcycle, you must also wear protective gear — including a helmet that is Department of Transportation-approved, at the very least — and you must wear it all the time. Martin says that the wide availability of riding gear that finally looks good and fits well is making motorcycling more attractive to women. "There were times when I had to pick boys' sizes to find something that would fit me half-decently," she says. "I even once flew to Boston to get measured for a full set of Vanson leathers and I still had to return them three times because they didn't fit right."

Motorcyclists traditionally are a diverse lot — typically strong-willed and individualistic — and female riders are no different. This shared passion has nonetheless led to the creation of myriad motorcycling clubs and associations of all persuasions. Female riders also have their own gatherings, separate from the giant spectacles in Sturgis, S.D., and Daytona Beach, Fla.

[Discuss: Are you a woman thinking about taking up motorcycling? What are your main reasons for doing so? What are your concerns?](#)

On August 19-22, 2009, the American Motorcyclist Association will hold its fifth International Women & Motorcycling Conference in Keystone, Colo. Sponsored by Harley-Davidson and Buell, the conference will also mark only the second time the U.S. has hosted the official annual rally of the Women's International Motorcycle Association, an organization that was founded by American rider Louise Menzer Scherbryn in 1950. Thousands of female riders are expected, with groups coming from as far as Japan and several weaving the event into long-distance trips of a few thousand miles.

Many will still go on solo rides these days. I also know at least one 24-year-old Gen Y woman who might be taking her first riding course with her baby-boomer dad in tow. After all, the fifth and last cardinal rule of the Motorcycle Safety Foundation is to "be a lifelong learner by taking refresher rider courses" every few years. I'm sure I will learn and rediscover a lot. Plus, I can make sure my baby is as safe and sound as she can be while discovering the joys of two-wheeling.

*A professional auto journalist for more than 25 years and the founding editor of Sympatico / MSN Autos, Marc Lachapelle is a two-time winner of the Canadian Journalist of the Year award from the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada, an accomplished photographer and licensed racer.*

**In the market for a new car?** MSN Autos is pleased to provide you with information and services designed to save you time, money and hassle. Click to [research prices and specifications](#) on any new car on the market or [get a free price quote](#) through MSN Autos' New-Car Buying Service.

## Related Content

[GM Plug-In Crossover on Track](#)  
[Lexus Tops J.D. Power IQS](#)  
[Cadillac Redesigns SRX for 2010](#)

[BMW's Entry-Level Ute Set for U.S.](#)  
[Chinese Company Eyes Hummer](#)  
[Chevrolet Traverse vs. Ford Flex](#)

---

[READ MORE SUV-RELATED ARTICLES](#)

[MSN privacy](#) [Legal](#) [Advertise](#) [RSS](#)

© 2009 Microsoft |