



I AM AN AVID CYCLIST “”

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Around 7 years ago, I remember seeing a few cyclists on the roads of Pune and it got me thinking. Is it time to rekindle my passion?

I really enjoyed cycling as a child. On an impulse that day, my friend and I decided to rent cycles and ride to Sinhagad fort and there it began, all over again. The gears were faulty, the bikes were a bit rusty, not to mention it was ages ago that we had cycled, so our bodies were not as enthusiastic as our spirits. We could barely make the climb and were completely exhausted.

But one thing I realized was that I certainly wanted to start cycling again. Shortly after, I bought myself a mountain bike and started cycling for pleasure and fitness. The next step that I took was enrolling myself to clubs and forums that would help me take things to the next level. Step by step I was making progress and decided to enroll myself for the Manali - Leh Cycling Expedition. This was a big step for me, but I had to do it.

Once my flight tickets were booked, I was truly committed and there was no backing out. I felt motivated enough to wake up early and go for my rides which can be tough if you work towards the later part of the day. It meant doing a lot of hill repeats to get the heart, lungs and muscles in condition for the grueling expedition and matching the pace with the leaner and fitter men, as I was the only woman in that group.

Weekends were spent riding to Lavasa, Katraj, Bopdev and Pirangut. For all my preparation, I still did not feel completely confident as my 2 fellow riders were top notch sportsmen in their younger days – one a former national cycling champion and the other, an ace badminton player.

What I lacked in fitness, I made up in perseverance and enthusiasm. At the end of the day, it was about living through the experience and enjoying the journey, albeit with some suffering.

I remember those 9 days so vividly. The expedition makes you cross 5 high altitude passes and each one of these passes is different: Baralacha La, Nakee La & Lachung La, Rohtang Pass and last but not the least - Tanglang La (5360 mts). The toughest was the Gata loops with 21 hairpin bends on an increasing incline that can numb your senses and you can barely breathe.

There were slow & painful ascents, thrilling descents and some more slow ascents. We pitched tents at camp sites, rented beds at makeshift hotels and bunked at hostels. We lost track of what date or day it was. It was refreshing to be literally 'switched off' from the outside world though we did wonder about which country had made it to the FIFA world cup finals. All that mattered was 'now' and getting past the next mountain. Simple pleasures like a nice warm bed and a hot cup of tea could bring so much comfort and joy. Very soon we were back to civilization and the hustle and bustle of Leh town.

Was it smooth sailing all the way? Certainly not! There were saddle sores, sleepless nights due to the thin air, sporadic headaches, moments of doubt and to top it when you are the slowest rider in the group of very fit guys it does take some nerve to keep going.

To anyone contemplating this sort of adventure, I would say **DO IT. Remember it is the things we do not do that we regret the most!**