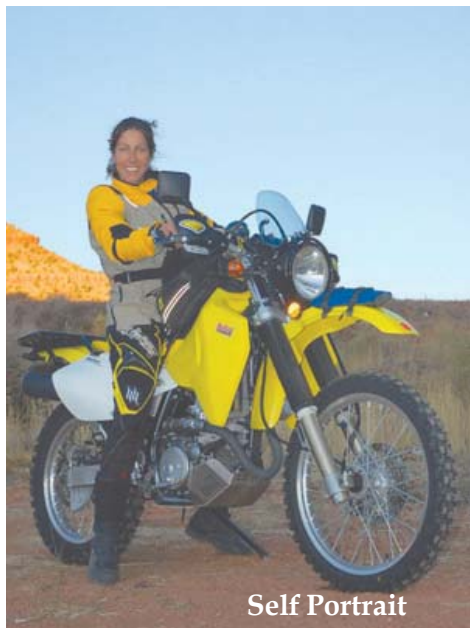


# Open Terrain:

## EXPLORING THE WORLD AND SOUL BY MOTORCYCLE

BY NICOLE ESPINOSA



Self Portrait

### MOTORCYCLING IS THE BEST MEDICINE

2011 felt like a year of challenge and preparation for a coming year of optimism, transformation and growth. We were faced with a continuation of our depressed economy that punched a few new notches into our belts. But even when challenged by adversity, what did many of us witness through this trying year? Humanity batted down the hatches and we lifted one another up through love, friendship, compassion, and support. I even have someone who is incredibly dear to me face 2011 with the health challenge of a lifetime... cancer. Now, how in the world do you deal with that without feeling all alone—even with loved ones doing their very best to buoy you up? Facing 2011 may have felt like one big monkey on your back, but the answer was right at your back door. There's one doctor with the right prescription for any kind of back-breaking monkey, and that's *Dr. Mother Nature*. In my case, she always seems to choose the same medical protocol... a prescription for sanity and health... *my motorcycle*.

Of course, I'm not the first to link good health to motorcycle riding. Take for instance, Dr. Ryuta Kawashima, a professor of neuroscience at Tohoku University in Sendai, Japan who is the scientist behind "Brain Training" computer software, as well as

an avid motorcyclist. He conducted a study in collaboration with Yamaha and Tohoku University to show that riding a motorcycle can keep you young by keeping your brain fit. "The driver's brain gets activated by riding motorbikes, in part because it requires heightened alertness," Ryuta Kawashima said after his research team and Yamaha Motor conducted multiple studies involving middle-aged men. The experiment utilized 22 men in their 40s and 50s who had motorcycle licenses, but had not been riding for the past ten years. They were separated into two groups: one group was asked to ride motorcycles every day and the second group was asked to use bicycles or cars as their mode of transportation. In conclusion, "The group that rode motorbikes posted higher marks in cognitive function tests," said Kawashima. "Mental care is a very big issue in modern society," insisted Kawashima, and "I think we made an interesting stir here as data showed you can improve your mental condition simply by using motorbikes to commute." What was most exciting was the fact that these riders confessed that they made fewer mistakes at work during that period and were feeling much happier.

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As far as motorcycles are concerned, who are we to know what's good for someone else's health and sanity? I remember when my father told my brother that he wanted to go out and buy a motorcycle, too, after hearing that my brother had just ridden home on a new Suzuki V-Strom. My dad wanted to create a new father/son bond, but my brother just flipped. Finally, the shoe was on the other foot. Parents usually only see how "dangerous" riding can be, as they recite testimony after testimony of those whose lives have been stolen by motorcycles. My brother felt very protective of our 60-year-old father at the time and tried scare tactics to keep him from taking a jaunt down to the local dealer for a test ride. Who knows? Maybe a bike in my father's garage would have kept his memory from deteriorating as badly as it has recently. What was ironic about all this was the fact that it actually took about two years of riding my bike to my father's for lunch

every week, with a huge smile on my face, before my father stopped asking me when I was going to stop riding. He had finally resigned himself to the fact that riding made me damned happy, and affected my life and health in beautiful ways.

Smiles don't lie. Not only do they feel good, but continued smiles from riding can lead to perpetual happiness even when you are off the bike. Studies have shown that happiness boosts the immune system and helps shield us from illness, therefore adding to our longevity. It's no surprise that happy people live longer. The effect of happiness on longevity is statistically comparable to non-smokers.

Guess what folks? We already know the shortcut to happiness... even in the midst of today's deep mind ruts that espouse that happiness is just around the corner after we reach the next job, partner, or target weight. Not only can our adventure bikes take shortcuts across the terrain, but they can also provide shortcuts to

"After a joy ride, this baboon can't wipe the smile off his face."



happiness. All you have to do to prove it is catch a glimpse of yourself in a store window reflection at the next city stoplight. It won't take long to figure out that the crazy ear-to-ear grin is your own.

It's really all in your state of mind, anyway. Bikes just have that way of making us "the glass is half full" people, and with that we tend to attract like-minded individuals. That feeling of adventurous camaraderie with fellow riders also boosts the mood and ultimately the immune system. Then there are also the solo rides that encourage communing with self and nature to promote emotional and physical health balance. Problems

then begin to dissolve in direct proportion to seat time, so if the current goal is to resolve one big life problem then why not shoot for a longer adventure ride. With the length of these rides, helmet time then becomes almost meditative and therefore stress-reducing. And, when you combine that quiet time with Mother Nature at the end of a beautiful long day of riding then you have found the answer to health, sanity and happiness.

We can't always control how our years play out, but we can control how it affects us. So, the next time you find yourself with a big monkey on your back take him for a joy ride and watch him climb right off with a big old smile on his face.

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