

In the trillium field



with Nancy Irwin

Every now and then I meet someone whose qualities require recognition. I encountered such a woman recently, a leader of both herself and others. When we met, she had just suffered a broken shoulder after a fall. It was in the light of that circumstance that I began to realize “average” was not her middle name.

We met dirt biking. Well, sort of. We were actually introduced by email when I tried to sign up to demo the new BMW 800cc enduro at a special test ride day set up for women in Orangeville, Ontario. As it turned out though the bike would not be available here until August. My interest in the day waned but this woman whom I had not yet met face-to-face encouraged me to come out anyway, advising me that there were many other interesting bikes to try.

Later, I had an opportunity to go dirt biking and that’s when I finally met Liz Jansen in person. It took us a while to realize we had exchanged emails prior to this meeting.

She had little experience dirt riding but showed no less skill than I did on my first day out this year. That got my attention. We rode an easy course, played on a beginner motocross track and headed down a forest trail. More on that later. The bad part was a big mud hole that I managed to avoid but stopped to make sure she had too.

She dumped to one side and made a noise that didn’t sound good to me. The short version is that the rider in the lead dashed off for help and left the two of us alone in the forest. What exactly do you say to someone whom you don’t know, who can’t move their arm, and who’s getting more and more pissed off as she realizes all the things she won’t be able to do if it’s really broken?

I told her about the time I fell and wrecked my knee. I asked her questions. I didn’t know if she’d rather be left alone with her agony or if she’d prefer being distracted. I needed to distract myself too, because at that point it was raining steadily and though we were well outfitted in dirt bike gear we weren’t entirely up for the cold, early season rain. She cursed about her goggles which she wished she’d stopped to clear. She got more and more angry at herself and the situation. But she didn’t blame outside forces other than to acknowledge that sometimes these things happen. She said she couldn’t afford to have a broken anything at the beginning of the season with so much riding to do. I was with her on that one.

So there we were alone in a forest waiting for help. On one side of the trail the forest floor was covered, and I mean covered, with the most amazing display of trilliums I’ve ever seen. And that’s when I learned that the ephemeral trillium is the name of the motorcycle touring company (www.TrilliumTours.com) she runs for the benefit of others who have the urge to travel by motorcycle but need some support. She said the irony of all the trilliums was not lost on her.

WHEN THE AFOREMENTIONED BMW TEST RIDE DAY FINALLY ARRIVED, LIZ WAS THERE WITH HER ARM IN A sling, clip board in hand and clearly in control of the situation as she sorted out who was to ride what and when. I chose the R1200S,

which is a nice big sporty machine with race bike qualities that handled like a dream on the lovely side roads we took through Mono Centre and along the river of Hockley Road. I also rode the especially low and surprisingly delightful X-Country 650 single. And I pigged out with the R1200GS, a bike I liked no better the second time I rode it than I had the first, though I did manage to entertain myself with the readout selector.

The day was lovely, and it was great to see so many women riders, some accompanied by men, and a number of Ducatis in attendance. I’ll happily return next year for the pleasure and the privilege of sampling new BMWs.

Two weeks later, Liz and I shared a meal and a walking tour of downtown Toronto, where I learned about the woman behind TMT.

Liz Jansen does many things for a living and one of them is to offer pre-planned tours to people who might not otherwise seek adventure for many reasons including not having time to waste finding duds instead of pots of gold at the end of a day’s ride. Some are new riders, reluctant to venture out on their own. Others have never traveled for vacation by road and are beginning a new chapter in their lives. Whatever the reason, tours that Liz began offering a few years back for women-only has since evolved to now include men.

She scouts areas to ensure the routes, accommodations and meals are the best, and then offers to lead small parties on what may be the adventure of a lifetime. (On longer adventures there’s a chase vehicle.)

The next big tour she has planned is called the Algoma Adventure and she assured me that Ontario has some of the most beautiful countryside and riding in the world. Having ridden around Superior I have to agree. Her tour offers one of Canada’s top 10 roads and now I’m eager to go.

Liz also offers day rides. But what she really provides is a chance to learn how to ride off on an adventure. For next year, there are plans for a 15-day South African sojourn, offered in conjunction with Safari Junction.

Liz has also taught also motorcycle riding courses at Toronto’s Humber College for the past five years. But it doesn’t stop there. She’s also involved with the Harley-Davidson “garage parties” that are designed to take away the intimidation factor for women who want to become riders. They walk you through the bikes, the controls, customization, Motorclothes (okay, so it’s sales related) and how to pick up a bike if it’s fallen. She also offers custom rides for birthday parties and corporate events when they want to arrange rides for clients.

Moreover, she’s on the board of directors for the Motorcycle Confederation of Canada, which is a national advocacy group. She also chairs the Women’ Riders Council, another national organization, designed to celebrate and promote women in riding. Then there’s her involvement with Ontario Tourism which is trying to promote motorsports in the province.

Top that off with basic motorcycle mechanics classes where you ride your own bike in to work on. Those classes are offered near her home in Orangeville and in Niagara (through multi-line dealer, Clare’s Cycle).

What I liked most about Liz is her attitude: a broken shoulder might inconvenience, but not stop her. **B**