



Losing Control in Madeira, Portugal

By Susan Jacobs



True confession: I possess a lingering fantasy that involves a motorcycle, the ultimate he-man driver, and me on the back, arms wrapped tightly around his waist. The scene includes speed and danger, which he skillfully navigates as we challenge the odds.

Born and raised in New York City, however, motorcycles have never been part of my life. In this concrete jungle, the subway, a bicycle, my feet, and the occasional Uber are the ultimate rides.

My two motorcycle rides, each on a Harley Davidson, have been life changing. Now, I've got biker fever and I want more. From New Jersey to Madeira, Portugal, my fantasy played out. Here's how.

Harley Ride #1

Last August, my friend Jack offered to take me on my maiden motorcycle ride. I wear jeans, sneakers, and a windproof shirt, with just my driver's license, tissues, and a helmet so heavy I can barely hold my head up. I look like My Favorite Martian with an Easy Rider edge, ready to conquer the road without a care in the world.

Jack chooses his 100-year anniversary Harley Davidson Screamin' Eagle Fat Boy for its two-person comfort over his other four bikes: a Ducati Hypermotard, Suzuki DRZ Supermoto 400, Husqvarna Competition TE510, and a Yamaha XT350. I'm grateful for its comfortable upright position and support for the small of the back. This is no wind-in-the-hair scenario because Jack is about safety first, and that's fine with me. Pro-tip: before becoming a motorcycle passenger, check if your driver has had any accidents, has children, and is overall a happy person with reason to live!

We're ready for blast off, and to me, it's sexy as hell, postcard perfect. Navigating the road through the Catskill Mountains and stopping at beautiful lookout points along the way, it's on-the-bike-training as I learn that turning my head with a heavy helmet and wind force isn't easy and could lead to a serious visit to the chiropractor.

I have no idea how long we've been riding; my butt muscles are sore, and legs want to stretch. It must be more than an hour, I think, but Jack says it's only 20 minutes. Wow, how do people transverse the country on a motorcycle?

Our speed is another mystery, but I find the right maneuver to get a glimpse of the speedometer: 70 mph. Waves of 'go faster' and 'holy crap' offer conflicting desires.

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As a mild adrenaline junkie – not the bungee or plane jumping kind, just things that spike my heartbeat with an edge of risk – I ask Jack to let it rip. The winding roads, however, say otherwise.

Leaning into the turns with my arms wrapped around him, I think our knees will touch the ground but it's barely a 45-degree angle. In this moment, Jack is the manliest of men, manipulating the machine to perform, as he wants, while avoiding an accident.

'Damn, this is cool,' runs through my head. I'm experiencing the ultimate surrender, trusting my life and handing over all control to the driver, not knowing where we're going, without my phone or money, only an ID and the ever-faithful tissue.

We ride for several hours, stopping wherever inspiration leads. When the day ends, I'm fully satisfied, happy that reality delivered perfectly on my fantasy.

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As a borderline type-A personality, letting go of all control rarely happens. This experience is invigorating, meditative, restorative, and includes a huge sigh of relief. It's a reminder of how exhausting trying to control anything, let alone everything, is.

As Trevor Noah says, "And now, for our moment of Zen." This is my Zen moment.

The Harley ride confirms why, in part, I love to salsa dance. Like the motorcycle high, it's another experience of surrender. On the bike, I trust Jack with my life. On the dance floor, I trust that my partner, whose job it is to lead, will keep me safe from being stepped on or knocked into. I trust that he'll provide a good enough lead so I can follow and not have to second-guess what he wants me to do.

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With a few of my dance partners, I dance with my eyes closed because they always place me exactly where they want me to land, even after a series of spins and dips. To trust someone enough to dance with closed eyes on a crowded dance floor without any worries is the ultimate act of letting go, and is highly intoxicating.

Many of us women hold on so tightly to control and, as the world is getting crazier, our grip is even more ironclad. But letting go is where true freedom is, it's where growth and invigoration happens, creativity flows, and where there is peace of mind and heart.

Which brings me to my second Harley ride in Madeira, Portugal.



Harley Ride #2

I'm back in Madeira for a second visit. Yes, it's that special. On this day, the agenda is an 8-hour 'Road 222, Route 66' motorcycle tour of the northwestern part of the island with Harley Madeira Tours. It turns out that we won't follow the planned route; instead, we're going freestyle due to inclement weather in the mountains, and because we're just in a Madeira state of mind.

My fantasy for this experience is that it will match or even surpass Harley ride #1, with a driver á la Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. And then he arrives, granting my wish. Think Vin Diesel meets Bruce Springsteen — swag, swagger, machismo, perfect body, black t-shirt, and tattoos. There are three other people on the tour, so we have four bikes, four driver guides, and each passenger needing to be paired with a driver. Without pause, like an eager kid hoping to get on a team with ‘ooh ooh, pick me,’ I blurt out, ‘I want him.’

The guides come prepared with motorcycle garb for us riders, including Harley branded leather jackets, gloves, and helmets. Oh yeah, this already tops my first ride.

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I hoist myself up onto my Harley Man’s Electro Glide Classic and we’re ready to take off from Funchal, the capital of Madeira, with me floating in fantasy heaven.

Madeira is gorgeous. The mountainous, volcanic island is filled with massive cliffs, including some of the highest in Europe, more than 200 tunnels, steep climbs and descents, and harrowing hairpin turns.

On Estrada Nacional 222 (or Road 222), which was awarded 2015 World’s Best Road by Avis, the scenery is familiar to me from when I toured the island by car. But now, the views are infused with a full sensory experience: the deafening sound of the wind competing with the *wroom, wroom* of the Harleys; changing temperatures against my skin as we go through at least three climates in one day; and the alternating smell of rain, endless flowers that line the road, dirt, cow dung, diesel, eucalyptus, and much more.

Harley Man can’t let us rip; it’s way too dangerous. So, in another moment of Zen, I surrender to my driver and the experience.

Tattoos and the Harley Dance

Harley Man sees I have a tattoo on my shoulder and offers me his business card. Of course, he’s also a tattoo artist. How perfect. I have two tattoos, both given to me by friends, so they have deep sentimental meaning. Hungry for another, I’ve been waiting patiently to find a connection, a story that will compel me to add more ink to my body.

Here it is... I want a tattoo from Harley Man in Madeira. We talk about design; he suggests I see his work before committing. Good point, but as much as I want the tattoo, I also want a good story ending. At a stop along the way, I check his work on Facebook, which is awesome, and am hoping to leave Madeira with a new tattoo.

As we ride throughout the day, like with salsa, I move to the cues of Harley Man, letting go of everything, becoming one with him and the bike. Although this motorcycle isn’t

designed for arm wrapping by the passenger, a few times I do grab on as we navigate a complete fog white-out and almost hit cows in the middle of the road. When I say complete whiteout, no joke. We're up over 5,000 feet and are engulfed in a fog that touches the earth on all sides around us – floor to ceiling, so to speak.

A passing thought runs through my mind: 'If mom could see me now she would freak out,' but I know Harley Man will return me in one piece.

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We make it safely through the freezing cold, fog, and about 50 mph winds that give Harley Man an extra workout trying to keep us upright. Surprisingly, I feel completely safe. I had no idea the physicality involved with riding a motorcycle and learn that not every motorcycle driver can ride a Harley.

We're back down at the ocean for lunch. I toast Harley Man with gratitude and respect for his heroic feat.

Just before the last leg of the trip, we stop at Taberna da Poncha (Poncha Tavern) in Serra de Água. Poncha, the traditional Madeira drink, is made with Aguardente de Cana (distilled alcohol made from sugar cane juice), honey, sugar, lemon rind, and different fruit juices. Lemon juice is often used, but my favorite is with passionfruit. Harley Man says he knows his limits; me, as a lightweight drinker, just a couple of sips get me silly from this fire water.

On the highway back to Funchal, we can finally fly and hit 85 mph, my ultimate fantasy. I am happy.



Reality Bites

As time did not allow for any pre-departure ink from Harley Man, a tattoo is just one of the many things that await my next visit to Madeira. With new friends, familiarity with the island, and many unexplored places yet to be experienced, the sooner I return, the better.

Back home in the concrete jungle of Brooklyn, reality hits hard as noise is a constant, stress is ever-present, and my senses are under constant assault. From paradise to Brooklyn, I feel like Cinderella, turning back into a pumpkin at midnight. Re-entry into my daily life proves challenging.

They say, ‘the only way out, is through,’ so I mentally bottle the wonderful experience of Madeira and lingering feelings of peace and surrender. As daily distractions are many, I blanket my apartment and office with photos from the trip as a reminder to stay grounded and focused.

New fantasy: Madeira is my home-away-from-home.

Photos for Losing Control in Madeira, Portugal by Pixabay and Unsplash.

About Susan Jacobs



Giving voice to things that matter, raising awareness, and expanding perspectives is the heart and soul of who I am and what I do. I’m a writer, storyteller, and strategist with more than 25 years of marketing, branding, communications, writing, and business experience. I have traveled the world seeking adventures and worked on projects in Africa, Haiti, Europe, and the U.S.

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