

Featured Article – Fatim Panju – SJ Ladies Cycling



It's when we are outside of our comfort zone that we realise how much potential God has given us

My name is Fatim Panju. I am 57 years young and mother of 2 and this is an excerpt from my cycling journal.

I was born and brought up in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. I have 2 brothers older than me. My earliest memories were of them being allowed to go swimming in the sea, trips with Boy Scouts, playing Cricket, Football, Volleyball. Girls in those days were not allowed to do any of that and I always questioned WHY NOT?

We migrated to England when I was 14. I watched my class mates going on school trips to Paris, Skiing in Italy and Trekking in the Lake District. My mother would say to me “Khoja girls don't do these kind of things”. She would also say that I can do what I like once I got married thinking that the husband won't allow it so that would be the end of that!

I was fascinated with the beauty in this world. The mountains, the rivers, the ocean, the vast deserts.



As mentioned in Quran in:

Surat Al-Raad: “And it is He who spread the Earth and made in it firm mountains and rivers, and of all fruits, he has made in it two kinds; He makes the night cover the day; most surely there are signs in this for people who reflect.” [13:3]

When Hasnain and I got married we did not go on a honeymoon because we could not afford it. But we promised that we will go to a new country every year once we got settled. To date we have kept that promise

The thing I loved most was the mountains. The first mountain we climbed was Mt Kilimanjaro, then Mount Snowdon in Wales, Mount Sinai in Egypt, Mount Kinabalu in Malaysia, Everest Base Camp in Nepal, Adams Peak in Sri Lanka, Atlas mountain in Morocco.

I then had a setback. My knees started to hurt whilst coming down the mountains. I had scans and MRI done and was told that the solution was either a knee surgery or hang up my boots. I opted to hang up my boots. I was told that Cycling and swimming are the best low impact exercise for dodgy knees.

I took up cycling in my thirties and I found out that one can go a lot further on a bicycle than on foot. Travelling and exploring new countries was my passion and seeing it from the back of a saddle was a perfect way of doing so. I started with a ride around the block. Then cycling a mile, then 5 miles, 10 miles, and so on. My major problem was that I am severely navigationally challenged. I have no sense of direction. I cannot remember roads nor do I know my North from the South. I even forget where I park my car in the Costco car park! Back then there were no computers or GPS or mobile phones. Having to follow paper maps challenged me. It would take me days to plot a route which most people could do in few minutes.

Our first long distance cycling trip was a 54 mile charity ride from London to Brighton over 20 years ago. We then progressed to riding Lands End to John O’Groats, a 1000 mile ride from Cornwall to Scotland taking 18 days.

We have then gone on to do Paris to Geneva, Brussels to Amsterdam, Paris to Lausanne, Vienna to Budapest, Bangkok to Phuket. Singapore to Malaysia. To celebrate our 50th birthday we cycled London to Istanbul, a 4000 kilometer ride crossing 8 countries taking 60 days.

Another ride on my bucket list was self-supported camping trip from Portland in Oregon to Crescent city in California in United States. It’s a scenic coastal road on the Pacific Coast. A lot of the car commercials are filmed here because of its spectacular scenery. Hundreds of people do it. Hasnain was not keen on camping, setting up a tent in the rain, the hassle of having to apply for US visa and so on. None of my friends are cyclists or would have agreed to join me on this trip. So I had no choice but to go by myself and you know what? It did not rain a single day. The US visa process was a doddle once I told them that I would be cycling the Pacific Coast Highway. The interwee was originally from Portland and she was so excited about my trip that it was her who did all the talking at the interview.

Friends and family were worried about my going to the US by myself. A hijabi woman cycling and camping in the US under the present political climate. In reality, I was never alone. Numerous people were cycling on that route every day. Every time I stopped at a view point people would come up and speak with me. At no time did I felt lonely or unsafe. At the campsites there were designated spaces for cyclists where no cyclists would be turned away due

to the grounds being full. I read other cyclist's blogs and learnt from their experiences. What is the worst that is going to happen? As long as I had the Ocean on my right and mountains on my left, I will be going in the right direction. Google maps would show me where the campsites were. If I could not ride up the hills then I would walk it. If I had mechanical issues with my bike then I would walk to a nearest bike shop. If I found riding day after day too exhausting then I will take a coach or a train back to Portland and fly back. Better to fail and learn from the experience than not trying.



If anyone wants to learn about the logistics of this ride, the route, how I carried my tent, cooking supplies etc they can read my blog in the link below.
https://www.crazyguyonabike.com/doc/?o=1mr&doc_id=20062&v=H3



People often ask me how do you ride 50 miles a day every day carrying all your gear? Or how can you survive 2 months on 7 kg luggage and 2 change of clothes? How do you get fit enough to do all these wild and wonderful adventures? The answer is simple. You have to work at it. There are no short cuts to how to get fitter. Most days we are either swimming, cycling, or running. And we have never been happier.

What I learnt from our trips was how simple life becomes when we have minimum stuff on us. The lighter the luggage the lighter the bike and less effort to ride. We would have 2 change of clothes which meant not having to decide what am I going to wear today. Or not having a matching scarf. Or what accessories are going to go with what outfit. When crossing borders, we never had to stand in the queue at customs because the inspectors know that cyclists don't have much on them. I wonder how easy would it be for us on the day of judgement if we didn't had much stuff to declare?

It's when we are outside of our comfort zone that we realise how much potential God has given us. We can do so much more than we ever think it's possible. The hardest thing is the first step, the first stroke on a pedal.

David Goggins, a motivational speaker and author of book called "Can't hurt me" says:

"If you can see yourself doing something, you can do it. If you can't see yourself doing something, usually you can't achieve it."

"If you want to get better, do the things that no-one else wants to do. Do the things that no-one is even thinking about doing."

Thank you and I hope and pray that more women get inspired and start cycling. I am always available for any guidance and support.