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Women on the edge

Extreme adventure is the name of the game for a clutch of fearless women, says Sushmita Biswas



Archana Sardana is a veteran of the skies. Three years ago the 37-year-old took a leap into the unknown when she became one of India's first woman skydivers. Today she has more than 250 jumps under her belt and she wants to perform a daredevil feat by jumping from 29,000ft near Mt. Everest and landing at Shyangboche Airstrip at around 12,000ft.

Cut to Bangalore where mountaineer Kavitha Reddy, 37, is preparing for an expedition to Mount Nanda Khat (21,690ft) in the Kumaon region in a few weeks. Soon after returning from this expedition, Reddy will head to Mt. Satopanth (22,640 ft) in the Garhwal Himalayas in August. Reddy's ultimate goal, however, is Mt. Cho Oyu, the world's sixth highest peak (26,906ft) where the last expedition was in 1958 from India. "Technically, it a difficult peak to climb and it requires an intensive physical workout for six months before the expedition," says Reddy, who is undaunted by the challenges ahead.



Just back from a diving trip in Lakshwadeep, scuba diver Mandira Shama is looking forward to similar trips in Malaysia and Egypt later this year

Pix: Life aquatic

Who says women are the weaker sex? As adventure sports catch on in India a large number of women are taking to the skies, the mountains, the sea and even the roads. They are falling through the skies and plunging to the depths of the ocean. Their only motto: there's no frontier that's too far to cross.

"It's a myth that women cannot take up extreme adventure sports because of physical reasons. Today, it is heartening to see so many young women getting the same adrenalin rush as their male counterparts and even outdoing them," says Neet Shah, owner and instructor of scuba-diving organisation, Dive Right In, based in Mumbai,

There's also Delhi-based car rallyist Divya Miglani, who got into motor rallies six years back because "speed thrills her." She has already participated in the arduous Raid de Himalaya every year since 2005 in which drivers have to steer all the way from Shimla to Leh. "Before my first rally, I had taken part in several smaller rallies in Delhi.

Therefore, when I first took part in the Raid, I participated directly at the professional level which was quite a challenge for me," she says. In one Raid her Maruti Gypsy went off the road just before reaching the Rohtang Pass but that hasn't deterred her from rallying. "Motorsports is usually a very male dominated field. And we do not even have a women's category. So I took it as a challenge," she says.

So what is drawing more and more women into adventure sports? "Today's women are well-travelled and are aware of the rising popularity of adventure sports. They are willing to come out of their comfort zone and venture outdoors and try some extreme sporting activities. And this way, they are able to overcome their fears," says Rupinder Parhar, a skydiver from Vishakapatnam. Parhar was inspired by Sardana's adventurous spirit and she travelled to Pantnagar in Uttarakhand to train as a skydiver. Like Parhar, her other friends Mili Sharma and Bharati Thanwani also from Vishakapatnam were similarly inspired by naval skydivers and are now part of the skydiving club www.indianskydivers.com set up by Sardana.

Some adventure sports professionals even insist that women are better at learning the crucial techniques involved in doing various adventure sports. Paraglider Anita Deshpande, who has set up a paragliding company in Pune called Temple Pilots, says: "Women adventure seekers are redefining the idea of cool. They are bringing in a lot of grace and control and are excelling over their male counterparts. What they require is proper guidance, infrastructure and loads of encouragement."

One person who might agree with that is Manali-based biking enthusiast Moksha Jetley, who enjoys going on motor-biking expeditions to Leh and Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti on her Royal Enfield 350cc bike. Right now she's looking forward to a motor-biking expedition from Kashmir to Kanyakumari in December. Her first motor-biking tour was in 2007 when she went from Manali to Ladakh in seven days. She says: "I was always a very outdoors person and as a child loved riding my friends' motorbikes."





But motor-biking is just one of Jetley's loves. She is also a trained mountaineer and a skier. She has opened an adventure company in Manali called Back N Beyond Travels that takes foreign adventure lovers on biking trips. This year she will be leading a British group to Lahaul and Spiti in June and a group from New Zealand to Leh and Ladakh in August.

Skydiver Archana Sardana dreams of diving from a height of 29,000ft near Mt. Everest in the near future

Then, there's Mandira Sharma, a rescue diver in Mumbai, who has been bitten by the scuba-diving bug. Just back from a dive site in Lakshadweep in April she says: "We took a group of 12 people consisting of first timers and also certified professionals. The experience was mind-blowing as we came across an amazing variety of sea creatures. Diving is like a habit and I'm itching to go on my next dive soon." Her upcoming dive trips include a diving trip to Maldives in August and Malaysia and Egypt in October.

Sharma learnt scuba-diving from a Swedish girl when she was holidaying in Oman. Today, she has completed more than 300 dives in India, Thailand and Malaysia. She has set up a scuba-diving training company The Life Aquatic along with her husband Jurgen Van Duffel under the parent brand Lacadives in Mumbai. "It is a lifestyle company that looks at scuba-diving in a fun way. Since India lacks a diving culture, we are trying to bring in awareness by our training programmes," she says.



Rallyist Divya Miglani has been participating in Raid de Himalaya every year since 2005
Pix: Jagan Negi

The company first trains people at an indoor swimming pool in Mumbai and then takes them for open-water dives at dive sites. She has also set up a retail outlet Dive Shop in Mumbai's Bandra area that sells scuba-diving gears like wet suits, snorkels and so on. "The idea is to inspire and bring in a level of awareness related to scuba-diving," she says.

need to have plenty of it or you need to find sponsors who are willing to put up large sums of money. Sardana, for instance, had to spend Rs 2 lakh to learn skydiving in the US — and that was just for starters. "I have knocked on the doors of all the big companies in India but nobody is willing to sponsor my dive on the Mt. Everest. But I am not going to give up as I am on a fund-raising drive from friends and family to make the event successful," she says.

Though adventure sport in India is growing, there are plenty of challenges — especially if you happen to be a woman. The biggest challenge is cash. You either

Jetley too points out that in India a woman motor-biker has several hurdles to cross. "On India's highways and rough terrain in the mountains, negotiating unwarranted male attention is a challenge in itself," she adds.

Some of these women are also trying alternative professions to fund their passions. So while Sardana is a trained DJ and is looking for a DJ-ing gig in Vishakapatnam, Parhar is taking percussion lessons and will soon get into scuba-diving.



Moksha Jetley is looking forward to a motor-biking expedition from Kashmir to Kanyakumari in December this year; (below) mountaineer Kavitha Reddy's company Basecamp Adventures organises high-altitude treks, rafting and skiing expeditions

On the other hand, Miglani will be hosting motor rallies only for women in Delhi and Mumbai this year. And Reddy has set up her own company Basecamp Adventures in Bangalore and gives outbound training to companies for team building and leadership development. Her company also organises high-altitude treks, rafting and skiing expeditions. Interestingly, many of these adventurous ladies are relying heavily on Facebook to market themselves and to spread information about their activities.

Also, all of them are dependent of plenty of family support. For Sardana, it's her naval officer husband Rajiv who has been the biggest pillar of support. "I started skydiving long after marriage and in all my endeavours my husband has always stood beside me," she says. An extremely proud Rajiv adds: "Though I am proud of her achievements, sometimes I feel scared about her daredevil attempts."



Miglani on the other hand recalls how her parents wanted her to quit rallying after her car toppled over during the Raid de Himalaya in 2005. "But today they understand my passion and sometimes I take my brother as a navigator in rallies," she says. Jetley, on the other hand, is a single mother and has a daughter who also helps her to run her company. Sharma says that she had heaps of support from her diver husband, who not only encouraged her to dive but is today a partner in her company.

But what is the priority for all these adventure divas? As Parhar says, "One should not rest on one's laurels but continue setting newer goals in order to attain success. Be brave and do things that others are not doing."

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