ON A PLEASANT NIGHT in Mountain View, CA, 80 or so riders trickle in to the BMW/Triumph dealership on Old Middlefield Way, chatting about bikes and gear and touching base with Karl Prager, co-owner of the dealership. Greeting Prager is an important ritual of the evening, but they’re all here to see Annette Birkmann—and she scares most of them.

Prager’s dealership is strong on real life community building in a valley famous for cyberspace “virtual communities” such as Facebook. Service training sessions, trackdays, clinics and off-road schools are the sort of things this dealership does to ensure a large and loyal group of customers who have difficulty passing his place without stopping in to say hello. Ten days earlier via the Internet (and make no mistake, Prager knows how to use the Internet (www.callbmw.com), and he alerted the faithful that a female Danish long-distance rider would visit the dealership and talk about her 12-month ride from the southern tip of South America to San Francisco.

Many in the crowd are “hardcore” riders. Some are experienced long-distance types, but mostly this group consists of dedicated commuters who ride every day, rain or shine. One woman arrives on a Suzuki V-Strom and parks next to me. She’s in her early 50s and has just started riding. She says she’s here to be inspired to make her big ride, “before it’s too late and I get too old.” She introduces me to her brother who, every two weeks, rides about 900 miles to his home in southern Utah, spends a few days there, and then rides back for his job in northern California. Others in this group I know from past events. They are the type of people who would never consider a Caribbean cruise or Disneyland vacation. Instead, they live for the next opportunity to get on a bike and ride. And many are apprehensive and nervous about meeting Ms. Birkmann. Who is she? What makes her tick? How was she able to do what many of them only dream of?

A few facts: She may be the only person to abandon a career as an attorney in Denmark to become a motorcycle mechanic in Argentina. She may be one of the few women to ride the South American continent solo from south to north, through Central America to Mexico. And she is certainly the only woman to have a red car on a highway in Mexico City put a stop to her year-long road journey a week before she was to reach her destination.

Thirty new motorcycles have been moved from the display area to make room for several rows of folding chairs. The visitors stash helmets and jackets and find places to sit and Prager introduces Birkmann. A woman of average height and few distinguishing features, she has bright blue eyes, a distinctive nose that she will make fun of during her talk and blonde hair which she shakes on occasion to make a point. Her English is impeccable and while she has a Danish accent, no one misses a word. She speaks clearly, from her heart, sharing the experiences of her journey, and demonstrates a wonderful ability to acknowledge her foibles and poke fun at her lack of preparation and the cost of her ineptitude and occasional naiveté. Her talk centers on the 10 mistakes you will want to make to ensure a ride like this—and your life—will end in disaster. In fact, it’s a top 10 list of “how not to do it.”

Birkmann illustrates each point with stories and pictures from the trip, alternating between funny and heartfelt and her personal breakthroughs in how to approach life. “I was fed up with my life, with my career in law, with studying, with working. On the one hand I had everything, but I was miserable. It was like all the important stuff; things I was passionate about, were passing me by. I’d always wanted to learn Spanish, see South America and learn to ride a motorcycle, and one day a friend suggested I combine all three,” Birkmann said.

“Ultimately, I got a divorce, sold everything I had and bought a plane ticket to Buenos Aires, Argentina and left. Looking back, the hardest thing in all of this was getting started.”

“This is why No. 1 on my top 10 list of How Not To Do It is procrastination. If...
Profile

Birkmann jokes that she's discovered a new peak close to Mount Fitz Roy on the border between Argentina and Chile.

Winds in some sections were so strong it was a fight just to keep the bike on the road. The sign says it all.

you want to know how to go nowhere, it's to procrastinate. Your plans are most often defeated not by conscious choice, but by just slowly delaying and putting things off until one day you wake up and realize it's too late," Birkmann said.

After getting to Buenos Aires, she first tackled learning to ride by renting a Honda Transalp 600 for a 10-day excursion. Her prior riding experience was minimal, only a few lessons at a riding school. Despite the challenge of dirt roads and limited riding skills, she manages to only tip over twice in 10 days of riding. Signing on as an assistant mechanic at a motorcycle shop during the day and taking immersion classes in Spanish, she began preparing for her trip.

Birkmann's eighth Top 10 point, on how to get off track by not planning properly, is illustrated by several self-deprecating stories on her own failure to plan. For instance, she packed no rain gear and nearly froze to death until she could acquire the proper gear. "I didn't have a GPS and my maps were really bad, so I would end up in places I hadn't planned on or expected. So, I would randomly consult people for directions. Sometimes it took a lot of people for me to get to my destination." Based on her experience, she thinks dirt riding lessons might have been a good idea, too.

The 33,000-mile trip begins in Buenos Aires. Birkmann finds and buys a six-year-old BMW F650GS Dakar with just 7500 miles on the odometer and heads south to Cape Horn—after all, if you're going to ride through South America, you want to start at the farthest point south. Her photos of Patagonia in Argentina and Chile are landscapes of great valleys shaded by the Andes Mountains. To cross southern Argentine Patagonia, one must cover vast expanses of barely populated areas on minimally developed roads. Birkmann talks about fresh, clean mountain air and steams of pure water in the shadows of some of the highest and most rugged mountains on the planet. The local population consists of strong, independent types who are just beginning to understand tourism and having outsiders in their midst.

In Buenos Aires she has to worry about motorcycle thieves. "A motorcycle approaches with two riders and one of them points a gun at you. You have to pull over or they might shoot you. They take your bike and keys. There is nothing you can do except ask them if they also want money for petrol. I was lucky, it did not happen to me," Birkmann said. Things in Patagonia are different. Cars are few on the roads there. When they pass, they blink their lights in greeting, and not just at the infrequent biker, but to each other. Birkmann finds that when she stops, approaching cars slow and pull over to ask if she is okay.

From Chilean Patagonia she spends the better part of a year heading back through Argentina, then on to Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and finally Mexico.

Birkmann keeps expenses low by sleeping in a tent or staying in hostels. She also doesn't spend much on food. "I never really ate in restaurants; mostly I ate where all the locals would eat. Since most of the population in South America is poor, food rarely cost me more than a few dollars a day, and often less," she explains.

With two full weeks to make the trip from Mexico City to a planned Thanksgiving Day rendezvous in Los Angeles
with American relatives, her trip comes to a screeching halt when a red car sideswipes her as she’s leaving the city. The bike is seriously damaged and, worse, so is Birkmann. After negotiations about money at the scene of the accident, the ambulance takes her to the hospital where she learns that, although extremely lucky, she’s suffered serious internal bleeding in her left leg. She spends 10 days in the hospital followed by two weeks of physical therapy before she is able to go back to Denmark.

“It was four days in the hospital in Mexico City before I finally gave up on the idea of reaching Los Angeles by Thanksgiving. It may be the most important learning of the trip,” Birkmann said. “Reaching Los Angeles was the biggest goal in my life that was just for me—not a goal I’d pursued because it would look good on my résumé, made me fit in, or impress my friends. To stumble, just a week before achieving it was devastating. Once I accepted that my trip would need to end, I realized I was still the same.

Failing to reach my goal didn’t change who I was or what I’m capable of. And it made me realize that, on another level, I can never fail. It was an extraordinary and powerful experience. All I ever have to do is to go with the flow, to accept what is in front of me, instead of trying to resist or control it.”

After four months of recuperation in Denmark she returns to Mexico City, picks up her bike and rides to Los Angeles and then San Francisco and Prager’s dealership. She’d made it, after all—just in a different way than she’d expected.

After she finishes, people approach her and shake her hand. Some give her an embrace. Birkmann still scares them, but now for a different reason. These hardcore riders had worried Birkmann somehow possessed advanced motorcycle knowledge or superior riding skills that would show them up. Now Birkmann scares them for who she is and what she knows and what it says about them. She’s found passion in her life. She’s not afraid—and especially not afraid of failing. “I still worry. Sometimes I push too hard, and try to resolve situations with force. But for the most part, I’m free. I’m happy, relaxed and have found myself. Before I was so task-oriented, I could not be happy until I graduated, got the right job or was married. Now I enjoy everything I’m doing—right now. It’s not about being happy at some point in the future, but being present in your life right now. Then happiness follows automatically.”

From our San Francisco gathering, Birkmann rides her F650 to New York City and then returns to Copenhagen. In the spring of 2009 she begins a ride from New York to San Francisco, giving talks to people who seek inspiration to follow their passion.

Birkmann has also launched a web site, www.uturninspiration.com, where she collects stories from people all over the world who have made a change, left the commonplace behind and moved into unknown territory. You can reach Birkmann at her blog, www.flow-point.net, and follow her ride.