

## Metro Plus Bangalore

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### Pedalling for peace

For the 63-year-old Brigette Kleine, her ten-year global cycle expedition means many things: self discovery is the foremost, writes DEEPA GANESH

Photo: Sampath Kumar G.P.



**Make or break Brigette Kleine: 'Bangalore seems to be a city under repair'**

If you see Brigette Kleine walking the streets, you cannot say she is a 63-year-old and on a ten-year global cycling expedition. You are bound to assume that she is yet another of those firang tourists, curiously exploring the city. A loving grandmother, who set out from her home in Germany four years ago, reached the sub-continent last week. In cargos, t-shirt and a cap, the vivacious Brigette carries many maps, two cameras, a little diary, and an English to German pocket dictionary. Impeccably organised, Brigette can speak nothing but German, and her hearing is not too good either. Even with her hearing aid on full blast, she just about manages to hear.

"Nothing was planned," says Brigette, Narrating the beginnings of her journey, she says, "my decision to go on a bicycle world tour was made with a first pedal step in my head. It was like applying a first pressure on the hydraulic brakes of my instincts, using my hands and feet, so to speak. I realised that the life of a mature woman still has something to offer, as long as she is willing to go for it. My plan grew over a period of three years into a world solo bicycling project. It became an intense longing to go out and meet the creations on our planet," explains the articulate woman of many gestures.

An ad on a German television channel offered a one week cycling camp. Brigette went for the camp and returned home only after buying a cycle. "That was my first encounter with the cycle and I was totally smitten!" she gushes. "As I entered, my neighbour asked me, 'what are you going to do with this?'. I was rather irritated by the question and inadvertently said, 'I plan to go on a world tour.'"

But that 'silly answer' began to work in Brigette's head. "My careful and serious preparations allowed me to learn about connections between the human and the cultural factors of travelling, before I even started the tour. I also wanted to be ready and excited about the unusual encounters with this world's people. In these times of globalisation, I wanted to meet the people far off the beaten paths of the average tourists. And I want to burn these scenes into my memory," explains Brigette.

Everyday, she began to cycle in her hometown Hannover; she even sold her car. As preparation, she left for an 80-day trip prior to this. "My daughters and my grandchildren thought I was mad. They often said, 'we don't believe you'. I had a tough time convincing them." The 'negative side' of the trip as she calls it, was to be separated from her grandchildren whom she is very attached to. "I had a job that allowed me to work between 3 a.m. and 7 a.m., so my daughters could leave for work in peace while I looked after my grandkids. It's a great emotional test on me. But again, it is a journey of self discovery for me; it had to happen now, as I may never have got a second chance," she reasons.

Was language never a deterring factor? "I tried networking with Germans in various parts of the world, through the Internet. A lot of people have helped me, but language is not the only means of communication. I still have my hands and legs intact. For instance, in Vietnam, I did not meet any German. And I managed fine through gestures," she explains.

Curiously, when Brigette decided to undertake this trip, there were no women's bicycles built for world travel. There were only men's bikes and the bar was much too high and wore out her 60-year-old legs. It was a company called Patria that offered to custom-build a bicycle for her. "But these obstacles never seemed too big. It always felt I could tide over them," explains Brigette.

Her first stop was Los Angeles, and after touring Mexico, she had to return home for a brief while. "My bike developed problems, and I had to take it home for maintenance." She later travelled to South America, before she moved to Asia. "I want to spend two years in Asia," she says. Brigette wants to do the tropical countries ahead of the cold countries because she feels that with advancing age she may not be able to handle heat. In Cambodia, Panama and Malaysia Brigette spent most of her time with the tribals and got to see their culture and rituals from up close. With barely five per cent hearing, Brigette was at total ease with them and recalls the monkey hunting in the jungles of Malaysia vividly. "After shooting them down they put them in a bamboo pipe and cooked them on a slow fire, it is supposed to be a delicacy," she shudders recalling it. "Of course, I refused to eat it and they cooked vegetables and rice for me," remembers Brigette, a strong advocate of vegetarianism.

"China and Singapore is lovely for cyclists. Bangalore seems to be a city under repair. Into whichever lane I turn into, it is dug up. It is difficult for me to cycle here....," she says.

For Brigette, the travel is also a means of mutual help and spiritual development. "I see myself largely shedding my Christian viewpoint and embracing a world religion. There are different names for God and it doesn't come in the way to establish a deep communication with God."