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Summer Motorcycle Travel Safety

Going touring? You might have questions. We have answers. Here's how to beat the heat, fight fatigue, and make those long rides fun and safe. **By [Art Friedman](#).**

WEB EXCLUSIVE.

Few activities match the adventure and change of pace of a long motorcycle tour, but if you have never taken a long ride before, or never taken one as long as what you're contemplating, the prospect might cause apprehension and raise concerns. Our mailbox reflects this.



Riding

in a group is more social but also slows everyone down. It's not for everyone, and it's not a good way to make time. Dean Groover photo.

How Far is Too Far?

One question we hear every spring is, "How far can I expect to ride in a day?" This comes from riders with limited vacation time and a desire to cover a lot of ground or reach a distant point. The answer is always the same: "That depends." It depends on how often and how far the rider rides normally. If he frequently rides 300 to 500 miles a day, and has developed a routine and systems for long rides, then the mileage number will be higher. It also depends, of course, on the roads he takes and the bike he rides. A comfortable bike with long range makes it easier to roll up the miles than an uncomfortable one. I usually tell riders who want to ride many miles that the first day will typically involve some delays for adjustments to your gear and bike. The second day is most likely to be the high-mileage one because you will still be relatively fresh and most bugs will be worked out. After that, fatigue is likely to become a larger factor.

Traveling with one or more additional people will also slow you down. You can only go as fast—on the road, at lunch or in a gas station—as the slowest member of the group. It pays to do some shorter day or weekend rides with someone, either a passenger or another rider or riders, before committing to spending several days riding with them. Some riders with compatible personalities but contrasting riding styles just plan to meet in the evenings but get from motel to motel at their own paces and on their own routes.

An experienced tourer with the right bike riding alone on major roads and interstates can easily do more than 500 miles for days on end and still feel like he is on vacation. But he already knows that and how to do it. If you have to ask, you probably won't want to plan on more than 400 miles per day, and you should start carving away at that figure if you are riding on back roads, plan to have leisurely meals, see occasional sites, or have other people joining you.

How Thirsty?

A related question I got a few times this spring related to fuel mileage. "How far does my bike go on a tank of gas?" or "How far can I go after the low-fuel light comes on?" This is pretty important issue for rider using remote roads with little traffic and no services or cell-phone reception.

A few years ago, a rider told me of running out of gas unexpectedly on such a road and waiting hours as darkness fell before someone came by who would help. He described it as pretty frightening. His problem was that he'd taken the opportunity of a deserted road to make some time, but at the elevated speeds he was riding, his bike's fuel mileage was much worse than he was used to. You should measure your fuel mileage with the bike packed, set up and ridden the way it will be on the stretch where you need to extract maximum mileage from it.



Those scenic riding roads are often the highlight of a trip -- if you allow enough time to enjoy them. However, the speed changes mean that your mileage

You should also make sure your tank is full when you are filling up before a long leg. Some cruisers will accept more than a half-gallon of fuel after the fuel first comes up to the neck. On some bikes it just takes time for the air trapped around the filler baffle to escape, and spending a minute or two adding a squirt every second or so will get much more fuel into the tank. On bikes with centered fuel fillers, straightening the bike up instead of leaning it on the sidestand will enable you to get more into the tank, sometimes significantly more. You should experiment with your bike to discover its hard-to-get fuel capacity.

probably will drop compared to a long, straight road.

For the rider wondering about how much fuel is left when the low-fuel light comes on, I suggest pulling over and filling up completely the first time it

blinks. If it takes 4.1 gallons and you have a 5.0-gallon tank, you can expect at least .9 gallons from that point. If you get 45 mph, then you can expect things to get quiet about 40 miles after the light first glows. I say "at least" regarding remaining fuel because most manufacturers tend toward pessimism on the fuel-capacity specifications for their bikes. This allows some slop for manufacturing variances and keeps the lawyers away if someone does run out on a remote road. I have frequently put as much or more fuel than the specified amount in test-bike fuel tanks and still had some left. If you really want to know you actual fuel capacity, drain the tank and see how much it takes. (Just don't let a fuel-injected bike run dry; they don't like it.)

Time to Re-tire?

Tires can also be a point of concern. Riders who have new bikes ask us what sort of tread life to expect. A ride around the perimeter of the United States will probably exceed the normal life of most cruisers' tires, and some won't make a coast-to-coast-and-back ride. Higher than normal speeds, improper inflation and heavier than normal loads can speed up tire wear. You should check them carefully before you leave, and replace them if there is any doubt. You can save the old ones and use them again in the future. You should check the tires' condition every day on the road and check pressure every few mornings.

If you expect to have to replace them on the trip, you should make sure that suitable tires will be available when and where you need them. There some styles and sizes of bike tires may be hard to get if you need a replacement. I have heard of riders getting stuck waiting for tires. One rider told me that before he departed on a 6000-mile trip, he had his dealer order a extra set of tires to hold, then overnight them to his next stop when his existing pair got thin. Others find the best mail-order prices and do the same thing. These sorts of strategies kept them from tempting fate by trying to stretch the worn rubber to its limit. To find what sort of mileage you can expect, join an online owners club and ask owners of your model when they had to replace. To be safe, plan for the low end of the range. You'll also find this a good source of advice on replacement tires for your model.

Time for a Change?

Another motorcycle-related question we hear frequently concerns mods for long trips. I exchanged emails with a Nomad owner who was trying to decide what pieces to add for the first long ride he and his wife would take together. He was thinking about highway pegs (I think he



The

was smitten by their looks), but I suggested a rack/passenger backrest combo instead. His wife sent me a thank-you card from the road, saying it made the trip much nicer for her. The top three suggestions for mods on long rides are usually big saddlebags, small windshields and comfortable saddles. Saddlebags are the best way to carry things because they have the less effect on handling than those other cruiser favorites, racks and sissybar bags. Strapping stuff to the handlebar or fork assembly is the worst way to carry things, since it increases steering mass and items in that space between the headlight and front fender can block air flow to the engine.

addition of a backrest will make a passenger feel more relaxed and secure, and if it includes a rack, you have more luggage capacity.

If you read this magazine or website regularly, you have probably already seen our rant about windshields that you can't comfortably see over. We consider them a real danger in rain or wet conditions. Our [windshield guide](#) in the [Accessories and Gear](#) section of this site offers some help in selecting plastic protection. A comfortable saddle -- for rider and passenger -- can make long miles go by much more easily. Consider your passenger's comfort carefully. The person on the back seat doesn't have the handlebar and throttle for amusement, so every ache is magnified.

Fatigue doesn't only affect passengers, though, and picking the right accessories and gear can make a big difference for any tourer. An uncomfortable helmet (see our piece on [buying a helmet](#)), a scratched faceshield or glasses, stiff throttle springs, an uncomfortable saddle (for help on choosing a comfy place to sit, see [comparison of five cruiser saddles](#)), a windshield that interferes with your view of the road or even something as seemingly minor as a flapping collar on a jacket can wear you down and make the trip less fun. Loud pipes can be a tremendous source of fatigue. These are the sorts of things to consider and remedy before you set out to string together a few high-mileage days of riding. A small annoyance on a 30-minute ride can turn into a major problem if you are riding for six or eight or ten hours a day. Not every worthwhile change must be major. A minor handlebar adjustment or seat cover or pad can make a big improvement.

Just allow time to test and adjust any modification before you leave to be sure you have done more harm than improvement.

How's the Air Out There?

Long
trips
can
take
you to
unfam
climes



dry southwest can dehydrate you, and the desert can overheat you. You will be cooler if you keep your jacket on and wet down the clothes beneath.

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expose to the elements, the more moisture the hot, dry air can suck out of you. You can get badly dehydrated, sun burned, wind burned, and fatigued in less than an hour. Look at how cultures that live in desert areas dress and mimic them. Wrap yourself up to slow down the movement of air over your skin to reduce subsequent drying of perspiration. We usually deal with a hot (over 100 °C / 212 °F) day in the Mojave desert by hosing down our clothes then putting a jacket over it with some venting over it. You don't want a torrent of air over the wet clothes, but just enough circulation to provide evaporative cooling. A scarf or other wrap that's soaked and tied around your neck makes a big difference. On these desert days, just hosing down your shirt and riding with nothing over it will keep you cool for a few miles before it dries out. An apparel layer over your clothes to slow down the evaporation is what's required. If your jacket isn't vented, open the sleeves and zipper part way. A former riding companion rode across the Mojave frequently during the summer, used to don rain pants over hosed-down jeans to keep the cooling water from drying too quickly. She was over 20 years ago. The rain pants later gave way to some updated overalls that let a bit more air flow, but she insisted she was cooler with the rain pants on those 120-degree days.

Desert crossers are often advised to wait until late in the day, or even better (especially if you are going west) early in the morning to take on the heat. Mornings are also a good time to travel in any hot climate, and you are also likely to encounter thunderstorms earlier in the day.

Altitude changes can catch unprepared riders by surprise. Crossing the Rockies or Sierras can involve a temperature change of 30 degrees from the flat land you left behind. We've been snowed on in the western mountains in every month of the year. If you aren't ready to layer for the cold, you might be dealing with hypothermia in July. And remember that altitude has other physiological

consequences, notably thin, dry air that can dehydrate quickly and leave you oxygen-deprived. Altitude headaches are common but some sea-level natives can actually be disabled by full-fledged altitude sickness, especially if they are at altitude for more than a couple of hours.

What's the Hurry?

Flexible schedules make for a much safer and less stressful summer tour. Riders who want to plan every detail and try to stick scrupulously to a schedule not only bypass opportunities to stop and smell unexpected roses, but can put themselves in danger by riding when fatigued or in conditions where they aren't comfortable. Leave some time in your itinerary for the unexpected. Pressure to get home or to an event or place to meet an obligation at a certain time can also get you in trouble, particularly if you get held up unexpectedly by traffic, weather, bike problems or other things. Motorcycles are more susceptible to weather and mechanical delays than cars. If you absolutely must be back at work on a certain day, give yourself some extra time to get there. A rider who has been on the road for two weeks more or less every day for 13 days and has to get home on the 14th may find himself having to make time on the day he is least able to handle it.



powerful, comfortable, well-equipped bike like this 1500cc, six-cylinder Honda Valkyrie Tourer is a great way to travel, but the author has also ridden across the continent on a 175 and a 350.

Riding far from home will take you to places where traffic culture is different than what you are used to. Give yourself some mental and physical space to deal with drivers who won't behave in ways you are used to. Slow down in towns and cities.

Some riders enjoy riding long and hard, for them the perfect vacation is lots of long days on the bikes. The ride is the destination. For others the road is merely a way to connect points of interest, which are best experienced on a motorcycle. Your first long rides might be rides of discovery, where you learn what moves you to travel by motorcycle. Once you know that, you can plan trips that are exciting and safe.

Senior Editor Friedman likes to ride by himself and ride hard and far and has never stopped to smell a rose, but he checks his email most days on the road: Art.Friedman@primedia.com or at ArtoftheMotorcycle@hotmail.com.

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