

GROUP RIDING

What follows are some general guidelines and advice that will hopefully help the new riders and more experienced riders alike that have never ridden within a large group before.

The following advice is broken down into two categories,

The Second Man Drop off System

General Advice

Employing the Drop off system eliminates most of the hazards associated with riding in large groups, so is highly recommended.

However, if you are a reasonably small group and for example you all know the route and don't wish to use this system then the general advice should cover most points.

THE SECOND MAN DROP OFF SYSTEM

The Drop off system is designed for a group of riders to make progress safely without getting split up, lost and most of all, without putting pressure on the less experienced riders in the group.

Firstly, you must have a dedicated lead rider who should be experienced enough to lead a large group and must also know the route.

Secondly, you must have a dedicated last man (tail end Charlie) who must also be an experienced rider and know the route.

During the ride these two riders do not change their position within the group.

Ideally the lead rider and tail end Charlie should be highly visible (Hi Vis vest and headlights on) and would also benefit from some form of communication between them i.e. bike to bike radio.

All other riders within the group will rotate the position accordingly as follows:

When the ride sets off it is advisable to fall into a staggered formation as this allows you to close up and dominate your road space as a group, but as stated later, use the 2 second rule (see Highway Code) as this gives you a larger margin for error, i.e. the correct stopping distance.

When the group approaches a fixed hazard (junction, set of traffic lights and major or minor turnings) the Lead Rider will indicate to the second rider to pull over safely on the left hand side of the road and stop. This rider then directs all the subsequent riders in the right direction. Once all but the tail end Charlie has passed him/her he then rejoins the group taking up position in front of the tail end Charlie.

At roundabouts the Second man will be dropped off at the exit only so as not to cause confusion and put riders at risk on the approach to the hazard.

To add confidence, you may also drop a rider off at the side of a road to let all the other riders know that they are on course if you are on a long A/B Road.

This routine is then repeated over and over without any of the group stopping. This system takes practice to work effectively and to gain confidence in as the group may be spread over a few miles but still be able to follow the lead rider with no problems.

The drop off system is used extensively by various motorcycle clubs and organisations and is very effective.

GENERAL ADVICE

Planning the route, sorting out the kit, prepping the bike and so on is all part of the fun. We all love it but are we always aware how easily it can end in tears?

We hate to say it but in the past few years there have been an increasing number of accidents (including fatal accidents) involving people riding in groups. Quite often the victim is either a newcomer to biking or someone who has only recently joined the group. Sometimes the group itself is new or had only got together for one ride.

Whatever the cause, with a few simple precautions and some common sense rules the run can not only be made safer but much more fun for all concerned. We have prepared the following to help bikers who may be new to group riding, to plan a run with the benefit of other peoples (sometimes painful!) experiences.

Route Planning

Whether you are looking for the quickest, motorway based route or a more challenging ride through the countryside you need to think about where you are going to make stops and to sort out rendezvous points in case you all get split up.

When making these plans you need to consider the comfortable fuel range of all the bikes on the trip as well as the ability of the riders to ride for long distances.

To avoid mishap it is a good idea to give everyone a copy of:

The route to be taken (list of roads and/or a route map)

Stopping places / RVs

Each others mobile phone numbers

If there is to be no drop off system the individuals have all the relevant info so they will not be pressured to play catch up!

The Running Order

This is critical to get right if you want a safe and successful run for the whole group so this point is worth spending some time on.

You often hear it said that you should put the slowest bike out in front - but think for a minute what will happen if you do that. The slowest one is frequently one of the least experienced riders on a less than quick bike; does he or she really want the responsibility of leading the way? What about the perceived pressure from those behind to 'get a move on!?' Or conversely, do the others really want to be stuck behind the slowest rider for the whole trip? Some fun that would be!

The reality is that it never happens. The group may start out with the slowest in front but pretty soon some of the others get fed up, start overtaking each other, blatting off and before you know it it's all gone to rats and you never get them together again this side of Christmas!

So what is the best order to ride in?

Well for a start the leader/navigator should be out in front. He or she should have studied and be familiar with the route and should have the riding skills and the bike to make reasonable progress.

At the back you need a 'sweeper'. This should be an experienced member of the team (or a pair of good riders) on a big, reliable bike - one with a turn of speed if required. This rider should, like the leader, also be familiar with the route to be taken and should, if possible, have a mobile phone or other means of communication. The job of the sweeper is to look out for stragglers or break -downs and to make sure no-one gets left behind or has an accident without being noticed.

Between the leader and the sweeper you can afford to spread out a bit. Usually riders will pair up with people they know and little sub groups can form - not a problem if everybody is still singing from the same song sheet. As a rule it is best to keep the newer riders well up towards the front where they can be a bit protected by their more experienced companions.

Rules of the Road

When out on the road there are two golden rules for a successful group run and these need agreeing by everyone before the start:

No overtaking each other without prior planning and
Ride to the bike behind you not the one in front.

There is nothing more likely to break up a group of riders than Mr Impatient getting a cob on in the middle of the pack and burning off past everyone with one or two of the quicker bikes in hot pursuit.

Okay, it's their trip as well and you've no right to demand that they ride along with everybody else the whole time. What is fair though is that they wait for the stop then let you know they are going to be having a 'blat' on the next stage of the journey. You can then warn the rest that a couple of riders will be out of the group for a while and you can arrange to meet up at the next stop.

'Riding to the bike behind' is more serious and is the key to the whole concept of good group riding.

Basically, one of the main causes of accidents is when the riders in the group play 'follow my leader' and constantly try to keep up with the bike in front. You often see riders towards the back of a group doing stupid things like overtaking on white lines, flying into blind bends, speeding in the most inappropriate places and even jumping red lights in an effort to catch up.

This can easily be avoided, without having to crawl along in a big group, if you just keep the bike behind you in your mirrors all the time. That way you can make as much progress as you like and only need slow down or stop if you can't see that bike for any extended period. Certainly, never turn left or right or deviate from the 'ahead' course without being sure that the follower has seen you.

Staggered File

By riding in a staggered formation it is possible for a sizable group of bikes to stay fairly close to one another at low speeds and even to move almost as one vehicle through junctions etc. minimising the risk of further split ups.

This can also be adopted on faster A roads and long as you adopt the "two second rule" between you and the bike two in front, this allows you sufficient braking distance but still keep the group close together, however, when the road becomes twistier you should form a single file and ride as an individual.

This technique needs practicing to get right and less experienced riders may be uncomfortable until their confidence improves. A bit of practice in local towns before the trip could well pay dividends if you know a major city is going to be on the route.

Faster Roads

One further point worth mentioning, is when following other riders on faster roads, it's very easy to get drawn in and end up going into bends too fast, consequently either going wide on the exit or having a moment or worse! To overcome this ride as you normally ride but don't focus on the bike in front but the normal limit points that you would use (look beyond the bike in front). Just keep the bikes in front of you within your peripheral vision and react accordingly.

By exercising these simple techniques you will be amazed how you can enjoy the higher speed runs along more challenging roads without having to sacrifice the group concept.

Motorways

Staying together, or at least in sight of one another is quite important on motorways. This is especially true if you are in unfamiliar territory. Remember stopping on the hard shoulder near a turn off just to let the rest of your group catch up is illegal and can get you booked or worse.

Within reason, the slower your group rides on the motorway the more likely they are to stay together. Really big groups of MCs can often be seen trundling along at around 50 m.p.h. and hogging (pardon the pun) the nearside lane.

Those of us less comfortable with the idea of holding everyone up or obstructing other traffic might like to try a different tactic. The best one is to give the lead rider the strict speed limit which is well within the reach of everyone else in the group. It could be 65 on a busy urban motorway in the U.K. or as much as 100 m.p.h. on an Autobahn in Germany. It doesn't matter as long as the others can do at least 20 m.p.h. more without blowing an engine - or a driving license!

Combining this with the no overtaking rule and riding to the bike behind, no-one should have too much difficulty staying in touch with the group when the inevitable speeding car gets in the middle of them.

Town / City Centres

Riding in large cities like London, Paris or Amsterdam or even smaller towns like Reading with the intricate traffic management systems can be a nightmare at the best of times. Even when you know your way around it is easy to get into the wrong lane or get caught out at the lights.

Staying together in a large group in these places is next to impossible. Sooner or later the group is bound to get broken up and the total strangers to the area will have major problems finding their friends.

The only way to sort this out is to get organised before going into the town into smaller groups of around three or four bikes. Ideally, one of the smaller groups should be able to act as a navigator, although this is not always possible.

Above all it is essential to have a substantial landmark as a rendezvous point in case of dispersal. Even in a country where you don't speak the language you can usually get directions to major places of interest and, of course, morale (which is linked to safety) will stay high for lost riders if they have the company of a couple of other bikes with them.

One other way to keep the distance between riders down is to close up into staggered file, go two or three abreast at junctions and traffic lights etc.

SUMMARY

These guidelines are all about safety at the end of the day, and as you can see if you do use the second man drop off system it does eliminate a lot of the risks and generally makes the ride more pleasurable. However; it takes practice to ride in a group safely and successfully but when it's done correctly can be very rewarding and it looks so cool!

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