

ADVENTURE SKILLS

GRAVEL 101 – GAINING CONFIDENCE

With John Nick

I'm often told by budding Adventure riders that, to them gravel roads pose as big a hurdle as riding off road. In some respects I can understand this. For those coming from a purely tar sealed road riding background, gravel, especially loose gravel, can become a big bogey. However riding gravel isn't a black art – it's something you can learn and practice. Over the next two issues I'm going to cover in detail the essential skills for conquering gravel.

NEW TERRITORY

I'm going to make no pretence that riding gravel on a pure street bike is easy. It's not. The usual front weight bias and large U shaped section smooth tyres make riding on any loose surface downright difficult. That's why good Adventure bikes have different chassis dynamics, riding position, wheel sizes and tyre treads and profiles. Simply put, dual purpose bikes are designed to end the terror of riding gravel roads and open up the adventurous world beyond. So, let's assume that you have improved your odds and bought, begged or borrowed an Adventure bike. How are we going to adjust our riding style for gravel roads?

MOVING ABOUT

From the outset you must come to terms with the reality that you are on a loose surface - the bike will move around, and just because it moves a bit does not mean you are about to fall off. The safe zones for bikes are the wheel tracks, clear of loose stones - it's here that traction is best. The wheel tracked nature of the gravel reduces your line options. Unlike the tar sealed road, where you can create virtually any line, on gravel your lines become confined to the clear wheel tracks, especially when you take into account the effect of high cambers.

BRAKING

On gravel your braking ability is greatly reduced, even in the wheel tracks. It takes a lot of skill to scrub off excessive speed mid corner in gravel, so the guiding rule is smooth gentle braking. Brake well before the turn, when upright and in a straight line, and yes, the front brake is also required. And what of ABS brakes, has modern technology come up with a foolproof way of stopping on gravel? For a beginner ABS might add some confidence. However experienced gravel riders use a fair degree of controlled brake lock-up to physically force their tyres through surface gravel and grit into better grip below. Most experienced riders turn off their ABS systems for gravel.

PLAN AHEAD, KEEP LEFT

Gravel roads invariably head into steep country where the roads are likely to be windier and the corners sharper. There may be few or no danger signs, narrow verges and there probably won't be barriers, even above frightening drops. Scan the terrain ahead for other vehicles, signs of dust, potholes and buildup of gravel berms. The orientation of power lines and shelter trees can often give clues as to where the road is going. Make it a personal rule to stick to the left hand track whenever visibility is at all limited.

CORNERING

More on this skill in detail next month, but here are the basics. Divide every corner down into three distinct zones: 1. Brake early, upright and in a straight line, keep lean angles conservative. 2. Don't focus on the apex, as you soon as you can, look ahead around the corner. Turn with progressively increasing power.

CROSSING WHEEL TRACKS

Crossing wheel tracks can be difficult if the gravel between the tracks has built up in loose berms. The rule here is to look and plan well ahead. Try to limit your berm crossing to straight sections of flat road. When you do, try to steer away from the berm a fraction initially, coming back at it as square as possible and always with the power on.

A THOUGHT ABOUT GRAVEL ROADS

Gravel roads are usually constructed of layers of crushed rock laid in decreasing size on a rolled clay base. The road is generally well crowned to spill water into ditches, or water tables. In the South Island gravel roads are usually less cambered and it's common to use small round river stones to surface the road. Gravel roads are regularly graded, when the characteristic three or four distinct wheel tracks made by four wheeled vehicles are levelled and the gravel is spread evenly back across the surface. This nightmare for motorcyclists lasts a few days, until vehicles again sweep the gravel into ridges and wheel tracks.

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