

Ride Smarter, Safer, Longer, Better

43 Tips for the BEST Riding season yet

It's springtime. Are you ready to hit the road?

It takes more than charging your bike's battery and topping up tire pressures. You need to get yourself in order, too.

That's where the tips on these pages come in. We've got everything you need to crank up the '05 riding season right.

To gather the information you need to ride smarter, safer, longer and better, we pulled together more than a dozen AMA staffers who collectively have ridden a few million miles, taught hundreds of Motorcycle Safety Foundation courses and, every now and then, ignored or forgotten their own good advice and lived to regret it. What we came up with is some timeless advice that bears repeating, as well as a few things you might not have thought of.

So consider this your refresher course for the coming year. Study these tips—then get out and enjoy the ride.

6 Strategies for Street Survival

Entire books have been written about how to stay safe on the street. We're not going to be able to cover all that ground here, but we have pulled together six tips that can be crucial to your safety. Sure, you've probably heard them before. But this is advice that bears repeating:

Remember to SEE: Search, Evaluate, Execute. Don't just ride along on autopilot. Engage your brain before engaging first gear. Constantly search for potential dangers, evaluate what's happening around you and execute measures to keep yourself out of trouble. In other words: think, think, think.

Where should you position yourself on the road? It depends. You may have been taught to keep yourself in the center of the lane, or in the left car wheel track. But the safest approach is to practice "traffic positioning," rather than lane positioning. Basically, keep the biggest cushion you can between you and cars, trucks, walls or anything else that can hurt you—from all directions.

Play "What if..." What if that car turns left in front of you? What if a tire blows on that semi in the next lane? What if your tire deflates? Playing "What if..." keeps you mentally engaged and prepared with a plan.

Look where you want to go. Yeah, it's the simplest lesson taught in even the most basic riding course. But it's also the most essential. In a panic situation, look where you want to go. Your bike will go there. So don't fixate on the car coming into your lane, look at the clear path that leads around it.

Practice. Do you know how hard you can brake without locking up the wheels? Practicing in a safe place—gradually building up braking until you find the limits of traction—is the only way to learn. The good news? You’re likely to find that your bike can stop in less distance than you ever imagined.

Oh say, can you see? You can only evaluate potential hazards well if you can see them well. Checked your eyesight lately? Sharp, 20/20 vision is not just a good idea; it’s a necessity.

5 Things You Owe a First-time Passenger

As a roving ambassador of motorcycling goodwill, you want to promote a positive impression of riding. When someone who has never been on a bike expresses interest in getting a ride, be sure you provide your passenger with these five essentials:

Proper gear. You’re responsible for your passenger’s safety. Your passenger should be wearing protective gear that fits, same as you.

Advice on what not to touch. Make sure a new passenger knows how (and when) it’s OK to get on and off the motorcycle, and which parts, such as hot exhaust pipes, to avoid.

An idea of what to expect. Consider the AMA staffer who gave a friend her first ride. The passenger had seen motorcycles lean a thousand times. But that didn’t stop her from screaming aloud in the first turn and trying to force the motorcycle upright. Encourage your first-time passenger to stay relaxed and look over your inside shoulder in the turns.

A joy ride, not a terror ride. This is no time to demonstrate your motorcycle’s capabilities at redline. For a first-time rider, even a sedate ride will feel exciting—and possibly a little intimidating. Go easy.

An attentive debriefing. A first motorcycling experience often draws a strong reaction. You’ll probably know right away if your passenger is now enthusiastic or uninterested. But asking some questions gives you an opportunity to clear up misconceptions (no, the weight shift under braking doesn’t mean you’re going to fly over the handlebars), and leave another non-rider with a good image of motorcycling.

5 Things You Owe Your Loyal, Long-time Passenger

When venturing beyond city limits for a long ride with a passenger, you need to adjust your planning, your preparation, and your performance. Here’s the least you owe your loyal traveling companion:

A role in planning the trip. Include stops and activities you’ll both enjoy. Plan daily mileage you both find comfortable.

A properly set up bike. Adjusting tire pressures and suspension preload to accommodate the added weight of a passenger will not only make the bike handle better, it will also make the ride smoother—and safer—for both of you.

A recalibrated performance meter. Taking on a passenger adds weight to your bike and responsibility to your shoulders. If something goes wrong, you'll need more distance to stop or more time to swerve. Enlarge your safety cushion.

Flexibility. You planned to spend the night in Paradise City, but if you arrive in Blahsville as night is falling and you're tired, go ahead and call it quits for the the day. Don't stubbornly stick to a plan. Adapt. After all, you're out to have fun.

Fun off the bike. For you, a bike and a road may be all the necessary ingredients for a great trip. Odd as it may seem, your passenger might actually want to stop at that historic site you just passed.

5 Things to Remember when your Bike Won't Go

The bike won't start.

What do you do? Well, the main thing you don't want to do is jump to conclusions.

Before you call the nearest dealer for emergency assistance, check the simple stuff, using the FINE-C approach:

Fuel. Is the petcock on? Are you out of gas? Could the vent on the tank be blocked (open the cap, and listen for a "whoosh" indicating a vacuum)? Do you have a clogged fuel filter?

Ignition. OK, we know you turned the key on. If you have no lights, including instrument-cluster indicator lights, look for a blown fuse. Replace it, then search for the reason it blew. Dim lights may mean a weak battery, or a bad connection at the battery terminals.

Neutral. Is the transmission in neutral? Some bikes won't start if it isn't.

Engine cut-off switch. There's the main one on the handlebar. But don't forget that most bikes also have safety cutouts on the sidestand and clutch. If the engine won't fire, try raising and lowering the sidestand a few times, and pumping the clutch lever. Those actions could unstick an unreliable switch.

Choke. If the engine is cold and the choke isn't on, it may not start. If the engine's hot and the choke is on, that could keep it from starting, too.

8 Tips for Going the Distance

Is this the year you take that big cross-country trip?

Few things feel better than setting out on a ride with a couple of weeks of unscheduled time and thousands of miles ahead of you. Just remember that a long trip places different demands on you.

Here are a few pieces of advice that will help you keep that positive feeling:

Be realistic. Don't plan two solid weeks of 800-mile days. Riding should be fun. Set goals you'll enjoy, not endure. On good, twisty back roads, 250 miles a day can be a lot.

Work your way up. Don't take on a 600-mile day if your normal riding is three miles to the diner for a patty melt. Work up to longer distances gradually.

On the seventh day, rest. On a long, multi-week trip, include at least one non-riding rest day per week. Keep your schedule loose so you can enjoy opportunities that arise unexpectedly.

Beware of dehydration. Wind, sun, hours on the road—it's easy to dehydrate. Don't wait until you're thirsty and have a headache to drink. Chug down water or fruit drinks whenever you get the chance. Avoid caffeinated soft drinks, coffee or tea—they're diuretics that can actually contribute to dehydration. On long rides, consider carrying a hydration pack on your back or in your tankbag. One of these can allow you to keep your fluids up while you ride.

Fuzzy thinking is a warning sign. If simple decisions, such as whether to stop for gas, become difficult, take it as a warning sign. Dehydration, hypothermia, hyperthermia, fatigue or sleepiness could be clouding your mind. Stop, identify the problem, and address it.

Rest stop? Don't just sit there. If you're spending hours sitting on the bike, use your stops to move around, get the blood flowing and stay limber.

Avoid untested gear. We all like buying stuff, but picking up new boots, a new seat or new luggage just before a big trip isn't smart. Brand-new gear could be uncomfortable or even dangerous if it upsets the handling of your bike. Don't start a long trip with anything you haven't tested or broken in.

Pack light at lunch. Double cheeseburger, fries, milk shake and apple pie? Aside from the caloric implications, eat all that at lunch, and you'll feel sluggish and sleepy all afternoon. Eat light and healthy at breakfast and lunch, and save your larger, oof-inspiring meal for when the day's riding is done.

5 Ways to Keep Your Bike from Being Stolen on the Road

At home, your motorcycle is probably tucked out of sight in a locked garage, barricaded in by your car, with you listening for any sounds of intruders. On the road, it's considerably more vulnerable.

You may never be able to stop a determined professional thief, but these five steps can deter amateurs and encourage pros to look elsewhere:

Lock and alarm. A small disc lock takes up almost no space and may send the casual thief in search of easier marks. An alarm adds deterrence.

Go undercover. A bike cover can draw less attention than a shiny bike. You might want one that doesn't advertise the type of machine underneath.

Parking strategies. A friendly chat with the hotel lobby clerk may get you permission to park your bike by the front entrance, where a witness will be around 24 hours a day. Some riders routinely ask for ground-floor rooms where they can park right outside the door or window. If you're traveling alone, you might want to park your bike with any other motorcycles in the lot, giving you additional riders who will be watching for suspicious activity.

Hidden obstacles. If a ride-off thief on an unfamiliar bike thinks he's having a mechanical problem, he's likely to abandon the heist. Shut off the gas. Loosen a spark plug cap. Pull the main fuse. Some owners go further and add a hidden ignition cut-out switch.

Not without me. One rider we know secures his tent to his bike with a guy wire when he camps at night. That way, if the bike leaves, he'll know it instantly.

8 Things to Pack on the Road (and One to Leave at Home)

You're thinking: "Eight things to pack? I already have more than I can cram into my luggage."

Don't worry. The essential items we're listing won't take up more than a small corner of a saddlebag. Other suggestions here are actually designed to save space.

Packing light is a virtue. The bike will handle better and you'll be more likely to find what you're looking for among your packed possessions.

May we recommend the following?

Multi-purpose clothing you can layer. Carry lighter items, not bulky clothing, and add or subtract layers as conditions change.

Earplugs. You'll ride longer with less fatigue if you block out loud wind noise. As a bonus, you'll actually hear cars around you better. And you'll increase the odds of being able to hear your grandchildren in your old age. Buy in bulk at safety-supply stores (they're much cheaper that way) and keep a pair, or several, in the pocket of every jacket and tankbag you own.

Dealer phone numbers (or manufacturer's toll-free number to get you in touch with dealers). In case you need professional assistance.

Expandable luggage and a bungee net. Despite your best intentions to travel light, you know you're going to buy that dealer T-shirt, or that chrome farkle on sale at the rally. Expandability makes room for souvenirs. A bungee net is cheap insurance in case you buy even more. Got too much? Next stop, a pack-and-ship store.

Tire repair kit and the ability to use it. Sooner or later, you'll have a flat. A compact tire repair kit takes up little space and could let you limp to a shop for permanent repairs, rather than calling a tow truck. Practice on an old tire before you get stuck alongside the road.

Other stuff that might keep you from being stranded. In addition to your bike's tool kit, carry a multi-tool, duct tape, spare fuses, zip-ties, safety wire, tubing for siphoning gas, disposable latex gloves, a tire pressure gauge and a spare key.

AMA MoTow and Help 'N Hands cards. When all else fails, the [AMA MoTow](#) service can come to your rescue with roadside assistance. Coverage for all your bikes costs just \$25 per year. And joining the [AMA International Help 'N Hands](#) network gives you access to fellow motorcyclists all over the country who have pledged to offer aid to stranded riders. To sign up for either, call the AMA at (800) AMA-JOIN.

The stuff you can't live without. Prescription medications, eyeglasses, sunscreen, bandages and disinfectant for first aid.

What not to pack. When you get home from a trip, make a list of everything you took that you didn't use. If it wasn't there in case of emergency, leave it home the next time.

© 2005, American Motorcyclist Association