

ASK THE RIDING COACH

With Rapid Training Coach Dave Hewson

'I fancy having a go at off-road riding. Am I mad?'

Q I'VE HAD MY 2019 Honda Africa Twin for a few years now and I think it's about time I took it down a green lane. I've never been off-road before, and would be interested to know if you think I'm mad. **Larry Underwood, email**

A YOU'RE DEFINITELY NOT mad to consider it, Larry - the Africa Twin can easily cope with green lanes, and trail riding is among the most entertaining things you can do on a motorcycle. But there are a few things to do before you embark on this adventure. I certainly wouldn't advise that you just head off down any old muddy track.



Your mission is to ensure your first few forays off the tarmac are, if anything, a bit too easy for you. That way you'll pick up a few skills and gain confidence rather than getting put off mud for life - which happens to plenty of riders.

Obviously if you've got access to a smaller trail bike, go out on that first because everything becomes a lot easier off-road with less weight - no adventure rider has ever complained about their bike being too light. But let's assume your first foray will be on the Africa Twin.

Your first mission is to find a mate to go with you. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, riding off-road on your own is very dodgy, especially on a heavy bike that can hurt if it falls on you at 2mph. Crashing on the road is bad, but at least there are usually plenty of passers-by to call an ambulance, which can then easily get to you. Neither are generally true off-road.

The second reason is more upbeat: fun. Riding off-road with mates is a hilarious, life-affirming joy. Plus, it's usually just as entertaining when you're in the pub afterwards discussing the day's highlights. So, find at least one accomplice. If no one springs to mind, join the excellent Trail Riders Fellowship (trf.org.uk) and they'll invite you on one of their beginner rides.

Next, choose your trail. Don't be tempted to ride down bridleways - besides being illegal, you risk getting



lectured by ramblers, dog walkers or, most terrifying of all, farmers with shotguns. To be legal, you need to find a Byway Open to All Traffic (BOAT). There are some exceptions though - visit www.trailwise.org.uk or join the TRF to get all the info.

For your first attempt, I'd recommend assessing the trail on foot or mountain bike if you don't know the route. If there are boggy sections, stretches of wet mud, boulder fields or steep climbs, forget it and find another one. A hard-packed gravel trail - like a forest fire road - is ideal. Obviously, weather makes a difference here - if it's been raining for two weeks, probably wait a day or six.

In terms of your bike, the key thing is the tyres. For the easy trails you'll be considering, most adventure tyres (ie, designed for on-road and off-road) will be fine - these have enough space between the tread blocks to find grip on loose surfaces, though will be well-nigh useless in wet mud. You may be better waiting until spring - adventure bikes are much easier to handle on dry lanes.

Other than that, the main things are to stay relaxed, look as far ahead as possible, and stop often to rehydrate while enjoying the view (and catching your breath). Enjoy! **R**



The Rapid team includes TT racers, a BSB squad, and police and surveillance riders. They are the most highly qualified professionals in the business and their unique, no-nonsense courses are designed to help riders be the best they can be. **More info at www.rapidtraining.co.uk**