

BE GREAT AT TAKING A PILLION

TRAINED PILLION

New pillions should always get a pre-flight chat telling them their main job: sit still, relax and just lean with the bike

VISION

To be smooth, our man is looking a long, long way ahead and soaking up masses of detail about potential hazards

THROTTLE

Grip the throttle lightly and twist smoothly and you can ride surprisingly fast without the pillion noticing

ATTITUDE

The way to a pillion's heart is through enjoyment not terror - rabid acceleration and braking are a fast-track to divorce

PLANNING

For every second of every ride, our rider has a plan. That way, they can smoothly stay out of trouble that the pillion won't even know existed

PILLION KIT

Don't give your pillion your stinky old Frank Thomas jacket from 1989. Kit them up properly and they're far more likely to enjoy themselves

ACCESSORISE

A back rest is the most pillion-friendly piece of kit out there. Adding some foam to a topbox achieves the same result

BIKE PREPPED

Tyre pressures have been upped by 4psi at each end and the rear preload has been increased by four turns

IT TAKES TWO, BABY

Taking a passenger on a motorcycle can be one of life's joys... or a potential nightmare. RiDE's riding coach talks us through making your pillion feel like one in a million

Words Ryan Decarteret, John Westlake Pictures Chippy Wood/Rapid Training

BEING AN EXCELLENT rider for pillions has a multitude of advantages. The most obvious one is that your partner is more likely to want to join you on excursions, which means you have the opportunity to tempt them into your world of freedom, fresh air and new places. Achieve that, and you'll be out on the bike more, your other half will appreciate why you love riding so much and might also begin to understand why it is essential you get a new motorcycle. Or three. The second advantage is that the techniques you need to make you a great pillion-friendly rider also make you faster, smoother and safer too. There really is no downside...

THE EXPERT



Ryan Decarteret

Rapid Training coach Ryan is a former National Crime Agency surveillance rider and now has a regular skills column in RiDE.

THE FIVE RULES OF PILLION-FRIENDLY RIDING

The two prime objectives of riding with a pillion are safety and smoothness. There's nothing as certain to put off a pillion as crashing, or thinking you're about to. Secondly, if you can flow like liquid velvet through every situation, even the most nervous of pillions will soon relax and marvel at your motorcycle mastery. And, fortunately, being super-smooth requires the same skills and techniques as being fast and safe. The key ones are:

1 IMPROVE YOUR ROAD READING

The single most transformational thing you can do for your riding – whether with a pillion or not – is to improve your ability to see and interpret detail at speed. This is the key to fast, safe riding and it's what gives great riders so much more time and space to react and handle whatever comes their way. If you get this right, that all-important smoothness will naturally follow and your pillions will love you.

Like any other skill, road reading improves with focused practice – years of riding experience can only get you so far. The trick is to start slow and go for detail. Ride at a speed where you have time to see and register all the crucial details – looking as far ahead as possible. Focus on how early you see new information appearing and how much detail you gather. And if you feel yourself getting swamped, or realise you're noticing hazards you could have actually seen seconds ago if you looked further ahead, slow down.

Remember: you can only ride as fast as you can see, so investing in your road-reading ability will not only make you safer, it will make you faster too. And, crucially, your pillion probably won't notice you're going any faster, because everything feels so smooth.

▶ Reading the road well will help smooth your riding

TRY THIS

Add the 'so what?' test to what you see. This helps stop you just scanning without thinking about the significance of potential hazards. So if you look across some fields and see a truck approaching, your 'so what?' answer might be that the lorry could arrive at the upcoming corner at the same time as you, so you might need to adjust your line and/or slow down.

▶ View through right-hand corners can help with overtakes

2 MAKE PLANS

It's no good spotting a load of hazards nice and early if you don't do anything – you need to come up with a plan. On the face of it, this is pretty simple: work out where to place the bike, what speed to go, what gear to be in, and if (or when) you need to indicate.

The problem is that new hazards arrive all the time so your plan has to change to accommodate them. Before you know it, you're juggling position, speed and gear relative to multiple, simultaneous hazards.

Take a right-hander for example. Advanced riding theory says you move to the left to extend your view into it. Simple. But then you see a blind driveway on the left, so you could move to a more central position to stay clear (but then your view is reduced), or you could hold your position but reduce speed. And what if it's wet, but with a dry line somewhere? Or if there's nasty-looking camber? The truth is that many riding situations have multiple solutions – no two bends are the same and, even if they were, no



TRY THIS

When planning overtakes, use right-hand corners to set yourself up. As you approach the corner, leave a good gap to the car or truck you're following and move to the left of your lane to get an early view of the road ahead as the bend opens up. Get in the right gear then, if the road ahead is clear, fire off the overtake as you exit the corner. And if it's not, close the throttle and drop back.

'The two prime objectives are safety and smoothness'



▲ Going gently on the controls will make a huge difference

3 SORT YOUR MACHINE CONTROL

This is the aspect of your riding that pillions assume you're getting wrong, perhaps because their helmet occasionally bangs into yours or the bike feels 'jerky'. The culprit is generally not machine control – it's reading the road and planning – but there are things you can do to improve matters by finessing your use of the throttle and brakes.

Because of the weight of your pillion, the back brake will be more useful than usual, but the front brake is still the main means of slowing down and the key to its use is – you guessed it – smoothness. If you load up the front brake smoothly – use two fingers for the best feel – you give your pillion time to brace against the forces and if your bike has a decent grabrail, you can brake surprisingly hard without irritating your passenger.

The smoothness principle applies to the throttle too but even more so if your bike has no pillion back rest. Fierce acceleration can be terrifying if the pillion feels like they're going to fall off the back.

TRY THIS

As soon as the bike has settled after you've turned it into a corner, smoothly open the throttle enough to maintain speed. This increases stability and ground clearance and signals to your pillion that you'll be accelerating soon. Beware being too aggressive though – besides unnerving your pillion, you risk pushing the bike wide or even losing traction.

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4 DON'T FEAR THE U-TURN

With an extra body perched up high, low-speed manoeuvres fill many riders with an understandable sense of dread – toppling off is bad enough without the main witness mentioning it over breakfast for the next ten years. But with the right technique, the addition of a passenger (even a whopper) needn't make a great deal of difference to your U-turns.

The first thing to do is look where you want to end up – not the halfway point but the final position. This usually means you've got to twist your torso round and swivel your head like an owl to look almost 180° behind you and across. This is the point at which most U-turns fail – if you look in the wrong place, that's where you will always end up.

Then smoothly set off, going slowly enough that you have to play the clutch around the biting point to drive forward. Keep your speed steady as you turn in and let the bike lean gently. You need the lean to turn – don't just twist the handlebars.

If you want a tighter turn, just slow down a fraction by taking away some drive via the clutch – this will cause the bike to lean more. You control the tightness of the turn as much with the clutch as the bars – you can keep the throttle steady the entire time. Keep looking at your exit and beyond, and keep the bike driving by playing out the clutch.

Some riders like to control speed with the rear brake but if you keep speeds low and concentrate on your clutch control, you won't need to.

TRY THIS

Slope off for an afternoon without your passenger and practise doing tight figure-of-eights in the corner of a supermarket car park. You'll be surprised how fast your confidence grows. It's worth practising checking for traffic to make sure you don't forget when doing the real thing.



▲ Key to low-speed U-turns is look where you want to end up

5 DOING DISTANCE

There are two important factors to consider for successful long trips: your concentration levels and your pillion's happiness. Fortunately, dealing with both usually requires the same tactic: regular breaks.

Research has shown that the human brain uses 20% of the body's energy supply when that human is sitting in a researcher's laboratory, so we dread to think how much it consumes when riding a motorcycle. Almost certainly a lot more, which explains why riding can be so exhausting, even if we're not physically doing very much. Simply

processing all the visual information, assessing the numerous risks, working out plans, and spotting hazards takes a huge amount of energy.

The upshot of this is that regular breaks are important for riders and little-and-often is more effective than slogging on until the fuel light comes on. A five-minute stroll while eating a banana once an hour can leave you surprisingly refreshed.

With nothing to distract them, your pillion will usually get bored and uncomfortable before you, so it makes sense to pre-empt their needs too.

TRY THIS

If your pillion moans about those tedious motorway hauls, invest in some sound-cancelling Bluetooth earbuds – depending on your bike, it means they can listen to music, podcasts etc at decent speeds. You could even consider a rider-to-pillion intercom...



▲ Regular breaks are essential for both rider and pillion



PILLION-FRIENDLY ACCESSORIES



1 Topbox (£120-500)

By far the best accessory for any pillion is a back rest. A topbox has the added advantage that you can put beer in it.

We recommend Shad SH58X, £233
www.shad.co.uk



2 Grabrails and pillion grippers (£15-100)

Aftermarket grabrails often come with a rack which can be useful. Pillion grippers have handles attached to a belt worn by the rider – a more civilised version of clinging on.

We recommend Bikelt pillion grippers, £9.99
www.sportsbikeshop.co.uk

3 Saddle covers or cushions (£15-50)

Worth looking into if your pillion perch is uncomfortable. Can be non-slip, inflatable or memory foam.

We recommend ComfortAir pillion cushion cover, £65
comfortair-moto.co.uk



4 Intercoms (£165)

To be able to chat with your pillion, you don't need a full-on MESH intercom. Two Bluetooth units will allow you to chat as well as listen to music or sat-nav instructions.

We recommend Cardo Spirit HD twin-pack
www.cardosystems.com

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▼ Being comfortable with a pillion opens up a whole new world



PILLION QUESTIONS ANSWERED

What should I advise my pillion to do?

Just go with the bike; lean as it leans and use the grab handles rather than their arms around your waist. The less they move around, the easier it is for you. It's also worth advising them to grip you with their knees under braking and for you both to work out a communication system for stopping, etc if you don't have an intercom.

What should my tyre pressures be?

If you're taking a pillion and holiday clobber, you usually need to add between 4 and 6psi but check your handbook.

Should I fiddle with my suspension?

Yes. Piling an extra ten stone (or thereabouts) on the back of a bike means the rear preload definitely needs adjusting (assuming it was about right in the first place). Check your manual to get a start point but be prepared to tweak it until



▼ Grab handles can help pillion to steady themselves



▼ You get on first, then the pillion with both feet

you're happy. The front preload will need to be increased too to take account of the greater weight transfer under braking. Don't forget this will still apply if you have semi-active suspension without an auto preload adjustment facility – the semi-active only does the damping.

Any other adjustments?

Once you've fiddled with the preload, it's worth checking the headlight alignment – it's easy to end up with the dipped beam pointing into oncoming drivers' eyes.

What's the best way for a pillion to get on the bike?

You need to get on first and plonk both feet down to create a stable platform. If you can't get both feet down, make sure the foot you do have on the ground is the side the pillion is getting on. Then tell your pillion to step onto a pillion footpeg and hold your shoulder to steady themselves as they swing their other leg over. Prepare for a slight rock to the side they're climbing on but for light pillions, you'll hardly notice. **R**



▼ You'll need to increase preload to cope with greater weight

WIN A DAY'S PILLION-FRIENDLY TRAINING!

RiDE has teamed up with Rapid Training to give you the chance to win a full day of one-to-one training with an expert riding coach worth £395 – for free. And if you choose to bring along your pillion of choice then so much the better. Rapid is one of Britain's most respected advanced riding companies and every one of its coaches is trained to Police Class 1 standard.

Enter the competition at www.rapidtraining.co.uk/Ride-pillion-competition