

Pillions.....

First a summary:



What the riders need to know:

- Your bike's performance will be altered with a pillion: ensure you have the correct tyre pressures and suspension settings
- Plan your braking to avoid sudden stops
- Use smooth acceleration particularly when starting off
- Agree when your pillion gets on and off, agree they are ready for you to start
- Carefully choose where your pillions get on and off, gravel and uneven surfaces can make life difficult, and always retract your side stand before they get on (otherwise the compressed suspension might make it difficult to retract it without leaning the bike)
- Remember that if you are cold, wet or concerned they are sharing those feelings
- Ask your pillion to help at tolls and ferry check-in to manage the money and paperwork

What pillars need to know:

- Make sure your rider knows when you are about to get on/off
- Have the right gear including protection: never get on a motorbike in ordinary clothing
- The slower the bike is going the more sensitive it is to your movements – in particular keep still when stopping, stationary and for hill starts.
- Sit perpendicular to the bike – especially when it's leant over. It might feel strange but the physics means that it works best that way and you'll cause problems if you positively lean or try and be straight at the wrong time
- Enjoy the ride! Passing slow cars, filtering, being part of the environment and the biking community.

Now for more detail.....

A Clash of Helmets

Every biker that has taken a pillion will know the “clonk” that reverberates around your crash helmet as you and your pillion bang heads. It’s noisy, blurs your vision and isn’t cool. You might hear a muted “sorry” from your pillion as you say “bugger” or “sorry” at the same time. Once isn’t good, but when you’ve clonked helmets for the n’t h time in a few minutes you’ll recognise this isn’t right.

Maybe there’s a better way?

Many bikers want to share their experiences – that’s why, unlike car drivers, they ride in groups. However, sharing the ride can be even better with a pillion however there’s a ‘BUT’. This article explores the trials and tribulations of riding with a pillion and riding as a pillion.

So what’s first?

It’s got to be the rider.

What’s the motivation for allowing someone else to sit on your pride and joy? It could be “love”, necessity, for fun or you just want someone else to share those moments on the road that only bikers experience....but maybe not all experiences?

If you’ve just had to brake halfway round a fast bend, just missing the mud the farmers left in the road and your adrenaline has rocketed to dangerous levels – then what’s it like for the pillion? Are you going to get an earful at the next petrol station, or for those with intercom, has the screaming stopped and the insults begun? Most riders take family or friends on the back, husbands take wives, dads take their kids but there’s another category of guys and their unsuspecting girlfriends. Let’s start with family. Here there’s a history of trust and familiarity. It’s not a one off, its part of your lives – the trip out on a Sunday, the group rides and the holidays. Biking is an extension of the bond that already exists where there is less incentive to show off and where the aim is a safe trip equally enjoyable to both of you.

On the other hand if a relationship is new then going on a pillion seat is a big risk for both rider and pillion. The rider has to be confident the pillion won’t bottle out of leaning with the bike mid-corner, or get on or off without careful balancing or simply moan. Why spoil a passion unless the pillion adds to the passion? The pillion has to trust the rider: completely and utterly trust that the rider will not show off, wheelie down the road or go from zero to ‘A and E’ in under 3 seconds.

So what sort of biker are you?

New, born again, ex-police Class 1 or what? It does make a difference because it’s all about skill. The skill of riding, yes, but also ‘roadcraft’ – dealing with traffic, weather and all the myriad of hazards that are pretty irrelevant to the average car driver but can be crucial for a safe ride.

Does your pillion care about how well you ride – they should do! Unless its blind love in which case you’re reading the wrong article! So how should you ride with a pillion that’s different to without? Maybe it’s easier to understand this by looking at what can go wrong....

Head banging

First it is totally unnecessary. You can tour most of Europe on a 3week holiday covering thousands of kilometres without touching helmets. Yet many seem to engage in frequent bangs, which can sound very loud, “oops sorry” says your pillion – “silly ****” you think; but it’s like strictly come dancing – it takes two to tango.

White knuckle rides

Your pillion staggers off the bike at every stop. Their hands and arms ache from holding on the grab rails, or a piece of your clothing. The key feature here is the unblinking stare of terror which remains until you’re safely back home. Not fun!

The bike moves

Someone else is shifting their weight and is making the bike go where its not supposed to go. This can happen in bends but perhaps worse at low speeds. Your riding becomes ragged, inaccurate and wobbly: you feel out of control – mainly because you are out of control. Filtering and parking are a complete nightmare.



The eagle has landed

Getting on can be a soft balletic movement almost indiscernible to you the rider. Or it can test your strength, balance and patience as the pillion fails to get their leg over the bike. Panniers and top boxes enhance the challenge.



Sitting on the petrol filler cap

I guess your bike was not designed for you to be halfway up the tank and your pillion in your seat? All the while you are in mid-panic braking and wanting to access those controls that are now by your hips. This is not a cool place to be because even if you have managed to stop in time you know that everyone is looking at you, thinking what a *****. Your embarrassment leads to instant incriminations.

Lost again

I'm riding the bike – you've got nothing else to do so 'why don't you know where we are?'

I'm cold/wet/too hot/tired/sleepy/thirsty/hungry/bored.....

So how does your pillion feel?

Care and repair

You know it makes sense to clean your bike, oil the chain, take bits into the kitchen for that extra TLC but others might not share your passion,...let alone help!

How much?

"What bike has your hubby/boyfriend/partner...got?" "I dunno but its red".



Someone said they could change their bike every year without their wife noticing as long as they didn't get a bike of a different colour. Bikes are expensive, the bits are expensive, tyres can cost as much as fuel per mile and you'll never get the car into the garage ever again.

The gear

If you've got the gear and your pillion is suffering because they haven't - then go straight to chapter 3

A different style of riding.

Let's assume you can ride your bike.

Let's assume you have good skills, not too many points and you can get insurance.

Let's assume you want to keep the relationship with you pillion

The experience

You know what's happening, you know what's happening next and you have the bars to steady you, the tank to squeeze - they have a pathetic rail by their bum or you to hold, the lucky ones have top boxes and Goldwing pillions have a choice of sofas, hi-fi and drinks cabinet: however many experienced pillions don't hold on at all!

That's worth repeating - pillions shouldn't need to hold on

In fact with practise pillions can turn from passive pussy cats to proactive thrill seeking demons. They're on the bike because they love it too!

They get a thrill from well timed overtakes, speed, filtering and waving to other bikers.

So beware – if your pillion encourages you to speed up they're probably not offering to pay the fine! You are in control! But, hey, that's what they like otherwise they'd be off doing their CBT (some do – and you'll end up with another bike in the garage)

Riding

We're back to basics: good observation, anticipation, maintain your safety 'bubble', smooth progressive riding – there's no reason to ride slower or with less commitment.

However your pillion may not be looking ahead so sudden acceleration or braking or changes in direction can be anything from uncomfortable to fatal.

Adopt a consistent riding style so they have a chance of recognising what's next.

Getting on

Get the bike into a sensible place: avoid gravel, slopes, slippery surfaces (impossible to avoid inside ferries): get both feet on the ground and hold the brake on.

Its unfair to ask a pillion to get onto a moving bike.

Sometimes a kerb (like mounting blocks of old) can give that extra few mm to ease getting on.

[Note to pillion: check if the rider is ready.](#)

Pillions can either stand next to the bike and swing their leg over: easy on low bikes like Ducati Monsters. But when the bike is tall and/or has luggage then use the footpeg – one foot on, stand, leg over/through, stand on both pegs, gently sit. A hand on your riders shoulder will let them know when you're about to get on.

[Note to rider: sometimes the additional weight of the pillion compresses the suspension so the side stand won't retract without leaning the bike - which is not recommended.](#)

Starting off

Are you ready to go?

Are they ready to go? How can you tell?

There's an infuriating list of possible activities that pillions get up to once they've mounted the bike:

- Purse in pocket,
 - gloves on,
 - plug in Autocom,
 - gloves off,
 - sunglasses on,
 - gloves back on again,
 - wave to whoever you're with,
 - adjust visor,
 - adjust position to get comfy
- and
- suddenly turn round to check the top box is shut – whoa! You nearly tipped the bike over!

Note to pillion: get sorted out and once on, keep still! Get settled and say "let's go" or whatever to let them know you're ready for take off.

Note to rider: wait and go when you have both agreed to go

Note to pillion: if in Europe on holiday remind the rider to drive on the right! (Clever pillions will say this in the correct language)

Boredom

Some pillions have a repertoire of exercises and mind games

But better they help you: map reading, phone calls, peage/tolls

Some are so relaxed and with nothing to do they can fall asleep!

Bikes

Bikes come in all shapes and sizes. Some are better than others for pillions and as a pillion you need to feel safe, secure and comfortable. But there's a balance to be struck between performance and comfort. Taking your holiday on the back of a 600c sports bike with minimal luggage space will be a different experience to a BMW RT with heated seats.

Sports bikes are designed for speed, with minimum drag, hard suspension and quite often no rear seat at all! Road going versions can be surprisingly good at the long haul perhaps because their small fuel tanks mean a stop every 100 miles or so to stretch your legs. They tend to be OK if you are young and don't mind the knees-up high perch for that Sunday morning dash to the bacon sandwich stop. You'll be home for lunch!

Enduro bikes are for off-roading and come with tall bench seats and knobby tyres. Again little potential for luggage.

There's a generation of enduro bikes the GS's, Tigers and Multistradas that are popular here and throughout the rest of the World because they offer pillion comfort, performance and luggage space.

Out and out tourers like BMW's RT's, Honda Goldwings and some Harleys can come with all the creature comforts. They have sumptuous pillion accommodation but might not suit everyday riding such as rush hour lane splitting on the M40 because they are big, heavy and wide.

All riders I know crave a garage of at least 4 bikes – one for each riding mode from track days to that mega-euro trip with pillion of course.

Performance

This is it, the whole point.

A fast car, such as a Mazda RX8, will have a 0 – 60 time of 7 seconds, an Aston Martin DB9 will get down to 5 seconds; and a “supercar” like a Porsche 911 GT2 is 4 seconds and now the zone where the guys on Top Gear get excited and wet themselves: McLarens F1 is 3.2 seconds and top of one published list is the 2.7 seconds achieved by a Bugatti Veyron which has 1000bhp and cost in excess of £800,000 but your average bike will beat 4 seconds and the good ones – well 2.5 seconds isn't out of the question. So you're on the back seat of a machine that sees 100mph in a few hundred yards, and with massive front discs brakes can stop as quickly – even bringing the rear wheel off the ground. This is why “riding skill” is paramount.

But what happens in the real world?

On real roads? In real weather?

The power becomes something to caress, getting grip on slippery surfaces is an art.

Staying upright is everything.

And what does a pillion do?

Adds weight, changes the power: weight ratio and therefore reduces the bike's performance.

The good news is that most of the time this is pretty irrelevant.



The other huge advantage of a bike is its ability to get through traffic; so as a pillion you might not be used to overtaking. Riding a bike is not like being in a car, you don't have to sit in the queue behind a caravan, or waiting for another sequence of traffic light changes before you get to the front. A bike can filter through slow moving and stationary traffic: some pillions love this, looking down at the endless row of parked cars with frustrated drivers and screaming kids while you sail past, wheels never stopping. Beware other drivers won't necessarily see you so they'll throw out lit cigarettes, sweet wrappers, banana skins, McDonald's trays etc the better drivers will have seen you and its not uncommon for cars to move over to allow you more space to get through.

Note to pillion: a thank you wave is a good move – it shows your appreciation and means your rider doesn't need to take their hands off the controls to say thank you: when filtering they need to keep relaxed, ride smoothly and with fingers covering the brakes.

Going abroad?

There are a number of options.

The more extremes are:

- Shipping your bike in a box to wherever you want to ride it. You'll have the pleasure of your own machine but the worry about 'it' getting to where 'you' will be. Then unpacking, getting it going and a whole host of other issues. Can you imagine calling up your insurers and saying:

"I'm covered for EU countries; right?"

"Yes, of course Sir!"

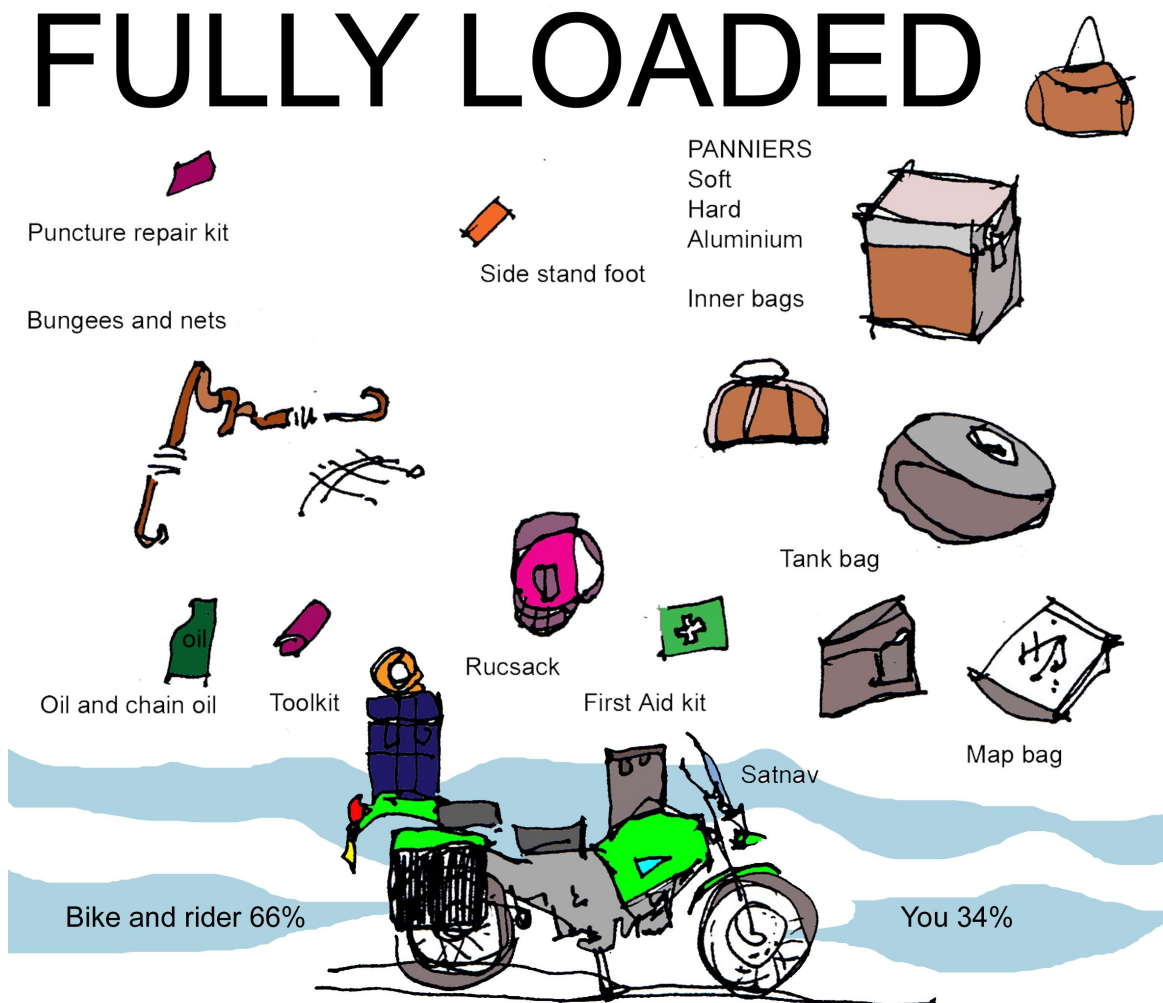
"But what about Kazakstan/Bolivia/Java/wherever"

"Can you hold the line....?"

- Some tours provide everything – the bike, gear, mechanics, first aiders, routes...etc There are a multitude of possibilities, but however romantic the idea of getting onto the pillion seat of a Royal Enfield in India you need to be aware that this probably equates to a death wish. Your rider might be the best but they'll be contending with gears on the wrong side, no real brakes, and suicidal drivers all while desperate to find the next toilet. Generally roads outside of Western Europe are "challenging".

Packing

No suitcases just "hard" or "soft" luggage.



Tip: don't use a rucsac

Eurotunnel

But most of us simply book a ferry or Eurotunnel...

The tunnel is fast, efficient and for the most part, biker friendly but a little uncivilised and completely boring. When you roll up to the tunnel to book in you'll not be met with a screen that simply asks you to confirm you are who they say you are on the screen – the clever the number plate recognition system can't read bikes. Instead you have to input your booking reference or go to a "manned" booth.

Note to rider: give you pillion the booking form and passports to manage

Note to pillion: it helps if you have easy access to a big pocket – some rider jackets have pockets on the back – ideal!

Note to pillion: don't drop anything!

Note to rider: take your time: you'll be stopping where 1000's of vehicles have stopped before and someone will have dropped some oil just where you'll be putting your feet down and just where your wheels are.

They'll give you a big ticket to display – now there's a challenge – it's windy and you can't fix it anywhere because it's designed to go over a car's internal mirror. Trying to hook it over your bike with gloves on is almost impossible.

Tip: take a small karabiner to hook it onto a cable or a mirror stalk.

Then you have the option of a comfort break, coffee or a shop. But remember shopping is almost always completely useless because there's no room on your bike for even a packet of gum. But keep your eye on the boarding letter display. Whether you stop or not when your letter appears then follow the signs to French customs. Technically you'll be leaving ol' Blighty before you get into the tunnel. Bikes and bikers tend not to be considered "threats" but you can still be pulled over for a chat. Be patient and don't queue jump unless maybe if you're joining your mates further up the queue? After customs you'll find yourselves on the bike lane waiting to board. Chill out but be ready to go. Take it steady down the ramp; then very steady into the train and along through the carriages to where you'll be parked. The crew will tell you where and how to park.

Rider tip: avoid the slippery metal floor panels

Pillion tip: it's a low ceiling (unless you're with the vans and higher vehicles) so don't bang your head when standing on the pegs to get off.

The trip is pretty boring; mobile signals disappear very quickly as you accelerate into the tunnel.

You've around 35 minutes to have snack/drink from your top box, alter your satnav to Km and stretch those legs. The health and safety announcements are inevitable but why don't they give you a weather and traffic update too?

Once the train has arrived it's a quick unloading process where they open the front doors and everyone drives out.

Pillion tip: it's a low ceiling (unless you're with the vans and higher vehicles) so don't bang your head when standing on the pegs to get on.

Rider tip: don't start your bike in gear and avoid the slippery metal floor panels

Then it's out into 'la belle France'

Pillion tip: shout to your rider at least three times – ride on the RIGHT

Ferries are different!

Ferries vary in their care of bikes and bikers.

The good ones get the bikes on early so you have the pleasure of riding past the rows of cars and caravans. You ride in on clean decks and are neatly strapped down by a knowledgably caring crew. You then head for your cabin or the lounge. Easy peasy!

However sometimes you can be faced with:

- Last on which means a 2 hour wait in the open
- Wet oily decks that will be the most slippery surface you'll ever have to negotiate
- The non-english speaking crew will then point you towards an old mattress and rope because you are expected to tie your gleaming bike to their dirty bulkhead
- All the time the noise and heat and fumes from lorries manoeuvring next to you is making you deaf, hot and a little tetchy

Tip: organise one bag to go with you from the bike. This avoids dragging panniers and top box up flights of steep stairs

Tip: on the boat try and get a weather forecast for your destination. Quite often "information" desks have this.

Enjoy the trip, talk with other bikers they might tell you where the better roads are, places to avoid, you know all the "stuff" we love to chat about over a beer!

Tip: on disembarking, particularly in Finland, make sure your bloodstream is completely alcohol free. They'll be checking!

Europe

There are great places to go biking from the Picos de Europa in northern Spain to the Eifel in Germany. Basically anywhere there are mountains and on Michelin maps a green highlight to the road (means "scenic route" to car drivers but often signals great biking roads)

There are biker friendly hotels, moto parking and you can dispense with the gormless nod to other bikers because "over there" you can use your leg or your left hand

Peage/tolls

Pillions can make toll roads easier if they pay.

You can avoid that horrible couple of minutes where you have to take your gloves off, find the ticket, get out the coins for the toll fee which is normally a really odd amount like 2.78Euros, take the change, put it into a pocket, do up the zip, get your gloves on; all the time the cars you've just passed are staking up behind you; then into gear and.....arrgghhh...this is another location for vehicles to leave a nasty oil slick.

You fishtail away desperate trying to look cool as if you meant to spin up your back wheel.

With a pillion you simply drive up, pause while they sort it out, then go.

Tip for pillion: watch out ahead for pay stations, get ready. If you have many stops to deal with then fix your gloves to your jacket so they can't fall off.

Tip: wait until your pillion says "go" before racing that Porche into the next section of the autobahn

Travel tips:

Petrol in France particularly on Sundays can be impossible. The automatic supermarket petrol stations take French cards but often refuse Anglo Saxon cards.

Some towns have public lockers for gear (eg Cochem)

Speeding: more cameras and they are grey not yellow, more radar traps and if stopped heavier on the spot fines and/or confiscation of your bike. Know the speed limits wherever you go.

Tyres can wear out on the trip: start with new tyres or be prepared to get replacements en route.

Take:

- Puncture repair kit
- Chain lube
- Bulbs (compulsory in some countries)
- Hi-viz (compulsory in some countries)
- Oil (Especially if you're on a boxer twin)

Pillion tip: don't get impatient as your rider spends ages finding where best to park – it has to be level-ish, secure, in sight and close.

Communications

Whatever your choice of comms where ear plugs. Rider and pillion should always wear ear plugs otherwise your long term hearing will be compromised and, short term, it's more tiring particularly on long high speed trips.

Without any system you can grab short conversations when you're going slowly or stopped at lights. Flip up helmets are an advantage.

Be careful because a rider can mis-hear quite important instructions...the following conversation was held at 65mph

Pillion "Hey"

Rider "What?"

Pillion "Don't go any faster!"

Rider (who heard "Go faster") OK

..later.....

Pillion "You're crazy!"

Rider (Perplexed) "What's up?"

Pillion "I'm going home by bus"

Rider "What?"

Pillion "I'm terrified"

Rider "What?"

Pillion "I said don't go faster and you did the opposite"

"Rider "What?"

There's an alternative; an intercom. Hard wired or Bluetooth.