

Courtesy of <http://www.openroadjourney.com/about/motorcycleroads.asp>

## Riding Motorcycles on Gravel: Find the Real Road Less Traveled.

I pulled over to the side of the road and dropped my kick stand. The weight of the motorcycle settled easily onto the asphalt. I leaned forward to rest my weight on the fuel tank, peering at the side road that meandered off to my right and up a mountain.

I usually don't spend much time stopping to think about which way I should go when I'm riding motorcycles, but this time was different. I really, really wanted to go up that side road. I had spotted it on a map a few days before - barely noticeable, switchback after switchback, the entire way up a mountain. It looked like it was one of those roads that you'd talk about with your buddies for a few weeks afterwards.

The reason for my moment of consideration was that this thin little beauty of a road was gravel, and I was riding my eight hundred pound Harley Davidson.

If you tend to shy away from gravel roads when riding, you are missing a whole new world of possibilities. Some of the most incredible places that I've found have been off some old gravel road that rarely sees a car, much less a motorcycle.

It's worth learning to be comfortable navigating a motorcycle on a gravel road.



I have a history with gravel roads and motorcycles. I grew up riding dirt bikes on gravel roads in Missouri. When I finally got my first road bike, there were two miles of gravel road between the house and the first paved road. I guess you could say my experience riding street bikes on gravel was a baptism by fire.

I've grown to become comfortable on gravel, whether it's on a dirt bike, sport bike, or an eight hundred pound Harley Davidson Road King.

What follows are a few pointers that I've picked up over the years riding gravel roads and a variety of bikes (including my current Harley Davidson Road King).

Note: If you're looking for tips on how to flat-foot through a gravel corner going 40 miles per hour, this article will be disappointing. I'm not going to cover some of the techniques used by the more "gravel and dirt oriented" dirt bike and dual-sport bike crowd. :)

Like most things, to be successful you need to keep things simple. Gravel roads are no exception.

There are only three rules I keep in mind when riding gravel:

- Read the Road.
- Easy on everything.
- The motorcycle knows best

Let's look at each rule in detail.

### **Read the Road**

This is probably the single most important thing you can do to raise your confidence on gravel. Simply put, you're looking for parts of the road where the gravel has been pushed clear and you can ride on the hard-packed dirt underneath.

Most often these will be in the shallow of the road. What's a shallow? Good question. Over time, paths get made in the road where a car's tires push the gravel out to the sides of the road. These are shallows.

I've included a picture below to help.



Shallows are a gravel road's sweet spot. You want to ride in these as much as possible. If you take the chance to stop and look at a shallow, it usually contains very little gravel and just consists of a hard pack dirt surface - like asphalt. Stick in the shallows whenever you can.

As your ability to read the road and spot shallows increases, your confidence on gravel roads will grow ten-fold.

### **Easy on Everything**

Why do gravel roads make bikers nervous? For the same reason bikers get nervous when they get caught in the rain.

Less traction.

With less traction you want to go easy on everything including turning, braking, accelerating, and your overall speed. Sudden movements require more traction to execute. If you try a sudden movement on a surface with less traction, like wet asphalt or gravel, the bike is probably going to lose traction and not do what you want.

Don't jerk the handlebars to make a sudden turn. Don't "panic jam" the brakes to slow down. Don't roll your throttle back like your blasting off the line (unless you're trying to throw gravel out from behind you and hit your buddy in the head).

Moderate your speed and go easy on everything.

### **The motorcycle knows best.**

If "Reading the Road" is the single best thing you can do to raise your confidence on gravel, than "Realizing that your motorcycle knows best" is the single best way to increase your enjoyment of riding a gravel road.

Your motorcycle is going to wiggle on a gravel road. It's going to feel like its sliding all over the place. Your front tire is going to jerk about. Let it. Your bike knows best.

Awareness that your motorcycle is going to do this will help you form the appropriate behavior. The natural tendency for most riders is to try and control every movement on gravel - don't.

Just relax, keep a firm grip on the handlebars, and a light touch when controlling the motorcycle. Don't try to control every movement of the bike, allow the bike to move under you. The law of science that a body in motion tends to stay in motion definitely applies in this instance.

Keep your head up and your focus on where you are trying to go. The bike will wiggle its way to where you want.

This rule probably takes the most getting used to, especially for those of you with heavier bikes.

Be confident in yourself and your motorcycle and you'll be fine.



### **Summary**

However you may view gravel roads - whether as a white-knuckle experience from hell or an opportunity to find some cool new unexplored place - learning to ride gravel opens up a whole new world of possibilities for you and your bike.

As for that meandering gravel side road up the mountain that I was considering trying on my eight hundred pound Harley cruiser? I ended up on a grassy knoll at the top of a mountain overlooking what seemed to be about one hundred miles of beautiful earth. Needless to say, I was smiling ear to ear.

Enjoy and keep ridin'.