

GRAVEL ROADS & LOOSE SURFACES

Words: Karel Pavich | Photos: Paul

Many people fear riding in gravel. Even when you don't want to, sometimes you have to ride on gravel to get to where you need to go. Road works can mean loose surfaces or gravel to negotiate. But you **CAN** do it safely, as long as you're aware of the risks and how to avoid or minimise them.



THE HAZARDS

The biggest problem with riding in gravel or on loose surfaces is impaired traction. Loose stones can create a soft surface that can bog you down or cause your tyres to slip and lose their grip, de-stabilising the bike. Slowing down can cause the tyres to wobble more, or get more bogged into soft gravel, taking away all your control. Going too fast can also cause you to lose control of the bike when a loose stone causes the front wheel to wobble and change direction. Braking hard or quickly can destabilise you, causing you to fall off, and following another vehicle can mean a lot of dust in your face, reducing your

visibility significantly. And then there's the fact that gravel roads often have serious potholes that can damage your front wheel or tyres. Punctures are common when riding on gravel and other road users may guide or force you to the edges of a road where the gravel is thicker. As the bike goes where you look, it can be hard to avoid riding into a patch of gravel you're anxious about.

WHAT TO DO

Relax and keep looking where you want to go. Don't panic. Read the road ahead. Keep moving, and maintain a speed that allows you to keep control of the bike.

Avoid swerving, or quick or hard braking. Slow and steady is the key, but not so slow that your wheels get bogged. Maintaining some speed is recommended as safer and more stable to be able to move without losing control. Ease out your clutch and go easy on your throttle as you set off. Match your gear to your RPM. Keep a good distance behind other vehicles for visibility and safety and relax your grip on the handlebars and guide the bike loosely through the road so it can move around underneath you. This will allow a jumpy front wheel to correct itself with the momentum of the bike going forward.



Find the part of the road where the gravel is less thick, being careful of on-coming traffic that may be trying to do the same thing. Keep to the left and stay in the tracks of cars wherever possible, as the ground will be harder and the gravel more compacted.

If you have to stop and pull over to the side of a gravel road, apply the brakes gently, and allow the bike to come to a controlled stop. It's surprising how much front brake you can use on a loose surface as long as you follow two key points: Use front brake while bike is upright and in a straight line, this reduces the chance of the front "tucking" on the loose surface. Apply brakes in a 2-stage progressive pattern, gently apply brakes for stage 1 and then begin braking for stage 2. The amount of braking pressure you should apply will depend on the bike and the surface, and whether you have ABS or not.

For smooth cornering on gravel roads, set your speed before you turn in, make sure you are in the right gear and get onto some throttle as soon as you can, so you can "power" through the gravel, rather than the bike floating on top of it. Keep your body upright, and don't be afraid to let the bike move. If you're riding on gravel a lot, make sure your tyres are up to the job, and keep an eye on the tyre pressures. As a general rule, the softer the surface, the lower the tyre pressures should be for increased grip.

There is a lot to consider when riding on gravel, but it can be a lot of fun and can take you away from many of the hazards associated with other road users on our often busy, sealed roads. There's some fantastic back country to explore, so get your skills up and get onto the gravel!

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