

PILLIONS BE SMART

Words: Karel Pavich



Sharing your passion for riding a motorcycle is always a great experience, but there are a few things to keep in mind before chucking someone on the back of your bike...

Pillion passengers represent a very low percentage of motorcycle casualties, but their injuries are likely to be severe because they often tend to just go flying off the back of the bike involved in a collision or a fall. Many are only occasional pillions who often don't have the right protective gear, i.e. boots, clothing, helmets that fit properly, etc.

Then of course there are also some licensing restrictions on a rider's eligibility to carry a pillion, with a full Class 6 licence required to legally do so.

In short, riders have real responsibilities

for the safety of their pillion passengers out on the road.

THE HAZARDS

Pillions are vulnerable because they only have the rider or a back seat-bar to hold onto for stability, on bends, swerves or during other sudden actions that can compromise the stability of the bike. Inexperienced pillions may also cause problems for the rider if they shift their weight unexpectedly. This can also happen if they don't know how to lean appropriately.

The extra weight of the pillion passenger changes the handling capability of the bike.

This can cause problems if the bike is not appropriately set up to carry the weight of an extra person safely. Extra weight can cause a bike to tip, and steering, braking capability and ground clearance when cornering are all altered with the extra weight on board.

Some motorcycles are designed for one rider and are not ideally set up to carry a pillion. This can result in the pillion "crowding" the rider and reducing that rider's ability to ride comfortably, and that can cause problems during heavy braking and slow-speed manoeuvring. For example, on a short wheelbase machine, the weight shift to the rear can result in some steering instability.



PHOTO: PETE VAN DE WETERING

WHAT TO DO

As a rider carrying a pillion, review your own riding skills, responsibilities and attitude about safety. Your pillion trusts you with their life – don't let them down through lack of experience, confidence or due care for their well-being.

- Make sure your pillion has adequate protective clothing and footwear, and that their helmet fits properly and has an adequate visor.
- Be aware of the changed handling characteristics of your motorcycle when carrying a pillion. You'll have a lower ground clearance when cornering, altered braking feel and performance, and different suspension and steering movements. You also need to think about smooth, fluid gear changing, braking and cornering which will help keep your pillion comfortable and safe.
- Adjust the suspension and tyre pressures to compensate for the extra weight and increase stability. Remember to realign the headlight if necessary.
- Ensure you are on the bike and it is upright and completely stable before the pillion gets onto it, and that the footpegs are sturdy and safe. Let your pillion know to keep their boots clear of hot pipes.
- Tell them what to expect – especially if they are new to pillion riding. Take a slow practice session with them so they understand what is expected of them also.
- Check at regular intervals to ensure your pillion feels comfortable and safe. Be prepared to end the ride if they feel unhappy or vulnerable – being on the back of a motorcycle is not for everyone!
- If you're a pillion, align your body with that of the rider. If there is a "sissy" bar or grip at the back of your seat, align the centre of it with the centre of your spine, and move in alignment with the bike
- Grip the grabrail, or hold the rider at the waist and grip with your knees when the rider is braking. Decide which shoulder to look over and don't change position, or fidget or move about when the rider is cornering or braking.
- When the bike is coming to a stop, stay still to assist the rider in maintaining the balance of the bike. Keep your feet on the footpegs at all times.

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