

GRAVEL ROAD RIDING

ROCKY ROADS

Words: Pro Rider

Want to explore some of the backroads around New Zealand this summer? There are some wonderful places to go if you don't mind getting off the tarmac.

Riding in gravel is a big challenge for many people. Sometimes though, in order to reach a destination, riding on gravel surfaces cannot be avoided.

Road works, farm tracks and 'B' or 'C' roads (especially going to rallies in out of the way places) can offer nothing better than loose surfaces to negotiate in order to get to where you want to go.

But, however daunting, gravel CAN be safely negotiated, once you're aware of the correct techniques and how to avoid or minimise the risks.

Many riders regard slowing down as the obvious remedy to dealing with loose surfaces, but this can actually compromise your control completely, because the lack of forward momentum can mean that the tyres will wobble

more and you can get more bogged down in soft or thick gravel.

Conversely, too much speed can also cause a loss of control. All it takes is one loose stone to alter the direction of the front wheel. At speed, the bike can very quickly go out of control.

A jumpy front wheel will correct itself with the momentum of the bike going forward if



you can relax your grip on the handle bars and guide the bike loosely through the road.

Compromised tyre traction is the biggest problem with riding in gravel or loose surfaces. Loose stones create a softer surface than tarmac and this can cause your wheels to sink or wobble.

Tyres which don't grip properly render a bike instantly unstable, so be prepared for some movement in the bike. Relaxing on the bars and treating the throttle as your friend is the best way to deal with this.

Counter weighting to the outside of the bike will help increase the contact patch of the tyres and give you more grip on a loose surface, and this is the biggest change from riding on the tarmac.

Keep in mind that the bike tends to go in the direction you look, and so, if you're fixated on a patch of gravel, a puddle or a pothole, riding straight into it can be hard to avoid. Always look where you want to go.

Read the road ahead and plan your pathway, look for the smoothest surface and always keep left on public roads so you don't have to make an unexpected traverse across the center "hump" to avoid oncoming vehicles. Riding in the left wheel track is by far the safest place



to be on gravel roads, as there tends to be only 3 wheel tracks, and we don't really want to "share" the middle one with oncoming vehicles in the middle of a corner!

Be as smooth as possible on the throttle, brakes and gears. Use a higher gear where possible to avoid rear wheel spin and always be ready to pull the clutch in to stop the bike stalling. It's a good idea to "cover" the clutch lever in the corners, so you can slip it to get a better drive out. First gear is often too tenuous on a loose surface.

The same as on the tarmac, the front brake is still the most effective brake, even in the gravel, but you have to be a bit more judicious about how you use it. A smooth, 2-stage progressive braking technique will give you the most stopping power in the gravel, and it's surprising how hard you can actually brake when using the correct technique. ABS will always help to prevent skidding, but you still need to know where the limit of your braking is on the gravel.

As a rule, the front brake should only be used while the bike is upright and in a straight line. If the front brake locks or the ABS kicks in, release gently and apply again more gently and the same with rear brake. Set your speed and gears before the corner so you can "drive" through that loose surface and maintain good control of the front wheel. The rear might spin or step out, but having control of the front will always keep you heading in the right direction.

If you encounter some thick, freshly laid gravel, try to keep your weight back to allow the front wheel to "skim" over the surface. Momentum is your best friend here too. Relax with a soft grip, soft shoulders and try to let the bike "float" over the gravel.

Off-camber terrain can also be very tricky, always weight the outside (downhill peg) when

riding in off-camber terrain to try and get the tyres to provide more contact area and therefore, more grip. Shift your body weight to outside also.

Stand up if you are on a dual-purpose bike. This affords you much better visibility and helps soften the bumps as your knees become shock absorbers over some of the harsher terrain.

Get your head up over the bars (scanning ahead), gripping the bike with your ankles and knees, a slight bend at your hips, gentle grip on the bars. It's a good idea to get used to clutch-less gearshifts on the bike and know where the rear brake pedal is for those times when you need it.

Shift weight back on downhill's, grip the tank with your knees, push your feet into the pegs and shift your bum as far back as possible to level the bike. The steeper the hill, the further back you need to shift your weight. Get your speed adjustment done in a straight line before the corner and apply some gentle throttle through those downhill corners for better control.

Shift weight forward on uphill's. If the bike is "pulling" you up the hill, you need to shift weight forward more. Hook your feet in front of the pegs and point your toes down to give you some extra leverage to help stay forward on the bike. Momentum is your BEST FRIEND! Especially on uphill sections.

Your bike is more capable off-road than you think. If you think you can, you probably will; if you think you can't - you won't! Get out and practice! The more you do, the more fun it gets.

You will probably fall off at some point (everybody does!) so good protective gear is really important.

