

# Motorcycling with a Passenger: Double the Pleasure, Double the Fun

Some simple preparations and communications can make the difference between a pleasant motorcycle passengering experience and a disaster. **By Jamie Elvidge**.  
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**Dear Rider,**

If you're lucky enough to have someone you care for on the back of your motorcycle, you should consider it a gift in trust. Even if you are an experienced rider, there is much to know about carrying a passenger. I'm not speaking solely of how riding double affects the behavior of your machine, I'm also talking about simple comfort and convenience factors that will make any ride more pleasant for both of you.

- Adjust your bike's rear suspension for the extra load (see your owner's manual).
- Always make sure your passenger has proper riding gear, even if it isn't a perfect fit. Have him/her arrive bikeside in their own over-the-ankle boots, jeans and layers on top. If he/she doesn't have the following, provide them: a decent-fitting helmet, leather gloves that fasten around the wrist and a protective jacket (leather or heavy Cordura).
- Educate him/her about the bike -- what's hot, where to hold, where to put their feet and also how they will mount. You obviously want to make sure he/she waits until you're braced. When you're ready, do you want him/her to use the footpeg as a step, or swing a leg from the ground? Can he/she use your shoulders for balance?
- Before you even get on the bike, tell your passenger how to hold on. Both arms around the waist? Or do you have a real grab rail where they can place one hand? Unless you have a backrest, he/she must hold your waist with at least one hand. Warn them not to use the strap across the seat, which is a worthless style element.
- If you're dealing with a new rider, advise him/her ahead of time not to put their feet down at stops or grab your arms or shoulders while you're riding. Explain that when you corner they need to relax and not lean against the turn, which is the usual impulse.
- Devise a system of communication before you ride away. Maybe it's one tap on the right shoulder to say, "When you get a chance I'd like to stop." Two taps for, "It's urgent." Maybe a tap on the left shoulder could mean, "Please slow down." It's easy and fun to come up with your own language.
- Anticipate that your bike will handle differently. It may steer less readily on initial lean, but once in a turn, the addition of weight up high may cause a more abrupt dip. You will also lose some braking efficiency, so start stopping sooner.
- While it's easy to adapt to these changes in your bike's handling, it is more challenging to actually improve your skill to enhance the two-up experience. Approach every maneuver -- accelerating, shifting, cornering, braking -- with an eggshell-smoothness, and you'll help your passenger keep their seat. (Remember that if he/she bumps your helmet with his/hers on shifting or braking, it's entirely your fault. When you're riding well, they'll be able to stay neutral.)
- Know that your bike will drag more readily with the added weight. Remind your passenger (and yourself) not to panic when it happens.
- Plan to stop every so often just to check their comfort and emotional state.
- As an occasional passenger, I can tell you that the one most affirming and endearing gesture a rider can give his co-pilot midride is an adoring pat on the thigh. For the best results, repeat this act of appreciation once each hour, or every 50 miles, whichever comes first.

## Dear Passenger,

First things first. Do you really trust this guy? That's the number-one thing we want passengers to mull over before they accept a ride on the back of a motorcycle. It doesn't matter if he's your father, a first date or your husband of 20 years; you must not take this question lightly. You're gambling your very life on faith in his skill. If you doubt it, say no. If you're not sure, ask questions: How long have you been riding? How long riding this particular bike? Have you ridden with a passenger before?

Riding as a passenger can be a very fun, relaxing experience, not to mention a fulfilling, intimate way to connect with the person you care about. So once you're comfortable with his abilities, here's what you need to know to develop your own.

- Aside from trust, proper gear is the second most important component of a safe, comfortable ride. A full-face helmet is essential to avoid head and facial injuries, but it's useless in a crash if it does not pass the following test: Fasten the chin strap snugly, then grab the rear of the helmet and pull it up and forward simultaneously, trying to pull it off over your chin. If it comes off, it fails.
- Arrive bikeside with over-the-ankle boots, but not the type that slide off easily (for obvious reasons). If you are wearing laces (zippers or hook-and-loop fasteners are better), carefully double-knot and tuck the bow under your pant cuff to lessen the chances of the laces coming loose and getting wrapped on the peg or, disastrously, in the rear wheel. Gloves should be leather, your size, and fasten snugly around the wrists. You are not wearing these for comfort, you know, so forget the cute mittens.
- Denim is popular, but just so you know, it sucks at protecting you. We are all guilty for wearing it for its comfort, versatility and affordability, but you can do better. Leather is always the first choice, followed by heavy-weave Cordura nylon. Strategically placed armor inserts, of course, are like IQ scores. Einstein would have worn plenty.
- It's good to wear layers under your protective jacket. [Motorcycling](#) is a debate with the elements, and there is no way to predict turns in temperature.
- Make sure you and your partner are clear about what you expect from any ride, whether a short initiation, weekend getaway or cross-country adventure. How long will you be on the bike? How often will you stop? What type of roads will you be traveling on? City streets? Winding back roads? A high-speed freeway?
- Make sure your pilot has instructed you on how and when to mount the bike, where to place your feet, how to hold on, and also how to communicate while you're moving, since you won't be able to talk.
- When you're on a new bike, check to make sure your heels will not contact the exhaust pipes. Most rubber will melt readily, which ruins the boots for walking and mucks up the chrome, too.
- Once you're on the road, relax. It's hugely important for a passenger to be physically in tune with the movements of both the pilot and bike. We call this being "neutral." Especially in turns, when your impulse is to sit up, away from the lean, keep your body fluid and in line with the bike. It cannot just fall over, but if you make abrupt moves on the back during cornering, you will unsettle the machine, which can cause dangerous handling issues.
- Balancing your upper body will make the ride more pleasant for you and the rider. This goes hand-in-hand with predicting how the bike's movements will affect you. Shift and hold your weight over the hips when the bike accelerates, for example, and lean oh-so-slightly backward on braking. You'll learn to predict when the rider shifts as well, and you'll be able to absorb the movement in your torso. By the way, the smoother (read: better) he is, the easier this will be for you.
- Never put your feet down at stops. If your pilot asks you to, he shouldn't be riding [motorcycles](#).
- Don't panic if the extreme lower parts of the bike scrape on the ground during hard cornering. It will make a loud noise, which can be alarming even to veteran passengers. While this isn't a good design characteristic, it's a quite common occurrence on cruisers. If you become alarmed and jump or shift your weight, that might cause a real problem, however.
- Never be uncomfortable telling your pilot how you are really feeling. If you are uncomfortable, he should be understanding and make adjustments, whether it's a shortened ride, a change of seats or the addition of a backrest. It's all about finding solutions. Don't just suck up your discomfort, because the memory will affect your decision to ride again. Keep an open mind. Fine-tuning is infinite.

The whole idea behind these tips is to increase your chances of a next time. And a time after that. We too often hear stories about passengers who tried it once and said, "Never again." The number-one cause is poor communication up front. (Number two is a dumb-ass rider trying to impress his passenger with speed and antics, but we know that's not you.) Nail down your expectations before you ride, and you'll both prosper.

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