

Riding in the Rain



By Richard Bennett

I don't remember when I first got caught in the rain on a motorcycle, but I can tell you I was



nervous about the experience.

Most motorcycle riders who encounter rain and wet pavement for the first time know the feeling of just wanting to survive and get to their destination safely.

Riding a motorcycle in the rain is one of the skills that is not taught in the basic Motorcycle Safety Foundation course. In fact, it wasn't taught in the Police Motorcycle Officer training or the Advanced MSF training either. It is one of those things that become a learn-as-you-go experience.

As the Southwest Conference Safety Officer, I was recently asked by a member of my Blue Knights Chapter to write something on this topic. I hope to give you information that will not only let you survive riding in the rain, but give you confidence to get you through any type of rain storm. If you have been riding long enough to feel comfortable on your motorcycle, you are ready to ride in the rain.

Once you master the techniques of riding in the rain, you will be able to travel most anywhere with confidence. Here are some subjects to help you get there.

Dress for rain



Always have rain gear with you, especially during the rainy months.

On a group ride through the Salton Sea area, unexpected rain showers caught us in the open. Of the four riders in the group, I was the only one with rain gear. We stopped briefly at a gas station where I donned my riding suit, and then the group elected to ride on. Needless to say

the other riders were wet, cold and uncomfortable riding in the rain. It was a lesson that was learned the hard way, but no one ever left home without rain gear again.

Experienced riders learn to read the weather pretty accurately. Dark clouds ahead usually mean you should be wearing your rain gear. After it starts raining, and your clothes are wet, stopping to put on rain gear is an exercise in futility. Be prepared, and suit up early.

Once you have rain protection, you will be much more comfortable. A comfortable rider will be able to concentrate on the task at hand rather than ruminate about how cold and wet the day is. That is especially true for your lady passenger; she will endure the adventure better if she, too, is dressed for the wet weather. You will appreciate the difference at the end of the ride.

Here is a short list of what you need for you and your passenger:

- High quality rain suit. You get what you pay for, and when you need it, you will be glad you invested the money.
- Waterproof boots that are tall enough that water doesn't seep in from above.



- Waterproof gloves, or at the least, covers that slip over your gloves.

At the risk of offending the minimal helmet crowd, I also recommend a full face helmet, or a helmet with a full face shield. Rain drops that hit your face at highway speed feel like bullet strikes. Get a full face helmet and protect yourself from stings. Besides, your friends will never know it is you inside there.

After you have proper rain gear, it becomes a matter of using common sense and being aware of the hazards around you.

15 Minutes of Danger

The first rain of the season is hazardous, and the first 15 minutes the *most* hazardous.

There are places in the U.S. that get a lot of rain much of the year. Those locations don't need much time to stabilize the wet road surface. But, if you are in a location that enjoys dry seasons, that is when cars, and trucks deposit a lot of crud on the same roadway you will ride upon. You need to allow some time for the crud to wash away.

No worries, Mate. At the first sign of rain drops, you will probably want to stop and don the rain gear you paid top bucks for. Use the first 15 minutes to find a safe place to stop, preferably a service station, or something with an overhang. Walk inside, grab a cup of something and take

your time drinking it. Then pull out your rain gear, and impress the by-standers with how nice and dry you look.

By now the mud, oil and transmission fluid should be draining down the culverts on the way to pollute lakes, streams and the ocean. Your road will be washed clean and ready for you to continue on your way. It has been estimated by veteran riders that clean wet pavement has 80% of the traction of dry pavement. I can vouch for that; I rode the Alps in rain and never had an incident with slippery curves. With some normal attention to the road surface, you should be good to go.

Surface Hazards

While clean, wet roads give you good traction, there are still slippery spots to avoid.

- Painted lines. Crosswalks, words painted in the lane, directional arrows, etc.
- Surface textures. Transitioning from roadway to private drives; watch for slick concrete.
- Steel. Manhole covers, plates covering construction and rail road tracks.
- Oil slicks. Watch for rainbow colored water.



- Water puddles. Pot holes fill with water, and can be deeper than expected.

Now that you are alert to these additional hazards, you can navigate them with a little common sense.

Smoothness

The best motorcycle riders in the world have perfected smoothness.

Practice smooth riding techniques before you get caught in the rain. Smooth transition between motorcycle controls lessens the risk of unexpected motorcycle dynamics.

When you ride, work on your use of controls. A smooth start and “seamless” run through the gears should be your first drill. When I have a passenger, I try to go through the gears with only the engine sound betraying the shifting. The closer you get to a turbine feel, the smoother your gear usage. The same should be done for down-shifting. Practice, practice, practice!

Next is the transition from power to brakes and back to power. Ever wonder how the “Pros” get



through those turns so quickly and effortlessly? It is smoothness. Your motorcycle has many dynamics, which change when you accelerate, brake, lean and stop. You may not feel it, but the chassis is shifting and the tire contact patches are transitioning. You want these transitions to be as smooth as possible, especially in the rain.

Pick Your Spot

OK, we are now dressed in proper rain gear, we know surface hazards and we ride smoothly. Now some words about lane positioning.

Motorcycle riders have the advantage of being able to use the entire 12 foot width of the lane, six inches at a time. That is about how much your tire footprint is on the pavement.

In the Motorcycle Officer training, we learned to position ourselves in the left wheel track of the vehicle ahead. This gives the car driver a clear view of you in two mirrors, and you have the rest of the lane for cushion. This works especially well in rainy weather.

During heavy rain, the tires on the vehicle ahead of you will cut through the surface water and leave a brief “path” for your motorcycle tires. This small change will create additional traction, and therefore more control for you. Don’t get too close, because in an emergency, you may have to stop before imprinting the cars’ trunk lid.

When there is no traffic ahead of you, remember the slickest part of the lane is usually the center. On highways where thousands of vehicles an hour travel in your lane, there is bound to be some residual oil or transmission fluid still percolating from the pavement. Ride in one wheel track or the other; there will be water, but it will be cleaner and more cohesive than in the center.

Speaking of traction, you did replace those worn tires, didn’t you? I know that pound for pound motorcycle tires are far more expensive than those you have on your minivan. Keep in mind that those two six-inch contact patches are your connection with mother earth. If the tread is worn, the rain-wicking properties of your tires are diminished. When the water is not efficiently displaced, the traction is reduced. While hydroplaning on a motorcycle is uncommon, worn tires will get you into the unwanted minority. Don’t take chances; spend the money and keep your tires in top condition.

Visibility

“See and be seen” is a motto that veteran riders follow.

Riding in the rain increases the importance of visibility, both for you and those around you. Your visibility will be diminished in the rain.

The most challenging time I ever had with visibility in the rain happened in southern Louisiana. My wife and I were returning to our hotel from a day ride when darkness fell. Soon after, a hard rain began. Rain covered my windshield and my helmet face shield. My breath fogged my face shield, and on-coming headlights made everything white and blurry. It was a nervous time.

Since that time, I have learned some tricks that help in extreme circumstances. Having gloves with a squeegee or a chamois insert will help wipe away the surface water from the face shield. Anti-fogging compounds are on the market, and I use Rain X on both sides of the face shield. This helps keep the water flowing off instead of sticking in front of my eyes. The same stuff can be used on your windshield too. Buy some, and keep it handy. You can thank me later.

Now for the more obvious “visibility” topic: be seen by other drivers.

I know I am a little “paranoid” about being “invisible” on my motorcycle. During my Motorcycle Officer days, it was never a concern; people looked for me and avoided me when they could. Now I ride a gray motorcycle with a gray riding suit. Here are some tips to be more visible at any time, and especially in the rain.

- Add running lights to your motorcycle both front and rear. If you can afford it, high intensity or LED headlights really get attention.
- Add reflective tape to the back and sides of your motorcycle. I even put some on the underside of my saddle bags in the event it ends up on its side in the dark.
- Wear a bright, reflective vest.

Now, even with a gray motorcycle, I am very visible to other traffic. You can be too.

If you have never ridden in the rain, I hope this will give you the confidence to try it. Once you experience riding in the rain, you will be a better rider on sunny days, too. And you can swap stories with other riders as you don your rain gear and sip coffee under the service station overhang.