

**Flies In Your Teeth
Motorcycling Guides**

number

2

**TIPS FOR RIDING
MOTORCYCLES IN
THE US**

GARY FRANCE

Introduction

Having ridden a 21,475 mile motorcycle road trip around America in four-and-a-half months, I saw and learned a lot about riding in the USA. There are significant aspects about motorcycling in America that are different from where I live, in the United Kingdom, and so I thought would be useful to pass this information onto other non-American bikers thinking of making a US road trip on a motorcycle.

I was originally going to include these tips as a chapter in my book 'France In America' but decided to make it more widely available, and free, to anyone who wanted to read it.

Please don't read this guide as if you will encounter all of the potential problems it discusses. Most of the problems written about in here are rare, but it is well that you know about them before setting off.

I would like to thank Derek Polhill and Chris Luhman, who both helped in the writing of this guide.

Further motorcycling guides can be found on my website, along with details about my book.

Gary France
www.GarySFrance.com

Riding in the United States is not too different from riding in most other places in the world. Nonetheless, there are some things that you should be aware of, if you are not from the US and are planning a riding trip there. This guide is intended to help such bikers by providing them with information and tips on riding in the US. (Much of what is written here could apply equally to driving a car in the US.)

Easy does it

Riding for the first few times in any new country can be very confusing. The signs are different and so are the driving practices and laws. I have ridden and driven in the US on my many visits over the years, yet I still get confused sometimes about how to treat particular junctions and road signs. The best recommendation I can make to anyone riding in the US, or any other country for the very first time, is to ride slowly initially, until you get used to the new conditions.

Most visitors to the US will rent a motorbike (or car). Invariably, these rental centres are right in the middle of a city, which is the worst possible place to be having to come to terms with different road conditions. If you know in advance that your ride is likely to be commencing in a city centre, it is advisable to spend as much time as possible familiarising yourself with the route you will be taking away from the rental centre – for there is nothing worse than trying to cope with a whole new environment and being lost at the same time. For most people it will take a few days to become acclimatised to these new conditions, so try to relax and just take it easy at first.

Also, if you come from the UK or other commonwealth countries, as I do, you will need to remember to ride on the right!

Interstates



“Life doesn’t happen along the interstates. It’s against the law.” – Travel writer William Least Heat Moon

Interstates, sometimes called Freeways, are the biggest and fastest roads that cross the US and pass between different states. These are limited-access, centrally divided main roads with grade-separated junctions and without traffic lights or stop signs.

Each Interstate is designated a countrywide number: even numbers for east-west Interstates and odd numbers for north-south. These Interstate numbers are normally shown within a shield design against a blue background. Speed limits on Interstates vary between states, but are high – typically between 55 and 75mph / 88 and 120kph.

Surface issues

The Interstate road surfaces vary in quality. While generally good, they can sometimes be quite poor and catch out unwary motorcyclists. This is particularly likely at sections of road works, where it is not uncommon for the top surface to be removed for long stretches, forcing motorists to drive on the exposed rough surface. There are also huge potential dangers for motorcyclists where stepped edges are left between adjacent lanes when the surface has been removed from one of them. Moreover, on Interstates made of concrete, it is not unusual to see large cracks waiting to catch out the unwary biker.

Pick a lane, buddy!

Lane discipline on Interstates is awful. Even though drivers are meant to overtake on the left, there is little regard for this law, and drivers are just as likely to pass on the right. In addition, drivers often change lanes unexpectedly, and all too often without signalling either. Tailgating, where vehicles drive too close to each other, is also commonplace on Interstates. In addition, there is a high risk of getting side-swiped by a truck (and trucks in the US are bigger, heavier and travel faster than those in Europe). All things considered, Interstates are not good places for motorbikes to be.

The fast and the tedious

While Interstates might be useful for covering long distances in a short time, most are depressingly dreary to ride on. For that reason, along with the aforementioned dangers for motorcycle riders, I avoid using them whenever I can. I would recommend taking alternative roads, if at all possible.

Get your kicks, on Route ...



The next main category of road in America is the United States Numbered Highways system, each of which is often called US Highway or US Route and its number. These can vary in size, but generally comprise either one or two lanes in each direction. Some are close to Interstates in design and traffic flows freely; others run through the centre of towns and cities and become heavily congested. As with Interstates, there is a countrywide system for numbering US Highways: even-numbered roads run east-west and odd numbers run north-south. Signs are a black and white shield. In general, they can be used to cover large distances relatively quickly. I used them a lot.

State of the nation

While Interstates and US Highways are part of a nationwide system, each state also has its own State Roads, sometimes called State Route and the number, along with smaller County Roads. While considerably slower, both are more interesting to ride than Interstates or US Highways, as they allow you to see much more of the country and, consequently, discover more about the real America.

With the exception of some Interstates, I generally found most of the road surfaces to be very good, whatever type of road I was travelling on. This was due largely to the fact that US utility services are rarely buried under roads, thus eliminating the need for them to be regularly dug up, as is common in some European countries.

The rough and the slippery

But, where roadworks were carried out, they could pose real problems for bikes. Recently laid loose gravel is not an uncommon occurrence, especially where roads had recently been resurfaced.

The only other issue I really had with US roads was occasional loose sand or soil on the surfaces, which is another obvious danger for bikes. Sand can get blown onto the road by wind, and soil is sometimes washed onto the road due to rain or flood water. Trucks and tractors are sometimes culprits too, particularly in remote areas, where they drag loose soil or gravel onto the road when cutting the corners.

Cracked, grated and gravelled

In some states, cracks in the roads are repaired by simply pouring tar into them, but the tar frequently flows out onto the road surface itself. You will often come across these on your travels – they are commonly known as ‘tar-snakes’ – and it is advisable to treat them with caution, particularly when riding round bends. They can be very slippery, both when it is raining or the road is wet, and in hot weather as the surface begins to melt.

Watch out too for road surfaces on bridges that are metal-grated. These provide very little traction for a motorcycle, especially when wet. I always approached any bridge very slowly, just in case the surface turned out to be a metal grate.

Lay-bys at the side of the road (sometimes known as turnouts or pull-outs in the US) are often just composed of dirt or, even worse, gravel. If you are braking hard to slow down from highway speeds onto one of these areas, it can be very dangerous where the surface is loose. I always approached lay-bys assuming that they would be made of loose gravel. The same is often true of hard shoulders (known simply as shoulders in the US) at the sides of roads. Not only are the surfaces frequently loose on these, but there is also often a significant step down to them from the road as well.

Although rare, some rural roads are pure gravel, and these can be a challenge when you first encounter them. I tried my best to avoid them as often as I could, but this wasn't always possible. The best way of dealing with them is to ride slowly – 25 mph / 40 kph was my preferred limit. Most gravel and dirt roads are well compacted, but occasionally I came across a very loose one.

While surfaces can be bad in particular locations, most of the time I found them to be very good.

When red means ‘go’

At most intersections, you are permitted to turn right at a traffic signal when that signal is red. The only time you are not allowed to do this is if there is a sign saying so. Very often, the right lane at a traffic signal or road junction is a right-turn-only lane.

The right of way rules at junctions are different from those in most European countries. Very often, all entries to a junction have a stop sign and no particular entry road has priority. This means that every vehicle entering that junction has to stop. The simple rule to remember here is that the first vehicle to reach its stop line has right of way. If two vehicles arrive at the same time, the one on the right has right of way. For a foreigner, this can be confusing at first so, if in

doubt, always wait to see if somebody else drives forward. This is particularly advisable if you are on a motorbike, as you are normally the more vulnerable. The best advice I can give is to take care and take your time.

Expect the unexpected – ride defensively

America is a very spread-out country with lots of land. This means that, even in towns, there are often no facilities within walking distance. As a consequence, almost everyone has to drive, including the very young and the very old.

The drivers' licensing system in the US is very easy and requires only one test to be passed. Most people start driving at the age of sixteen, and their lack of experience can be a real problem. The behaviour of elderly drivers can also be challenging, as they are often less alert than they used to be and are sometimes unpredictable.

Expect the unexpected, as anyone, may pull out in front of you, proceed when it is not their turn at junctions, change lanes without warning and just generally drive poorly. As such, I constantly tried to think ahead, riding with a "what if" mentality at all times. Without wishing to sound too preachy, I'd suggest doing the same.

A stop sign means stop!

In Europe, it is perfectly acceptable to roll up to a junction and keep moving before crossing that junction. In the US, this is illegal. A stop sign means you must stop before continuing. Only at a 'Yield' sign, which you may occasionally come across, are you allowed to keep moving.

Traffic light induction loops

Obviously, you have to stop at red traffic lights (mostly called stop lights) in the US, like anywhere else. Many US traffic-light systems are triggered by induction loops buried beneath the road surface that detect vehicles approaching the lights, but often a motorcycle does not have enough mass to be detected. This can mean that if you are the only vehicle in a particular lane,

you may not be shown a green light allowing you to proceed. This happened to me a few times, especially in left filter lanes, so I would make sure that the lights' sequence had gone through its full cycle before I proceeded with extreme caution through the red light.

In the city

In common with most cities of the world, traffic congestion in large US cities is generally pretty bad, and finding places to park a motorbike can be difficult. By all means ride in the big cities but do take extra care, as the standard of driving is sometimes way below what you will find outside city centres.

At the time of writing, filtering (or lane splitting as it is often called in the US), when a biker rides between lines of stationary or slow-moving cars, is illegal in all states except California, as is riding down the centre of a road to pass other vehicles. Sitting in long lanes of traffic and not being able to filter when there is evidently plenty of room can be very frustrating, especially in the rain or in very hot temperatures. This can make riding in cities very frustrating, as the full benefit of riding a motorcycle, where passing stationary cars is widely accepted elsewhere, is against the law in most of the US.

Escape and wiggle room – keep a safe distance

Wherever I am riding in the world, when I pull up at any stop light I always leave a 10-15 foot / 3-4 metre gap between me and the vehicle in front, especially in large cities. I never stop directly behind the vehicle in front of me and generally keep to one side, so that I can ride around it if necessary. On a motorbike in some areas of large cities you can feel especially vulnerable. However unlikely it may be, should the worst happen, I want to make sure I could ride away from any danger as quickly as possible. This means not having to back up because you are stuck behind the vehicle in front. You might never need to make a quick getaway, but it is better to be prepared.

Signs of the times

Road signage is slightly unusual in the US when compared to many other places. In Europe, signs often display the names of towns, and direction and distance to those towns. In the US, it is more common to navigate using the road numbers, and distances to towns and cities are rarely provided. When travelling in the US, it is imperative that you know the numbers of the roads you will be using, or you will most probably get lost. Where distances are shown, the longer distances are displayed in miles and the shorter distances mainly in feet.

Round and round it goes

Most Europeans find roundabouts easy to negotiate, as we use them so often. A few roundabouts are now appearing on US roads too, but I would advise Europeans to be very careful when approaching them. They are still an unfamiliar concept for many Americans, so they often do the strangest things when using them. To make matters worse, the signage at roundabouts varies greatly from state to state and this can often cause even more confusion.

Walk the line

Where there is two-way traffic, the centrelines down the middle of the road are normally painted yellow. And, to put it quite simply, crossing double parallel solid yellow lines to overtake another vehicle is illegal. The solid yellow line changes to broken where passing is permitted.

If there are double parallel lines and one is solid and one is broken, the driver on the side of the broken line may cross over the double line to pass other vehicles. The start of a double yellow line or a solid yellow line on your side of the road is usually accompanied by a 'No Passing Zone' or 'No Passing' warning sign. You are allowed to cross double solid yellow lines to turn left into a private road, such as a shopping mall, petrol station or a driveway, but you must give way to oncoming traffic. A short gap in solid lines in the centre of the road also indicates that turning across them is permitted.

It also makes sense that crossing a double yellow line is permissible if you need to make a u-turn – but only when safe to do so, obviously. On my long US road trip, I had to cross such yellow lines many times to make u-turns.

Many city roads have a single-width, two-way lane down the centre. These are used to turn left from a main road into a side road or driveway, or from that side road or driveway back onto the main road. You can cross a single solid yellow line to move into one of these lanes. These two-way centre lanes can cause great confusion, as often two vehicles can be driving straight towards each other along them. I would advise you to be especially alert when using these shared central lanes, particularly if you are from outside the US and have not encountered them before.

Against the wind

Crosswinds can be very severe and can mean you have to ride at quite an angle to maintain a straight line. This can be quite disconcerting and daunting. Be particularly careful passing other vehicles, especially large trucks, when leaning at an angle. The vehicles temporarily act as a windbreak and you could end up swerving once they are no longer protecting you from the wind. The same is true of any other windbreaks, including any bridges that you may ride under.

Don't 'take it to the limit'

Speed limits vary from state to state and often change, especially around cities and towns. The limits displayed on the Garmin sat nav I used when on my long US tour were often wrong, so don't always rely on such data.

Always, and I mean always, observe the speed limits in small towns and cities. Drivers are generally extremely courteous in towns and small cities, and almost everybody sticks to the speed limits. Police often carry out speed checks in built-up areas. In fact, I've been told that in some places there are as many unmarked police cars as marked on the roads.

Police also regularly check speeds on Interstates and US Highways, along with other major roads. Many people drive above the speed limit. Of course, I would never admit to doing so, but if ever you do, remember you won't be the only one ... and do keep your eyes peeled.

If you are caught riding above the speed limit, it will most likely result in you being issued with a ticket and having to pay a fine. If you are caught speeding significantly above the speed limit, you may be required to appear in court. Laws vary among states and sometimes between different counties in a given state, so whether you will be required to appear in court will depend on the speed and where the offence took place. You may be able to employ a lawyer to appear on your behalf. If not, you will either need to remain in the US until the date of your court appearance or return to the US later to appear personally.

If you are given a speeding ticket and offered the chance to challenge it, don't do this, as it may require a court appearance in front of a judge, again depending upon the state or county in which the ticket was issued. It is not uncommon to have to wait for days for a judge to be available, so you could be stuck in one place for ages. Also, be aware that once you have started the challenge process, you might not be able to stop it.

Keep your hat on

Helmet laws vary from state to state, with some states deeming the wearing of helmets to be mandatory and others optional. The same applies to other motorcycle laws, such as wearing eye protection and the use of daytime headlights. I wore a helmet all the time on my US road trip, with only occasional exceptions.

Before you set out on your journey, it would be a good idea to enter 'US motorcycle laws' into an internet search engine, so you can view the relevant laws for each state.

I fought the law and the law won

In the US, there are different types of law enforcement agencies dealing with traffic offences. First

there is the Sheriff, who is elected by the local population. That Sheriff appoints local deputies, whose job it is to enforce state laws within the county they serve.

Next are the regular police who tend to work at a more local level. Then there are the State Police who enforce the laws of the state within which they work. They often patrol the Interstates and US Highways. If you are stopped by a state police car and questioned, never give flippant responses, as these particular officers tend to have very short fuses – possibly because they are constantly enforcing strict traffic laws that have little or no flexibility. Stay calm and remain polite at all times, as arguing is unlikely to get you anywhere. Also remember to turn off your bike and remove your helmet.

You can deal with most traffic tickets yourself, but should you find yourself in a more serious predicament, it is advisable to employ a lawyer, who can guide you through the complexities of laws that you are unlikely to know about yourself.

I did my tour of the US on my UK motorbike, with UK number plates, and I did wonder before I left if this would cause any difficulties throughout my journey. I need not have worried, as in the four-and-a-half-months I was in America, I wasn't stopped once by the police because of my unusual plates. I was asked many times by regular people where the plates were from, but never by the authorities.

Be very careful not to hold up any vehicle with flashing lights or wailing sirens, as you could get into serious trouble if you delay an emergency vehicle. You have to pull over and stop to get completely out of their way.

We all stop for the yellow school bus

There are particular laws regarding the large yellow school buses when their red 'stop' lights are flashing. This means that all vehicles in the immediate vicinity, including those travelling in the opposite direction on the other side of the road, have to stop. It is a serious offence to pass a stationary school bus when its red lights are flashing.

'Get off the damn phone'

Rather than using hands-free facilities, US drivers have a tendency to hold their mobile phones as they drive. This is still quite legal in many states. In fact, it is not uncommon to see drivers using their phones to send texts, although this practice is gradually being banned in more and more states. It is a known fact that drivers' concentration levels fall when they are talking on a phone, and this can lead to dangerous driving. On many occasions I saw such drivers suddenly switching lanes without looking properly, because they were too busy concentrating on their phone conversations.

Parking

Parking was free in most places I visited in the US, and there are plenty of places to park a motorbike. Nearly all shops, restaurants, hotels and motels have their own designated parking. Some smaller cities have motorcycle parking bays, but not many. However, it was only in the larger towns and cities, such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, that I had trouble finding somewhere to park, so in large cities I usually left my bike at my hotel and used public transport instead.

Day, not night

Try to avoid riding at night. Very few roads are lit and cats' eyes (reflectors) down the centre of the roads are rare in the US. As such, it can be a real challenge to see the road ahead properly at night. Cats' eyes are not used at all in snowy states, as they get ripped out by the snowploughs.

Creatures of the night

The biggest danger when riding at night, though, comes from animals such as deer, elk and even bear. Any one of these beasts can venture onto the road during the day, but it is much worse if they do so at night, as it can be extremely difficult to see them. Deer are also a common sight early in the morning. They can be very skittish, appearing on the road out of the blue, and giving you almost no time to avoid them. When riding

in places likely to harbour wild animals, for example wooded areas, do be especially vigilant, whatever the time of day. Try to ride defensively and think about what you might have to do should one suddenly appear in front of you.

Try also to anticipate what you would do if smaller animals ran out in front of you. Of course, you would always want to miss a collision with a bear or a deer, but what about something the size of a small dog? Is it worth swerving violently to avoid a chipmunk or a squirrel? Probably not.

On my tour, I saw bison, deer, elk, cows, a porcupine, dogs, cats, squirrels, chipmunks, skunks, lizards, a turkey, a road-runner, coyotes, a large turtle and even tarantulas on the road. Expect the unexpected!

Snakes on a plain

In many areas, but especially in hot zones, you should keep an eye out for snakes at the side of the road, especially if you are stopping for a drink or to check a map. I only saw one snake on my tour and, thankfully, it was dead.

If you do see a live snake, the only safe way of dealing with it is to leave it well alone and get as far away as possible. If you have the misfortune to be bitten by one, it is vital that you remain calm and seek immediate medical help. You can help yourself by trying to remove as much of the venom from the wound as possible, by sucking and squeezing the area. It is also important to remove any jewellery, such as rings and bracelets, from around the bite, as rapid swelling can cause problems. If possible, make a note of the snake's appearance, including markings and length, as this will help hospital staff to quickly administer the correct treatment.

Pickup lines

There are many pickup trucks in America. Be wary when riding behind one, as people tend just to place items in the back without tying them down. It is not unknown for items such as empty buckets, and even lightweight ladders, to come flying out of these vehicles. I always gave pickups a wide berth.

Roll camera, caution!

While I wouldn't recommend it, I know that some people like to take photos while they are moving. If you must do this, make sure you have the camera on a strap around your neck, so you can let go in a hurry if you need to. It is probably illegal for the rider to take pictures in some states, as it could be deemed to be inattentive or distracted driving. On the whole, most photos taken on the move are not very good, so it really isn't worth the risk.

Weather report

It can rain of course and sometimes be windy, but generally, the weather in the US poses no major problems, but there can be a few extremes.

My own tour of the US started in late June in the northern states and finished in early November in the southernmost states. I deliberately planned to be in the cooler states in the summer and the hotter states in the autumn, to miss the intense heat. Planning your journey to avoid the extremes of the weather is undoubtedly the best way to proceed, but I appreciate that is not always possible.

Keep hydrated

As I knew I was due to ride in some high temperatures, I always carried sunscreen and plenty of water. I filled my small flask with ice and water before I left the hotel or motel each morning, and when the conditions were really hot, I bought more water at every petrol station I stopped at. I was often riding in temperatures above 95F / 35C and in such conditions it is essential to drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration, which can strike quickly, can have devastating consequences, and can soon make you very ill and deteriorate rapidly. In such extreme heat, there is a simple check you can carry out – if your urine is any darker than very light yellow, you are not drinking enough.

Vested interests

Another way to prevent dehydration is to buy and wear a hydration vest. These vests can be found at Harley-Davidson dealers in many hot areas. They are relatively cheap and look like thin padded waistcoats. You soak them in water before you start riding, and the crystals contained within the vests retain the water and keep you cool. They can be reused about fifty times.

Another excellent option when riding in extreme heat is to wear a mesh motorcycle jacket that provides protection and lets the air through to cool you down. It can be difficult riding in a heavy bike jacket when temperatures are high. Should you choose to take yours off, it is better to ride in a long-sleeved shirt rather than short-sleeved. Long sleeves not only prevent your sweat from evaporating too quickly, they also protect you from the sun, and actually keep your skin cooler.

I always wore sun protection on sunny days, applying it to all areas of exposed skin, especially my face and neck. And, even though I always wore gloves and mainly long-sleeved shirts, I also put sun protection on my wrists. This was due to a lesson learned after the sun managed to badly burn the skin on my wrists in the gap between gloves and shirt.

Who'll stop the rain?

I was very lucky on my tour of the US that I didn't get rained upon too often. This was due partly to the fact that I was able to be flexible with my route and, not being on a fixed time frame, I wasn't forced to ride in rainy conditions. I only needed to put on my two-piece, wet-weather rain suit about four times. Generally the rain was very light; only on one occasion did the heavens open, soaking both me and my gear. I learned another valuable lesson that day: always put vulnerable items in plastic bags, even if they are in saddlebags, because the rain can still get to them if they are not covered.

Place items such as your passport, maps and electrical items in zip-lock plastic bags. Put clothes in bin liners inside your panniers or bike

luggage. This will not only keep out the wet, but also the dust if you are riding on gravel or dirt roads. Some luggage and pannier manufacturers claim their gear is waterproof, but don't rely on these claims. I even took to placing a bin liner over the outside of my bike luggage to keep the rain out. It looked ridiculous, but worked a treat.

Riding in hail can be a big problem in the US, because the hailstones are often considerably larger than those in the UK and other parts of Europe / the world. Full-faced helmets provide much better protection than open-faced in these conditions; in fact, I found riding in hail with my open-faced helmet was almost impossible. Large hailstones can also cause serious damage to a motorbike, even when it is stationary, and, for that reason, I carried a full bike cover with me on my US tour. I only used it on a couple of occasions – when a major overnight storm was forecast and I couldn't park my bike undercover.

Get ready

You have to be prepared for all eventualities on tour, which means taking the relevant gear and clothing to cope with a wide range of temperatures. On my tour I not only rode in temperatures of over 110F/ 45C, but also in snow.

If your ride is likely to involve major changes in elevation, you might be surprised at how this can affect the temperature. I recall riding from the very low elevation city of Phoenix in Arizona to Flagstaff some 7,000 feet / 2,130 metres above sea level. Within just two hours, I went from being uncomfortably hot to extremely cold, such was the effect of the elevation upon temperature.

Withering heights

Altitude sickness is common when travelling in areas of high elevation, and the altitude at which the sickness occurs can vary depending on the individual. In the US, I travelled at elevations between 234 feet / 71 metres below sea level to 14,130 feet / 4,306 metres above it. Luckily for me, I didn't suffer from altitude sickness at all, but I have heard of bikers who begin to feel ill at just 8,000 feet / 2,438 metres. Its onset depends on a number of factors including how quickly you get to the high altitude and the amount of time you spend there.

The UK's National Health Service website includes the following as symptoms of mild altitude sickness:

- headache, nausea, dizziness, tiredness, loss of appetite, upset stomach, feeling unsteady, shortness of breath, increased heart rate, difficulty sleeping, and a feeling of being unwell.

Mountain passes can close due to snow at almost any time of year, so it is always worthwhile checking ahead to ensure these are open before you commit to a particular route. The higher passes can close as early as the beginning of September and not re-open until as late as June or, in extreme cases, July.

You can generally find websites that provide all the information you need to check whether a particular mountain pass is open or not.

The devil you don't know

You might see a dust devil at some stage. I saw one once, but only at a distance. My friend Derek (who kindly helped me with these riding tips) and his wife Linda had the misfortune to ride through one some time ago and told me "Avoid these at all costs. We went straight into one and the effect was immediate and painful, when the high winds, full of debris, hit you at speed. When you come out the other side, you struggle to stay upright, as you are suddenly leaning the wrong way."

Waving

In the US, most people on motorbikes wave to each other, especially when passing in opposite directions. This is easy to do, as it simply involves removing your clutch hand from the handlebars so you can wave at the biker passing on your left. In the UK, however, where we drive on the left, if we wanted to wave at a passing biker we would need to release our right hand from the throttle. This would require us to slow down each time we waved, so it isn't a very common practice. If you come from the UK, you will need to get used to waving a lot more in America than you do at home!

Biker-friendly

On a few occasions when I stopped at the side of the road in remote areas to take pictures, I found that other bikes often slowed down or stopped, just to ensure that I was OK and hadn't broken down. This is a common biker-friendly thing to do in the US.

You might be surprised at how often you find yourself without a mobile phone signal in some remote parts of the US, which is perhaps another reason why bikers nearly always check if other bikers need assistance. You ought to do the same. Should you be unfortunate enough to break down in an area without a mobile phone signal, you will either need to ask others to contact assistance for you, or try to fix the problem yourself.

Carry a few tools

I always carry a few tools with me when touring. In fact, it would be foolhardy not to, particularly when travelling through remote areas.

I recommend carrying a tyre-repair kit, at the very least, if you are able to use one. Having said that, I didn't carry a tyre kit on my long US trip, but that's only because of the spoked wheels on my bike; each tyre has an inner tube, so most through-the-tyre repair kits are of no use. Also, like most Harley-Davidsons, my bike doesn't have a centre stand, so removing a wheel to fix a tube is nigh-on impossible. Instead, I carried a print-out of all the telephone numbers of Harley-Davidson dealers in the areas I would be travelling through, so I could contact them if I had a problem on the road (which I didn't, thankfully).

Crash scenes advice

I'm happy to say that my road trip was incident-free. If you are unfortunate enough to be involved in an accident, however, make sure you always get the police to attend, no matter how minor the accident, and always take lots of photos, including pictures of the other people involved. I have heard tales of people being spuriously sued following a traffic accident for causing injuries to others. Taking pictures of people walking around at the scene can protect you against this,

as it proves that they were fine when the incident took place. If the other people involved object to being photographed, do it anyway and just say it is normal where you come from. You could also say that your insurance company insists that you do this, so you have no choice.

Dial 911

If you do need to call the police, or indeed any of the emergency services, the number to use is 911.

Motorcycle insurance is, of course, compulsory in all states and you will need to exchange insurance details at the scene of a crash.

Whatever you do, try to avoid road-rage incidents at all costs. Americans often carry guns in their vehicles and the last thing you need is to become involved in an incident with such a person. Keep calm at all times and always remain mindful that, as a motorcyclist, you are far more likely to get hurt in an incident than will a car driver. Try not to get angry and let an incident escalate into violence. Remember, it is always better to walk away than be carried away.

Fuel for thought

The fuel range on my Harley-Davidson Road King varied greatly, depending upon the speed I was riding and the terrain. I did manage to get more than 200 miles / 320 kilometres out of a tank of fuel when riding slowly but this plunged to just 130 miles / 210 kilometres at high speeds.

In remote areas, I had to be very careful not to run out of petrol and on a few occasions I had some very close calls. Twice I ran out within coasting distance of petrol stations.

Early on in my trip I bought a one-gallon plastic fuel can and kept this in one of my saddlebags, just in case I ran out, and I was grateful I didn't ever need to use it.

Reset your mileage trip counter every time you fill up; be sure you know how far you can ride before you are likely to run out of fuel, and try to check where petrol stations are in remote areas. I was lucky that my sat nav indicated where the

nearest fuel stations were. The mistake I made a few times was to forget to check my fuel level first thing in the morning, riding for around 50 miles / 80 kilometres before doing so, and being forced to divert from my planned route just to find fuel.

Nearly all petrol stations sell food and drink, including hot drinks and hot food. Nearly all have public toilets too and these are usually free for customers.

Buying petrol in the US is very simple and in most of the states I went through, paying at the pump with a credit card was the norm. This was very quick and easy, except in a few states where you are required to enter a zip code at the pump before being able to fill up. Of course, for any non-US visitor, this is not feasible, so it became somewhat of a nuisance.

Shun club colours

I am not a member of a motorcycle club, except the Harley Owners Group, and I don't wear any club colours, patches or insignias. I did read advice suggesting that wearing club colours or patches was not a good idea on a road trip, as they could easily attract the attention of the police or even motorcycle gangs. Let me say straight away that, without exception, all of the bikers I met were very friendly. Nonetheless, I think it makes sense to avoid risking upsetting any motorcycle gang by entering their turf wearing a patch or colours.

Security of your bike and gear

The security of your bike and belongings needs to be a constant consideration. My Harley-Davidson Road King has a steering lock and an ignition lock, plus an alarm. Overnight I locked both and set the alarm. During the day, I often only locked the ignition to prevent someone from simply riding the bike away. In remote towns, where crime is much less common than in big cities, I sometimes only used the remote to set the alarm.

Locking your possessions on or in your bike isn't entirely straightforward. If all your gear fits within lockable panniers or a top-box, then it is simple enough to lock these to keep everything safe. However, if you have soft panniers that do not lock, or you have luggage or gear fixed to a rack or to the seat on your bike, then you have to take a different approach. The situation is even worse if you are touring, for when you stop somewhere to look around for any significant length of time, all your belongings will have to be left on your bike. I did this only when absolutely necessary, and when I was reasonably confident that I was in a safe area.

I used various methods to secure my gear, ranging from a simple padlock for locking my helmet to my bike, to steel cable locks and cable alarms. I did see one biker on a round-the-world-trip secure everything to his bike with a thin mesh metal wire net that covered all of his bags and was also locked to his bike.

Most of the time I felt confident that nothing would be stolen if it looked secure, even if this meant merely fixing my leather jacket to my bike by strapping it onto the seat with a couple of bungee cords. I found that this was enough to prevent an opportunist thief from walking past the bike and lifting my jacket off. It was only in big cities that I felt the need to use my full armoury of cable locks and cable alarms.

The one thing I never left on my unattended bike was my sat nav unit. It is a high-value item that is easy to sell, so it is a vulnerable target. Also, I had entered all of the details of my route into it, and relied on it heavily. Losing it would have been a disaster.

The most effective security system I used during the day was to park my bike where I could see it. In restaurants I always sat next to the window!

Welcome to the hotel ...

I have discussed different types of accommodation in my book, but there is one accommodation-related issue that impacts on riding – and that is deciding when to stop riding each day to find somewhere to stay.

On a few occasions I found it more difficult to find a hotel or motel with a room available the later the time, so I tried to make sure that I had stopped riding and found a room by about 17:00 each day. The later you leave it, the more challenging it becomes to find the right place for you.

Feeding times

Many Europeans may find it odd that Americans eat very early in the evening and go to bed early as well. In most areas I visited, apart from the largest cities, people tended to eat between 17:30 and 20:00. In smaller towns and cities I sometimes found it difficult to find any restaurants open after 21:00, so I too began to eat early and go to bed early.

Most people are on the road early the next morning too, so most hotel / motel car parks are almost empty by 08:00.

Some riders I know like to eat at times specifically chosen to avoid the meal-time rush, so they can get more riding done in a day. For example, some start riding very early in the morning and then stop for breakfast at around 10:00. They might then eat lunch at around 14:00 to avoid restaurants' busy periods.

Let me finish by saying that, despite all the potential problems I have outlined in this guide, my own 21,000-mile / 34,500-kilometre ride across the US was trouble-free and hugely enjoyable.

This document is meant to act as a guide and not a comprehensive list of everything you need to know and understand about riding in the US. It is particularly important that you carry out your own research regarding the laws specific to the states you intend to travel in – and, of course – to adhere to those laws.

If you have any specific comments or suggestions that would improve this guide, then let me know and if included in a future revision, I will credit your comments to you.

You can read more about my motorcycling adventures at www.GarySFrance.com