

Why Dirt?

Getting off the pavement means gaining access to places most can't reach.

> By **Alisa Clickenger**

Twelve years ago, I was getting bored with motorcycling. I felt like I'd reached a plateau in my riding proficiency and needed to take my skills to the next level. The choices, as I saw them, included buying a different motorcycle to either attend track days or get involved in dirt riding.

I opted to learn to ride off-road, which changed my life forever. The skills I mastered managing traction off pavement made me a much stronger and more confident rider on pavement, and provided the tools needed to explore the paths less traveled on several continents.

It's easy to get started riding off-road. There are dirt-oriented motorcycle riding schools all over the world, and these classes may be called dirt bike, dual-sport or adventure riding.

Whitney Koeberle is co-owner of Dirt Bike Safety Training in Washington and uses Gary LaPlante's *Dirt First by MotoVentures* curriculum (pg. 13). "I firmly believe that the skills you learn in the dirt transfer to the street. Conversely, street skills don't necessarily transfer to the dirt. We have street riders come to us on a weekly basis who have never locked the rear tire. Often, they do not know what to do in an emergency.

"When we ride off-road, we often spin and slide the rear tire. Another important technique is pressuring the



Picture postcard settings like this are the kinds of rewards that await those who can handle a motorcycle across various terrain such as dirt, sand, mud and water.

outside foot peg in sitting and standing turns. These sensations should not be foreign to street riders," said Koeberle.

Fran Tully, owner of Dual Sport School in Utah, focuses on the basic skills of off-road riding, explaining some of the big differences in off-road technique as opposed to on-road.

"We work on balance drills, clutch and throttle control, body position, weight distribution, how to safely pick up a bike, how to safely fall, safety gear, hillside recoveries, how to ride in sand, gravel, rocks, mud, and how to do

water crossings. There is a bit more to it, but essentially, we do drills and exercises to teach the basics," said Tully.

They say that 95 percent of the world is unpaved. That means that every single moto-explorer has a much better chance of seeing the remote places, connecting with real local people, and getting to know a destination much more thoroughly than what trendy restaurants or beautiful museums can provide. We get to take our morning coffee alongside the locals, our lunches from the roadside stands of quaint out-

FRAN TULLY/ DUAL SPORT SCHOOL



Riding academies take students out on dusty trails, teach them the skills, then put them directly into practice in real-world environments.

of-the-way restaurants, and converse with locals in a way that's not polished and practiced or put together for mass tourism.

Kandi Spangler, of West 38 Moto in Colorado, offers training and guided tours in several Mountain States. "What better way to see the countryside than by getting off the 'beaten path' of the daily travel of thousands of cars? I liken it to seeing Yosemite from the Welcome Center versus from a hiking trail. One is riddled with tons of tourists, while the other is seeing it from a different vantage point, without all the bustle and noise of the masses.

"This community of ADV riders is like nothing I've ever experienced. If you think the 'wave' from a passing motorcyclist is cool, wait until you've ridden

with other ADV riders. Most of them are fun, supportive, helpful and, best of all, safe. You still need to surround yourself with the right riding partners, but for the most part, you'll be able to find like-minded riders who will help you up your game," said Spangler

The equipment is different for off-road riding, often providing more ventilation as well as more protection. Wear the best protective gear that you can afford, knowing that you can ease into it gradually. You don't have to buy all the equipment that professional riders wear right away. When you started riding on the street, you most likely did not start with the same kit that you're using now.

Tully has had several folks come through Dual Sport School on great used bikes that they got for less than \$2,000, and all their protective gear was either borrowed or used. Others got it used online or in the classifieds for under \$200.

"One doesn't need a ton of money or time to get started in the sport," Tully said. "Of course, newer bikes and protective gear

are incredible, and if one can afford it, great. But if someone wants to experience the thrill and freedom of dual sport riding, money doesn't have to be a barrier.

"Ride your ride. Just take it easy and don't go out by yourself and get over your head. Practice with friends and keep in mind that speed hides a lot of bad habits. If they ride very slowly, they will be forced to develop good skills. The speed will come later."

Folks who have a lot of off-road miles under their belt usually advocate starting with a smaller bike. I didn't at first, but once I purchased a smaller bike and started practicing on it, that's when my skills really started to accelerate, and my confidence soared. Practicing what you learn in class is critical to your advancement and comfort riding off-road, and it's simply easier on a smaller bike.

Take small steps. Start with a beginner course. After some time in the saddle, move into more intermediate and advanced training. With patience and practice, your skills will develop, your confidence will soar, and who knows where you'll go. You might decide to explore the country in a way that isn't possible on a street bike, or perhaps take a lap around the globe.

Even if you don't set out on an adventure of epic proportions, you'll feel more confident on your regular ride and become a better and safer rider. **MCN**



FRAN TULLY DUAL SPORT SCHOOL

When riders feel comfortable off-road, it opens more destinations.