

Fabric vs. Leather



Illustration by Brian McBean

One Sunday in 1973, I was riding the 200 miles home from a weekend visit with my parents in Michigan, where I lived at the time. This blustery afternoon leaked intermittent rain, and the temperatures were in the 60s. That was back in my cheap days when I didn't even own a rainsuit. I figured I was tough enough to ride in the rain until it got too bad, then I'd just stop and warm up. Besides, my bike had a fairing on it, and this day wasn't very cold.

After a couple of hours I was soaked. Though the rain was on-and-off, the wind rushing over me was constant. My hands became very cold. I remember shivering, and after a time my hazy mind decided it was time to stop for gas.

My bike was a Honda CB550 Four, and to open the gas cap you had to push a lever beside it. I can still remember watching in harebrained amusement as my numb thumb, which seemed totally detached from my body now, just collapsed, time after time, against that lever. Only some years later did I learn that I was in the middle stages of hypothermia then, and in serious danger. At least I'd had enough sense left to pull into a restaurant, warm up, and eat something.

Everything You Need To Know When Selecting Touring Clothes

by BILL STERMER

Motorcycling is a sport for the intrepid. The rider is protected only by what he or she wears. It may be raining and 40 degrees, but at skin level it had better be warm, dry and safe. By safe I mean not just comfortable, but totally protected. Your motorcycle clothing has a big job to do.

Motorcycle clothing is very specialized, and works better on a bike than general, non-specific clothing does. It should fit closely so as to not flap in the wind. Outerwear must have superior ability to block the wind and hold in warmth. Depending upon its function, it should have some ability to keep you relatively dry in a short sprinkle. If it's raingear, it should keep you dry in an all-day downpour.

Riding suits should be cut to accommodate the riding position. The sleeves

and legs should be longer than standard, the neck opening should close snugly to keep out the wind, and there should be similar closures on the cuffs and sleeves. Often riding gear has an "action back," which is an extra fold of material behind the shoulders so your arms can reach forward without restricting movement.

Finally, if a rider should meet with misfortune and go down, motorcycle clothing must be able to withstand abrasion, and lots of it. A motorcyclist will slide a long way if he leaves his bike at 60 mph, and the only protection his body will have will be what he's wearing. Because we tend to tumble when we fall, good motorcycle clothing will have a double layer of material on the protruding areas like elbows, shoulders, and knees.

Motorcycle clothing should be convenient and have pockets and zippers and snaps at all the right places. It should fit comfortably so that, like any item of clothing, you forget it's there once it's on.

Part of what makes a touring suit do its job is the material it's made of. Today, high-tech fabrics vie with good-old leather for popularity with riders. Each type of animal hide and fabric has its various advantages and disadvan-

tages, and no one material can do it all. Let's look into the pros and cons of such items as leather, nylon, and other fabrics, so that you can make the most informed choice when it's time to buy.

Types Of Materials

Leather is the traditional motorcycle garment for good reason. Heavier leather garments (3.0 ounces per square foot) provide superior abrasion resistance, tend to pass through the wind without flapping, and last a long time.

People have come to regard leather clothing as almost an heirloom. Get a good garment, treat it well, keep it clean and lubed, and it will last you a lifetime. No one throws leather garments away, and a skilled leather worker in a custom shop can restore worn-out or crashed leather garments to full luster. I hear stories of fathers passing their leather jackets on to their sons years after they have hung up their own helmets. There's something magical about leather for its history, the fact it's a natural product, the way it feels supple in the hand, for its rich aroma. It has come to be associated with fine fashion, and the look of a fine leather riding suit is truly elegant.

Most leather garments are made of split cowhide—the hide is sliced to make two thin pieces from one thick one. As a natural product, leather is porous and breathes well, but those pores can also let in moisture. Leather is not raingear. Though it can keep you dry for a while, leather will eventually soak through. A thorough wetting can stain, stiffen, and ruin leather.

In and of itself, leather is not that warm; it must be lined for comfort and heat retention. Removable insulated linings are highly recommended for versatility in hot or cool weather.

Because cows are self-propelled, clumsy, and not too bright, cowhide will become scratched and bruised as the cows rub up against fence posts and barbed wire. Some amount of imperfection is acceptable in leather, as it adds to character—no two pieces will be exactly the same. Quality leather manufacturers will reject hides that are too beat up.

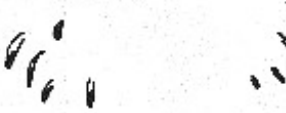
Besides its good looks and aroma, leather really shines in abrasion resistance. Drag tests have proven that heavy-weight racer leather is the very best material to be wearing when the rider hits the road, and will hold its integrity about four times longer than fashion-weight leathers (of about 1.75 ounces per square foot) and other fabrics.

Lighter-weight leather has the advantages of heavy leather, with the exception of abrasion resistance. Suedes get dirty too easily for motorcycle use, and also have poor abrasion resistance.

Leather's biggest drawback is its expense. A two-piece leather suit can set you back \$450.00 to \$700.00 now, and the price of leather has risen lately because of increased demand overseas as the price of the dollar has fallen. This year's drought, however, has driven up the price of grains, which is causing many farmers to slaughter off their cattle herds, thereby causing an oversupply

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**No one material
—hide or fabric—
can do it all.**



of cowhide on the market and temporarily stabilizing leather prices this winter. Don't expect this condition to last long though—leather prices will be increasing again next year.

Deerskin tends to be softer and lighter than leather, has great tensile strength and abrasion resistance, and it's also washable. Deer aren't quite as ponderous and bulky as cows, and their hides tend to be more pliable and finer than standard cowhide. Deerskin is favored by glove makers for its suppleness, but fine jackets are also made from it.

Unlike cattle, you won't find hundreds of thousands of deer being processed through the marketplaces each year. As a result, fewer hides are available, and deerskin products tend to be priced higher than cowhide products.

Nylon is a man-made material that can be formed from many weaves, into many colors, and coated with a waterproofing layer for weather protection. Because it's a man-made fabric, nylon is relatively inexpensive to manufacture. However, the coated fabric is sealed and does not breathe, so it should have vents in the underarms and back.

Oxford nylon is not an educated form of the stuff; it designates a fashion-weight nylon that is coated with 1.0 to 1.5 ounces of urethane per square yard of fabric. Most touring suits are made of coated oxford nylon. The coating

renders the fabric itself waterproof, but the perforations caused by stitching allow water to enter. Unless the seams are sealed, oxford nylon riding suits should be considered as water resistant rather than waterproof.

This material is relatively inexpensive, but it is not very abrasion resistant.

Cordura nylon is one of the best-known brands of nylon (it's a Dupont trademark). Cordura is a tightly interwoven fabric that is also coated for water resistance. It is very popular for use in tank bags and other soft luggage because of its stiffness, but used for riding gear less often than oxford nylon. Cordura provides good abrasion resistance, but is still far inferior to racing-grade leather in that category.

Denim is certainly the most common fabric most people wear as riding pants—blue jeans are made of the stuff. Just understand that while denim is inexpensive and looks good, it is next to worthless when you literally hit the road.

Gore-Tex is *not* the description of a meeting between a mad bull and a Texan, as I thought the first time I heard of it. Rather than a material from which riding clothing is made, Gore-Tex is a thin, man-made membrane that is inserted between layers of material to create a water-resistant garment. Unlike other membranes—plastic food wrap, for example—Gore-Tex contains millions of microscopic pores. These pores allow vapors to escape while stopping liquids—in a word, Gore-Tex "breathes."

The main disadvantages of Gore-Tex are that it is very expensive, and that it is not foolproof. You can expect anything that contains Gore-Tex to cost about double the price of a similar item without the space-age stuff. Also, the Gore-Tex membrane is very filmy and works very well by itself, but by stitching into it (which is unavoidable in manufacturing garments), the Gore-Tex is ruptured and water can pass through the thread holes.

Because of its filminess, Gore-Tex does not wear well. Long before the garment it's sewn into has worn out, the internal Gore-Tex may have lost its integrity through rough handling.

Denier is a measure of the thickness and mass of the material. For example, 200 denier is a light weave, and most motorcycle garments will range from 200 to 400 denier. The higher the denier, the denser and less flexible the material. For example, 500-denier and higher Cordura is not usually used for clothing, but is common in soft luggage.

Types Of Outerwear

Rainsuits are usually made of some light-denier nylon that is heavily coated for weather resistance. A good rainsuit will fold down to a package about the length and thickness of a football, and the price will range generally from \$35.00 to \$75.00.

Abrasion resistance is minimal—if you go down, you'll be wearing shredded nylon very soon. The seams must be sealed for the suit to properly repel water. Because of its impermeability, the suit must be vented for comfort. Rainsuits are lightweight and usually colorful. One other benefit is that even on a cold, dry day, a rainsuit will block the wind and allow you to stay much warmer.

Riding Suits are different from rainsuits. A rainsuit is usually just a coated-nylon shell; a riding suit is also lined and insulated. Man-made insulation is used for economy, but also because it will retain its insulating properties even when wet. Some common brand names of high-tech insulation are PolarGuard, Hollofill, and Fiberfill.

A riding suit of waterproof nylon can be used as a rainsuit if you seal the seams. You can purchase seam-sealer in camping-gear stores, as the same product is used to seal tents. Fabric riding suits cost several-hundred dollars, but still may be priced well below leather. They provide excellent warmth and weather protection, but abrasion resistance is perhaps a quarter that of good leather.

The drawbacks to insulated riding suits are that they're bulky, and you may find them stifling in warm weather. Their bulk is not flattering, and some could make comedian Pee-wee Herman look like the Michelin man. Finally, under the heat of intense abrasion, nylon can melt—and a melted lump of nylon on the skin can leave a nasty burn.

Use our definitions here as indicators of what you can expect to encounter when shopping for touring clothing. If you're well-suited for cold-weather riding, you should be safe from the potential grief that I almost suffered when hypothermia got me in its grasp 15 years ago. #

RR Staff Touring-Wear Preferences

The choice of what to wear while riding is very personal. While we could not begin to tell you what you should don for your jaunts, RR staff members do have their preferences. These riders have hundreds of thousands of miles under their wheels—and, as you can see, they don't all agree on what to wear!

Bill Stermer: I prefer a heavy leather riding suit, with a rainsuit for inclement weather. If this is beyond a rider's budget, he or she might get an insulated riding suit with sealed seams.

Bob Carpenter: For daily commuting or weekend rides, I'm strictly a leather-jacket-and-blue-jeans fan. For longer trips, or trips where I expect to encounter wide changes of temperature, climate, or altitude, my choice is a two-piece quilted-nylon riding suit—along with lots of inner layers—and a one-piece PVC rainsuit packed where I can get at it fast.

Paul Carpenter: Leather is nice for commuting unless it's really hot. Then leather is too hot for me. I

never take leather only on weekends because of this; a lightweight cotton/polyester jacket is always available in my gear. Blue jeans are a way of life. For long trips I prefer a two-piece nylon suit, and I always pack a 100-percent waterproof rainsuit on top of Bob's.

Bob Anderson: For full protection, ankles to torso, I wear a nylon jacket and bib overalls over jeans and a flannel shirt. The suit is an insulation layer, and it's waterproof. It has a bulky cut so that I can layer underneath it, and the full-length zips make it easy to get in and out of. I can roll the suit compactly into a stuff sack.

Dave Hough: For commuting, I wear a leather jacket over a shirt and tie, with cotton/polyester twill pants. When it gets colder, I wear an insulated nylon jacket over the leather jacket, and bib pants. When it gets colder still, I add a down liner to the leather jacket. Even colder (to 14 degrees), a one-piece, insulated-nylon suit. For touring, I wear a jacket and jeans of heavy leather.