

Rider Education: Ride in your "Comfort Zone"

I just completed a wonderful 1500-mile solo ride through Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina and South Carolina. During the two weeks I was gone, I rode in just about every type of road and road conditions, from Interstates to un-numbered back roads, flat ground to high mountains, weather ranging from sunny, to windy, to rainy. OK big deal – but what does that have to do with anything?

What I found was that every different condition there were factors that had to be adjusted to my own riding style and skills that allowed me to ride in what I call my comfort zone. Initially, as I got started on I-75 heading to Atlanta, I was running at about 73-75 miles and hour, pulling my trailer on a nice sunny day with little weather to affect the ride. However, by the time I got to Gainesville, I found my hands were getting sore and my back was tired. I realized that I was tensed up, fighting the turbulence from the Semis that were moving a lot faster than I was. I found that by slowing down just a few miles per hour, my bike was less affected by the trucks and I was more relaxed, able to enjoy the ride instead of fighting the bike. I found that under these conditions of road, traffic and weather that I was comfortable at 70, maybe 3-4 MPH less than I had started. I had found my comfort zone for this part of the trip. Now, when a couple of other bikes passed me, I must admit that I had the urge to speed up and demonstrate that I could go just as fast – a reaction that seems to affect many of the male gender. To avoid the urge, I set my cruise and stayed relaxed and comfortable. So it seem that 70 is the right speed for me, at least until I got closer to Atlanta and found myself in 6 lanes of heavy traffic. Ouch – Time to slow down. Here, even with the speed limit at 65, I found that 55 was a lot more pleasant for me. Changing conditions, different comfort zone, but that was the wrong speed for these conditions. At that speed, I was impeding traffic, even in the right lane, and found that by moving my speed up to 60, I was actually more comfortable, since traffic was not pushing me and cutting in, reducing my space.

In another segment of the trip, I found myself on the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina. What a beautiful road, lots of great scenery, many curves and very little traffic at this time of year. During the ride, I found that it was not practical to try and observe the beauty of the surroundings and safely negotiate the twisting road. Other bikes were up on the Parkway, most moving faster than I was, but they weren't riding a 1000 pounds of bike and hauling a trailer. I found I was only able to consistently run at about 40, even slower than a lot of the cars. In order to observe the mountain beauty and keep the pressure of faster traffic from becoming unpleasant, I made use of the frequent pull-off overlooks. At other times, I found myself being slowed down by sight seeing cars, moving at speeds well below posted and slow enough that I was now riding in an uncomfortable zone, with no place to pass on the twisting road. Solution? Pull off and take in the scenery again, letting the slow cars get well ahead. Again, I found my comfort zone and was able to enjoy the ride. Eventually, in order to make up some time, I decided to get off the Blue Ridge and get back to the Interstate. Only problem, the road I got off on turned out to be even more curvy and slower. I got stuck behind a car from Ohio that was moving at a snails pace, way slower than I wanted to travel. Here there was no solution, I was forced to follow this guy for over 30 miles at speeds of 15-20 MPH along this narrow road with no areas to pass or even safely pull off and let him get ahead. The moral – carry a map and check your route before making a change in plans.

In all cases, the statement "Ride your own ride" applies. Find the speed and variable factors that make you comfortable and then stick to them.

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