

15 Riding-In-Traffic Tips

Basics? Sure. But keeping them fresh in your cranial RAM could be the difference between riding tomorrow and The Long Nap.

Close your eyes and recall your last ride in heavy traffic. Imagine the vehicles surrounding you, crowding you, cutting you off. Imagine yourself monitoring closing speeds, reading street signs, noticing and anticipating traffic lights. Then imagine guessing what pedestrians will do, or how slippery that painted line might be. And those drivers with cell phones, newspapers or screaming kids to deal with imagine trying to guess what they are going to do.



Riding in traffic can be a nightmare, especially for street-riding newcomers. Is it any wonder so many motorcyclists crash and burn while riding on congested streets? It's amazing how many different tasks motorcyclists deal with on a normal traffic-choked commute. Doing it successfully means processing a multitude of items at once and reacting correctly to each. Doing it wrong can mean road kill the human kind. Here are 15 smart strategies for dealing with traffic-choked streets.

Watch drivers? Heads and mirrors

Watching the head movements of drivers through their windows and mirrors is an excellent way to anticipate sudden moves. Most drivers won't lunge left or right without first moving their heads one way or another (even if they don't check their mirrors).

Trust your mirrors, but not totally

Your bike's mirrors can be lifesavers, but they don't always tell the entire story even if they're adjusted properly. In traffic, always buttress your mirror-generated rear view with a glance over the appropriate shoulder. Do it quickly and you'll add an extra measure of rear-view and blind-spot knowledge to your info-gathering tasks.

Never get between a vehicle and an off ramp

This sounds almost too simple, but drivers who decide to exit at the last minute kill plenty of riders each year. The simple rule, then, is to never position yourself between a vehicle and an off ramp. Passing on the right is generally a no-no, but in this day and age it's sometimes necessary. So if you do it, do so between exits or cross-streets.



Cover your brakes

In traffic you must often react extra quickly, which means not fumbling for the brake lever or pedal. To minimize reach time, always keep a finger or two on the brake lever and your right toe close to the rear brake pedal. When that cell phone-yakking dorkus cuts across your path trying to get to the 7-Eleven for a burrito supreme, you'll be ready.

Be noticed

Make sure drivers and pedestrians can see you, even from a distance. Ride with your high beam on during the day (as a courtesy, turn it off when sitting behind someone at a light), and wear brightly colored gear, especially your helmet and jacket. Hi Vis yellow suits and jackets aren't just hugely conspicuous, they're also become fashionable, so now you don't have an excuse.

Be ready with the power

In traffic, ride in a gear lower than you normally would so your bike is ready to jump forward instantly if asked. (Not everyone rides open-class twins, after all.) Doing so gives you the option of leaping ahead instead of being limited to just using the brakes when that pickup suddenly moves over. The higher revs might also alert more drivers to your presence.

Traffic slowing? Stay left (or right)

When traffic slows suddenly, stay to the left or right of the car in front of you. This will give you an escape route if needed. It will also help keep you from becoming a hood ornament if the car behind you fails to stop in time. Once you're stopped, be ready, clutch in, your bike in gear and your eyes on the mirrors. You never know.



Practice the scan

Constantly scanning your entire environment while riding from instruments to mirrors to the road ahead to blind spots to your left and right rear keeps you aware and in touch with your situation, and therefore better able to react.

Dwelling on one area too long, watching only behind or in front of you, for instance is just begging for trouble.

Left-turn treachery

When approaching an oncoming car that's stopped and about to turn left, be ready. Your brights should be on so the driver can see you (during the day), but don't rely on this to save you. Watch the car's wheels or the driver's hands on the steering wheel; if you see movement, be ready to brake, swerve or accelerate, whichever seems best for the situation.

Study the surface

Add asphalt conditions to your scan. Be on the lookout for spilled oil, antifreeze or fuel; it will usually show up as shiny pavement. Also keep an eye out for gravel and/or sand, which is usually more difficult to see. Use your sense of smell, too; often you can smell spilled diesel fuel before your tires discover how slippery the stuff is.

Ride in open zones

Use your bike's power and maneuverability to ride in open zones in traffic. In any grouping of vehicles there are always some gaps; find these and ride in them. Doing so will separate you from four-wheelers, give you additional room to maneuver and allow you to keep away from dangerous blind spots. And vary your speed. Riding along with the flow can make you invisible to other drivers, especially in heavy traffic.



Use that thumb

Get into the habit of canceling your turn signals often regardless of the traffic situation. A blinking signal might tell drivers waiting to pull into the road or turning left in front of you that you're about to turn when you aren't. So push that switch a few times each minute. Better to wear out the switch than eat a Hummer's hood, eh?

It's good to be thin

A huge advantage single-track vehicles have over four-wheelers is their ability to move left and right within a lane to enable the rider to see what's ahead. Whether you're looking to the side of the cars ahead or through their windshields, seeing what's coming can give you lots of extra time to react.

More than one way out

Yeah, motorcycles fall down. But they're also light, narrow and hugely maneuverable, so you might as well learn to exploit their strengths when things get ugly, right? So don't just brake hard in a hairball situation. There's almost always an escape route. Swerving into Mrs. Smith's front yard could be a lot better than

center punching the Buick that turned left in front of you. Always have an escape route planned, and update it minute by minute.

Running interference

This one's easy, and we'll bet most of you already do it: Let larger vehicles run interference for you when negotiating intersections. If the bonehead coming toward you from the left or right is going to blow the light, better they hit the box van next to you, right? For the same reasons, don't lunge through an intersection as soon as the light turns green. Be patient, and use the vehicles next to you as cover.