

Road Runner Touring Tip: Mitigating the Risks of Group Riding

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Riding in a group can be a great way to enjoy the camaraderie of traveling with other like-minded motorcyclists. Caravanning in a large, unbroken procession, however, poses special risks for the group. For example, you may have heard about the recent tragic accident in California where a group of 12 motorcycles collided with a car (<http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/11/14/california.motorcycle.accident/index.html>).

From published news reports, it appears that a frustrated motorist tried to pass the group of riders without adequate space for doing so. An oncoming car switched lanes, to avoid the passing motorist, only to crash head on into the motorcyclists. The result: five dead riders, and several more severely injured.

Although I personally prefer to ride in smaller groups, here are 10 suggestions for mitigating the risks of riding in larger groups:

1. **Plan the Ride – Ride the Plan:** A well-organized ride will include: a map of the route, or turn-by-turn directions, with designated fuel and lunch stops and phone numbers for contacting the ride leader and emergency services. At the pre-ride meeting, there should be a discussion of route conditions, riding formation, hand signals, rider skill levels, speed, and the assignment of riders within the group formation. It's very important that everyone understands that they are expected to
- follow the ride plan unless an unforeseen event requires deviation, or the ride leader directs that a change be made.
2. **Designate an Experienced Ride Leader:** Although the ride leader may not have developed the ride plan, he or she is responsible for leading it and keeping everyone as safe as possible on the road. This includes setting an appropriate steady pace for the skill level of the group (i.e., an appropriate pace for the least skilled rider), having an in-depth knowledge of the planned route and stops, making sure proper formation is maintained, and curbing any inappropriate/unsafe riding behavior by group members.
3. **Designate An Experienced Sweep Rider:** The sweep rider is responsible for monitoring the group from the rear. He or she will assist with any bikes having mechanical problems, accidents or other issues. If the situation warrants it, the sweeper may need to call the lead rider and/or emergency services.
4. **Arrive Ready to Ride:** Each rider should meet at the beginning rally location with a full tank of gas, an empty bladder, a properly serviced motorcycle, appropriate riding apparel, a first aid kit, a tool kit, a cell phone and a positive attitude.

5. **Break into Smaller Groups:** On two-lane pavement it's especially important to allow other motorists an opportunity to pass, by having breaks in the caravan of motorcycles. Four to six bikes in the smaller groups should be about right. It's especially important to create passing gaps when a trailing vehicle indicates its intent to pass.
6. **Ride Your Own Ride:** It's always paramount that riders stay within their skill level and comfort zone, even if that means dropping out of the group. If so, tell the sweep rider that you're dropping back and will rejoin the group at the next scheduled stop. They probably won't be more than a minute or two ahead. Less experienced riders should ride at the front of the group, where the speed is more consistent. That way, they won't run into the temptation of playing catch-up with the group.
7. **Use Established Hand Signals or Electronic Devices to Communicate:** The Motorcycle Safety Foundation's recommended hand signals can be found at: <http://www.tellicoriders.com/safety/groupride.pdf>. *Hand signals are generally initiated by the ride leader and passed along by each succeeding rider.*
8. **Be Courteous When Passing Other Motorists:** Signal when changing lanes to pass another vehicle, don't dart directly in front of the vehicle passed and be sure to maintain your pace after passing. When a motorist pulls over to let you go by, be sure to show appreciation by waving.
9. **Don't Become Fixated on the Bike in Front of You:** There is often a tendency to focus on the motorcycle directly in front of you. Even if you're maintaining a proper distance from that bike, you're only looking a few seconds ahead of your front tire. It's important to continue looking through curves and down the road for potential hazards.
10. **Don't Forget about the Bike Behind You:** I was leading a group of about 20 bikes one time, when I glanced in my rear view mirror to discover, to my great surprise, that no one was back there. I reversed direction and found that a rider had low sided on gravel in the road. Every rider should periodically check his or her rear view mirrors to ensure that they can see the next bike in the group. If that bike isn't visible, then slow down for them to catch up or reverse course to find out what happened. This will work its way up to the ride leader (as it did in my example) who also should turn around to investigate the problem.

I'm sure you can probably add to this list, based on your own experience, but the important thing is that riders reflect on these considerations before hosting or attending a large group ride.