

Takin' It Off Road

If you're already an off-highway motorcycle enthusiast, you know all about the fun and excitement of riding on dirt, instead of pavement. Your motorcycle is designed for many types of off-road conditions, but it's really only as capable as you are.

As your riding skills increase, so will your sense of pride, satisfaction, and enjoyment.

There are three basic types of off-highway motorcycles:

Dual Purpose motorcycles come equipped with highway-approved lighting and turn signals, Department of Transportation (DOT)-approved tires, a U.S. Forest Service (USFS)-approved spark arrester, and conform to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) noise and exhaust emission standards. These motorcycles are designed for use on paved roads, as well as off-highway.

Enduro models usually have less complete or no lighting, have knobby tires, and meet EPA noise standards and USFS spark arrester requirements. Enduro motorcycles are for off-highway use only.

Motocross models have no lighting equipment, do not meet EPA noise or emission standards or USFS spark arrester requirements. These are high-performance motorcycles designed for use by highly-skilled riders in closed-course competition. Unmodified, they cannot legally be ridden on public land.

If you've just purchased your dirt bike, you're probably anxious to take it for a test run. Before you do, make sure you and your machine are prepared. Part of being prepared means wearing the proper personal protective equipment. This is largely the same gear you would wear when riding a street bike, but if you're not wearing a full-face helmet, you should also wear mouth protection. You can get pants with kneepads and jerseys with chest and shoulder protectors for extra off-road protection.

Before you ride, make sure to give your bike a pre-ride inspection. Also, carry a tool kit with you. Include a few spare parts, such as a spark plug or two, a couple of chain master links, some wire and tape, and possibly a headlight bulb. Carry emergency items, such as a strong tow rope, drinking water, emergency tire-repair kit, weatherproof

matches, a bit of food, and a first-aid kit.

When you're ready to hop on and hit the trails, make sure you know the land you're riding on and what your machine can do. Stay on existing trails and away from dangerous slopes and impassable swamps. Watch for sharp bumps, holes, ruts and other obstacles, and be able to identify muddy, sandy, rocky, dusty, and wet conditions, so you can adjust your speed and riding style accordingly.

Learn to read the terrain as you ride. Look well ahead on the trail, so you know what's coming and are prepared to react long before you get there. Stay alert at all times, and know how to adjust your speed to trail conditions and visibility.

You will encounter some tough situations, such as climbing a hill. Some hills are just too steep, so use common sense. When approaching a hill, keep both feet firmly on the footrest, shift into low gear, and speed up before ascending the hill. For small hills, shift your body weight forward. For steep hills, stand on the footrests and lean well over the front wheel in order to shift as much weight forward as possible.

If the hill is too steep and you must downshift to prevent stalling, shift quickly and smoothly.

When going down a hill, keep your feet firmly on the footrests, point the bike directly downhill, transfer your weight to the rear, shift into low gear, and apply brakes to reduce speed.

Part of the fun of trail riding is closely spaced bumps that create a roller coaster effect when riding up one bump and down the next one. Approach these at a slow or moderate pace, use your arms and legs as shock absorbers, and establish a good rhythm over the bumps. Advanced riders can modify this to stand on the footrests with their weight rearward. This allows the front wheel to skim over the bumps.

If you find yourself in water or mud, your brake application will have to be much more gradual to avoid slipping and sliding. Dry the brakes after a deep-water crossing by applying light pressure to them while riding until they return to normal.

These are only a few of the conditions you will face off-road. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation offers a one-day course that is fun and informative. Visit www.dirtbikeschool.com for more information. ■

