



THE WAY I SEE IT BY GENEVIEVE SCHMITT

Off The Beaten Path

In this case, the beaten path is pavement, asphalt, blacktop, or whatever you call it — the surface on which we ride our street motorcycles. Where I live in Montana, there are more unpaved

roads than paved ones. Many times, as I'm cruising scenic byways, I see a turnoff to a gravel road with a sign indicating there's a ghost town five miles ahead or a lake 20 miles down the road. If you love to explore new places, then you yearn to venture down those gravel roads. If you're like me, you wouldn't dare take your street motorcycle on those sandy, pebbly surfaces. Sure, my Harleys and I have wobbled down our fair share of rocky, rutted roads, but not by choice. It's usually because of road construction. The uneven surface beats up the suspension, rocks fly into my fender and tank, leaving dings, and my nerves of steel get shaken. It's no fun.

So when I had the opportunity to learn how to ride a dual-sport, a bike set up to ride on pavement and soft surfaces like gravel and sand, I jumped at the chance. I thought I might just like to have one of these do-all two-wheelers in my garage. If you've ridden your motorcycle anywhere in this country where there are mountains or deserts, you've most likely seen dual-sport riders at a gas station or on the asphalt making their way to the next gravel trail. They look different from street riders. They wear lots of protective gear, ride bikes with high suspension setups and knobby tires, and are always dirty — both them and their bikes.

This time last year, I was approached by Sue Slate, co-founder of the Women's Motorcyclist Foundation, the nonprofit group that has raised more than \$2.2 million for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation through its Pony Express rides and other motorcycle events. She was organizing an eight-day dual-sport ride to raise awareness of dual-sporting among street riders while also raising money for the Dr. Susan Love Research Foundation and the Gynecologic Cancer Foundation. She was looking for 12 women (we called ourselves the Dirty Dozen) to raise a minimum of \$2,000 each to participate in this expedition and to then spread the word on how great dual-sporting is. I signed on, did the ride in mid-August in the mountains of Colorado, and now I'm telling you how great it is. Stay with me here, especially if you're one of those people who think you'd never be interested in off-road riding. Dual-sport riding is exploratory, adventurous, and downright exciting! It's just you with Mother Nature showing off some of her best work. The only traffic you'll encounter is

a herd of cows or elk, or a flock of turkeys crossing the road.

"Don't be alarmed if you crash two or three times." I was warned during my dual-sport lesson. "Crash!" my mind echoed. "Are you kidding me?" My instructor, Andrea Beach from Coach2Ride.com, continued, "Crashing means you've made a mistake, but you'll learn from it." Crashing in street riding is not a good thing. Outcomes are often grim. But in dual-sport riding, you can often keep on riding right after a crash. I should know: as I crashed four times: once in sand; once in a mud puddle; once riding up a steep, rocky, rutted incline; and once on a steep, heavily graveled turn. Each time I got up, brushed myself off, and hopped back on the bike. Three of the crashes were a result of not looking where I wanted to go. You've heard that in street riding: Look where you want to go. I looked down in the murky mud puddle wondering if I'd make it through and bam! Down I went. I went where I looked — into the mud. I should have had my eyes up, looking ahead. I crashed on the incline because of excessive speed. I was in second gear trying to find a line to climb the hill, but I should have been in first gear, taking my time rolling from rock to rock. The speed literally threw the bike out from under me. I tend to be anxious and overthink my choices, which is why I fell so much. I learned from my mistakes.

Have I scared you off yet? I hope not. It's not about speed in dual-sporting. It's about taking your time, strategically finding a line, and sticking with it as the knobby tires dig into the surface and power you through to new heights — literally. The payoff is incredible. I crossed three 12,000' mountain passes where no street motorcycles can go, and for all the tumbles and dirtiness, I came away with a newfound confidence. I had pushed through personal boundaries and blasted through fears ("That's really steep and rocky!") while adding an exciting new dimension to my love of two-wheeled travel. If you've been uttering, "Been there, done that" of your street-riding experience, if you desire to venture off the beaten path and escape civilization for awhile, if you desire a new challenge, then give dual-sport riding a try. You won't be disappointed.

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