

Dress for Excess: Motorcycle Apparel

Your motorcycling apparel choices should consider comfort and protection from not only crashes but the everyday challenges of riding a motorcycle.



Because your choice of riding gear is as important to making motorcycling fun as your choice of motorcycle, *Motorcycle Cruiser* magazine includes regular articles about riding apparel. The right gear makes motorcycling safer and more comfortable through a wide range of conditions. Yet apparel-buying decision may be based on little more than what the wearer sees while standing in front a mirror. Consider a riding jacket. Most riders buy on style, but a real riding jacket should do much more than look good. With a bit of augmentation (layering), it should actually *increase* your comfort throughout the range of temperatures you ride in, serve your needs on the road, prevent damage to your machine, ward off gravel and bugs, and on that day when something goes wrong, provide significant protection from abrasion and even impact. That's the difference between a motorcycle jacket, and good-looking but functionally empty jacket.

Be Cool

You can actually be cooler in a solid crash-resistant motorcycle jacket than in a T-shirt in hot weather, but the jacket must have good venting in places where the moving air touches it. If you ride behind a large windshield, that means that it must have vents out on the sleeves, perhaps even on the outside of the sleeves. I have a Firstgear jacket, for example, with a unique scoop on the outside of the forearms to catch air flowing around the shield. If you don't have a windshield, then large vents in the upper chest, such as the tuck-away panels on some Vanson jackets, are a cool solution. What goes in must come out, so the jacket should have exit venting on the back too. If you are buying a jacket just for warm weather one of the mesh motorcycle jackets can actually keep you cooler while moving than riding in just a shirt.

Those vents can be a liability on cold rides, so if you plan to use a mesh or vented jacket in a wider range of temperatures, there should be some means of sealing them. An insulating liner increases a jacket's cold-weather utility. A longer jacket, especially one with some sort of belt or elastic waist, will reduce the drafts that can blow up your back and chill your kidneys.

Various other design features can expand a jacket's temperature range. If the front closure features a snap-down flap over the zipper, you might be able to get air flowing through by unzipping the jacket most of the way but using the snaps to keep yourself fully covered. Sleeves that close with a zipper plus a snap can provide a similar option to keep the closure intact but let some air flow through.

The Fine Points

Massive zippers, fancy snaps or big chrome buckles may look cool, but they can also scratch your bike's paint, especially on the tank. Sleeve zippers and snaps will also come into contact with your bike more frequently than you might suppose. However, don't abandon these kinds of closures in favor of a knit cuff. The problem with knit-style cuffs, often found on aviator-style jackets, is that they permit the sleeve to ride up your arm if you are sliding on it in a crash. The sleeve should close snugly enough that it can not pull up and expose your forearm. You probably want some adjustability in the cuff area though to accommodate additional layers of clothing, watches or gloves. A closure using hook-and-loop material (such as Velcro) can provide great flexibility. Our preference is for a system that uses hook-and-loop material or snaps to adjust the size combined with a zipper (independent of the adjusting system) for closure. The the least convenient cuff systems are those where you must zip *and* adjust each time you put the jacket on. This is also true of waist adjustments. The adjustments help you accommodate varying layers beneath, but I'd rather just zip the jacket and not have to mess with the belt each time I put it on.

Jacket length is also an issue. Short jackets tend to be the most popular from a styling standpoint, but I have noticed that few experienced riders use them as their primary jacket. Short jackets have a tendency to pull up in a slide, leaving you exposed between the bottom of the jacket and the top of your pants. I prefer a jacket that reaches my hips, since it is less likely to ride up that far in a slide. It also keeps breezes from blowing up my back on colder rides.

Remember that anything you want to reach while riding must be accessible to your left hand, so change pockets for tolls, map pockets, etc. should be on the right side. Zipper pulls should be large enough to grip with heavy gloves. If you are planning on mating the jacket to pants, it's nice if it comes with a zipper for that purpose, though that can be sewed in later. One feature I find indispensable when I'm not using the jacket is a hanging loop.

Motorcycle jackets offer a wide variety of collar styles, including some that zip off. I prefer a tall collar that I can leave open when the weather is warm or closed snugly to fend off cold or bugs. If the collar uses a tab-type closure that fastens with hook-and-loop fastener, the hook portion should be on the tab with a loop patch that allows you to fold the tab inside the jacket when it's not in use. This will prevent the hook section from snagging your helmet strap.

Wear Protection



Soft, supple fashion leather may look good in the showroom, but it provides no real abrasion protection, a fact that will become painfully obvious when you are sliding along the asphalt at 50 mph. It also marks the wearer as a pretender, not a real motorcyclist. That heavy, motorcycle-weight leather may not hug your curves like the paper-thin stuff, but it will break in and become quite comfortable in a few rides. Though you will pay more, riding leather will also last far longer than the fashion-weight stuff.

Armor may seem, well...unseemly, until you need it, then it might prevent broken bones or perhaps even internal injuries. Apparel with armor might look and feel lumpy when you first wear it; although the looks won't change much, we have learned that most armor molds and moves to fit the body it's wrapped around. Though meaningful research is just beginning on what sort of body armor is most effective, it stands to reason that the kind of armor built like a helmet, with an outer shell to spread out the impact load and a layer of slowly resilient foam, is the best bet. However, almost any sort of padding is likely to improve on the impact-absorbing capabilities of leather or cordura.

Leather isn't the only suitable material for motorcycling. Aerostich pioneered protective riding gear made from synthetic materials, and other firms have followed. The Aerostich suit also serves as an example of easy entry, useful features, custom construction, and accessible repair facilities, all points worth considering. The Aerostich suit uses a coated material that can keep you dry in a brief rainstorm, though the coating also blocks air movement. A similar suit from Motoport is not coated, making it significantly cooler in hot weather. To get rain protection, you'll need the firm's liner or a rainsuit worn over it.

Getting into Your Pants

Jeans, especially heavy ones, do offer some protection in a crash. They are substantially better than light slacks and a world ahead of shorts. They may also offer a good level of comfort, protecting your legs from wind and sun and allowing some air to flow over your skin. The only way you are going to get better wind flow with protection is by wearing mesh pants over shorts.

If you are buying pants for protecting your lower region, consider the points above about heavy leather and the need for cuff closures that won't ride up. I am amazed at how often I see people riding in chaps or pants made from fashion-weight leather in hot weather. You get all the lack of cooling with almost none of the protection of serious leather. Chaps that leave your glutes uncovered also make me scratch my head, since most falls leave you with third-degree monkey butt. Instead of chaps, look for overpants with full-length zippers, which make them at least as easy to put on as chaps and provide significantly more protection than open-butt chaps.

Decide how you expect to wear the pants before you go shopping. Will they be worn full-time on the days you ride, and have only underwear beneath? Will you put them on and take them off during the day and wear them over jeans? If so, what will you have in your jeans pockets? Take the pocket contents along when trying on overpants. Will you be able to reach things in your pockets? If not, where will you put wallet, keys, etc.? Make sure the pants are easy to get on and off if they are to be donned and doffed at roadside and that they will roll up into some storable form to strap to or tuck away on your bike. Armor will make this harder, but leaving it out will make falls harder.

Full Coverage

Of course, the best protection comes from a one-piece riding suit. The epitome of street protection and motorcycling functionality is the one-piece Aerostich suit. It is made from heavy materials that provide protection from the elements and in a crash. Armor panels provide some protection from impacts. There are plenty of reports of people who have crashed at speeds over 100 mph and come to rest with their bodies and Aerostich suits intact. A one-piece Aerostich is almost as easy to don as a jacket—just step into one leg, zip up the mail zipper and the other leg. Its only shortcoming is its limited temperature range, since it doesn't vent too well and requires layers to keep you warm. There are one-piece suits from other brands that also provide excellent protection, and Aerostich and others other two-piece suits.

Buying Boots

Unless you are buying boots with some armor over the anklebones, you probably aren't getting any special protection with motorcycle-specific boots. However, one of the many waterproof boots can extend your comfort in the rain, and a motorcycle boot's sole design can improve your riding experience in other ways. Most of all, the sole should provide good traction when you plant it in oil or sand at a stop, to prevent you from tipping over. This is a big problem with cowboy boots on motorcycles; with their smooth soles, they desert you when you need traction on a slick surface. A deep rubber sole can also absorb some vibration. Some motorcycle boots now offer venting, which you might also get with a lace-up style boot.

It can pay to have your motorcycle available while shopping for boots. That's because the boot should work with your foot controls. Boots with a vertical face on the fronts of their heel blocks can limit your options in terms of foot position on footpegs. A ramped heel

block may allow you to reach the brake and shift levers more easily. Short-legged riders may find that boots with thick soles (not tall heels) can help them to plant their feet more securely at a stop. (Some also have thicker soles added.)

There is some research that indicates that heavier boots, by increasing the pendulum effect of the foot on your leg, may increase the likelihood of leg fractures in an accident.

I have flat feet, and finding boots that are comfortable to walk in can be a challenge, but they are out there with the other features I want -- easy entry combined with secure fit so they don't fling off in a crash, waterproofing, enough flexibility to shift and brake, and not too much bulk.

Velvet Fist in the Iron Glove

After a helmet, a solid pair of gloves is the most important protection you can wear while riding. I have heard too many tales of riders who have ground all or part of a finger or thumb off in a crash. A solid glove can at least slow this down.

The best way to have a glove for every situation is to have several sets of gloves. I think the minimum for a serious rider is three sets—a light vented pair for summer, a middleweight pair for in-between weather and a heavy insulated pair for cold rides. I have a box of gloves in the closet, perhaps 20 pairs, and almost every set get used at some point during the year.



Features all motorcycling gloves should have in common are substantial materials, rugged construction, a solid retention system and comfort. For lighter gloves, deerskin or goatskin is a supple and comfortable yet tough material that resists abrasion. Look for seams sewn with tough thread material (turning the gloves inside out may make this easier to examine) and a retention system that holds the glove firmly in place once it's tightened (so that it is not flung off in a crash). If a glove is initially stiff, it will probably soften up and conform to your hand with wear. Gloves that bunch up in the palms will soon become a problem when wrapped around a handlebar. Gloves that are pre-curved—that is, shaped as if they were beginning to grab the grip—are less likely to build up in the palm.

My preference for summer gloves is a perforated solid-leather (deerskin or whatever) type. The part-fabric types don't seem strong enough to stay together reliably in a crash. These days you can also find gloves with armor and wind-catching vents from several

makers. Fingerless gloves are little better than no gloves at all. If you have seen the remains of hands of people who have endured crashes in fingerless gloves or just the sun- and windburn on riders who have used them on long rides, you'll leave them in your weight room. They have no place on motorcycles.

Some middleweight gloves are waterproof, which is a worthwhile feature. As with heavier winter gloves, the extra material shouldn't make the gloves too stiff or bulk up the palm areas.

Added Warmth

If you want the ultimate in warmth for your hands, consider electric gloves. However, don't buy the gloves until you have the electric vest. All the brands of electric vests that we have tried make a huge dent in cold weather, and by warming your vital organs, they also get your extremities warmer as well. If cold impairs your riding pleasure or control, an electric vest can raise your temperature dramatically and transform an unpleasant experience back into riding fun.

Hat Trick

This article has not discussed helmets, but a good helmet is vital. A helmet is the only piece of riding equipment that can actually save your life in a crash. Even better, it can be difference between spending your life in a wheelchair sucking meals through a straw or living a normal life. I am always amazed at riders who say they are less comfortable riding without a helmet than without one. As our article on picking a helmet points out, if you spend the time and money to buy and adapt to a comfortable full-coverage helmet, it will actually make riding more pleasant by reducing fatigue and noise, protecting your eyes, sheltering you from rain and bugs, providing a controlled flow of air on hot days, making your head warmer on cold days, and keeping the wind and sun from dehydrating you. Riders who have spent the time to try a lot of helmets have all found some that fit them very comfortably, and I don't know any who are more comfortable at speeds above 45 mph, with a good helmet than without it. We have noticed at big cruiser rallies that more riders have stopped following the flock and wearing no helmets or non-DOT novelty beanies and are choosing instead to wear real DOT helmets with actual protection.

Dress to Prevent Accidents

Wearing gear that makes you comfortable and prevent fatigue by blocking wind and noise can help you ride more safely. However, there is an even more dramatic way of dressing to avoid accidents: wear bright colors. Accident causation studies have frequently noted that motorcyclists with light and bright-colored helmets and jackets are less likely to be involved in accidents. Other drivers should see us, but sometimes they don't try hard enough and sometimes the job is made difficult by glare or obstructions that obscure their view. I usually wear a bright orange helmet, and notice a difference when I am wearing something less visible in traffic. Other drivers are considerably more likely to overlook

me. A bright jacket also helps. The colors that seem to be most effective are orange, yellow, white, red and perhaps pink (though there isn't much pink motorcycle apparel out there). Motorcyclists like the fact that dark colors don't show dirt and perhaps contributes to a bad-ass image, but bright colors are a simple, passive way of avoiding getting flattened.

Around here, new bikes show up all the time, and so does clothing. However, the bikes eventually go back, but when we find apparel we like, we hang onto it. I have a couple of jackets that I still wear that are in their third decade, and most of us have proven pieces of apparel that go along on the long rides, when space is limited and we need to have clothing we can depend on to keep the ride comfortable—and come through in a crash—under a wide range of circumstances. Hopefully, you have or will find those core apparel items too.