

with three words. Vast, rugged and majestic, with a beauty that encompassed all three. One of the many highlights of my adventure was actually meeting Dr. Gregory Frazier at "The Motorcycle Shop" in Anchorage, Alaska. I will end by saying that if at all possible, every "motorcyclist" needs to put an Alaskan trip on their "to do list." You won't be sorry!

John E. Kendall
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Radiator Problem

I own a VTX 1800, and although I've never fouled a plug, I'm on my third radiator in 10,000 miles. 90% of my riding is on the highway at 65 mph, going back and forth to work, which is probably why I'm not fouling plugs. I was just shown a copy of your magazine, and my friend suggested to write a letter. If you have any other history of this problem, I would love to know.

Eric Hudspeth
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Steering Headshake Solved

I just read Frank Cheek's letter in the June 'Downtime Files.' Having logged nearly 190K miles on my 1986 GL1200 SEi and doing all of its maintenance, I still can't believe that the mysterious "35 mph wobble" still exists out there. The bottom line is this: Most dealer mechanics do not read or practice the factory recommended procedures. I fixed half-a-dozen 'unfixable' wobblers over the years. Now a friend is suffering the dreaded 35 mph wobble with his GL1800. His local dealer has "adjusted the steering head" numerous times and never solved the problem. Like so many others, he took it in and they blamed wheel-balance, tire tread, etc., etc. Just to check, I asked him to put it on the centerstand and raise the front wheel. Sure enough, the bars flopped to the side and 'that, my friend' is the problem.

The American Honda service manual for the 1984-1987 GL1200 specifies a procedure something like this: Place the bike on the centerstand and raise the front wheel. In that position, using a fish scale on the end of the handlebar, it should show measurable tension to start the bar in motion (I don't remember the exact number but I think it was 14-16 oz).

My friend with the GL1800—after much frustration with his dealer—has finally purchased the factory service manuals. For the GL1800, they specify a similar procedure except hooked at the triple clamp (and a correspondingly higher tension value). The bottom line is this: To dampen the wobble, the steering head bearings should have a slight amount of preload. If you raise the front wheel in the air and bars can flop to

the side, they are too loose. If you nudge the bars into motion, there should be just enough drag to stop them before it gets to the stop.

The old stand-by procedure of "pushing on the fork legs checking for zero free-play" is NOT a sufficient check of the bearing preload.

Since the days of my GL1200, I have used a similar procedure for every one of my bikes from my KTM 620 Adventure to my ZX11. The lighter bikes need slightly less preload, the heavier bikes more. You'll know if it's too tight because the low speed handling will get weird (the caster effect no longer centers the bars at low speeds). This procedure ALWAYS cured my GL1200's headshake. The original bearings lasted about 120K miles before they developed flat spots. Take a closer look at any bike exhibiting the 35 mph wobble and I'll bet things are just a touch loose.

Greg Cifu
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RE: Gas Tank Leak

After you published my letter on this in the August "Downtime Files," I got a call from one of your readers who lives nearby and who also happens to work for a bike shop in the area.

His take on the reason for the inside-out corrosion of the gas tank is that it probably happened in the part of the tank where the reserve is. He said if I seldom used much of the reserve, moisture could accumulate in that part of the tank and could eventually cause the corrosion problem I experienced. In fact, I very seldom ran the bike on the reserve setting for more than a few miles.

What do you think? Does he really have a point?

Joe Marshall
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Joe, if the bike did a lot of sitting and you tended to purchase gas from discount stations (some will actually put water in the gas deliberately to stretch supplies and make extra money), the water could have settled out, and being heavier than gasoline, it would have settled to the lowest point on the tank, presumably where the reserve is located. It's possible.

To the reader with the rusted-out gas tank: I, too, had a tank rust all the way through from the inside when I was living in the South and riding year around. I concluded that condensation had accumulated over the years, pooled in the bottom of the tank, which caused the rust. I had not had that problem before (or since) while living in the North. Here, every fall, everyone

either drains the tank, or fills it up with a mixture of gas, drygas, and stabilizer. Any condensation is disposed of annually and does not have the chance to build up.

William Pinkney
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Nightmare: Ducati Immobilizer Key & Codes

As a subscriber for the past couple of years, I always read your letters from other readers. This week I had an experience that, had I been aware of the situation beforehand, would have helped me avoid a significant amount of pain. I would like to share the experience in the hope of helping others avoid a similar one.

This week I purchased a used Ducati Monster 620ie from a local Ducati dealer. When I took delivery of the bike, I was given the bike and two keys. After getting it home, I realized the owner's manual was missing, but was able to download a copy from the Ducati web site. Imagine my surprise when I read that there were not two but *three* keys that should have been included, plus a code card to disable the immobilizer in an emergency.

The missing key happened to be the "master" key, which evidently is required to reprogram replacement keys for the bike. I contacted the dealer who sold me the bike, who said "don't worry" about the missing key and code card. Not accepting this, I checked with another dealer, who confirmed my fears that the key and card were pretty important. I then e-mailed Ducati USA, who sent the reply below:

Bruce, thanks for taking the time to contact Ducati, and congratulations on your recent purchase. I'm not sure what your dealer is talking about, the red key is actually quite important. The red key is the master key to the bike. If there's no red key, there's no way of getting into the immobilizer system if something should go wrong. The factory cannot help either. It's very possible that the bike can be used for years upon years without the red key ever being needed. But if it ever is, you will have to buy a new ignition switch (or complete lock set), dashboard, and ECU. I'm sorry that someone lost the red key, but there is nothing I can do.

*Sincerely,
Ducati North America, Inc.
Customer Service*

I have since sent the following to Ducati, which pretty much sums up my opinion about the situation:

"Thank you for your reply to my inquiry, below. However, your answer is rather dis-

couraging to me, and I'm certain it will be for many others who will be finding themselves in my position as time goes on.

It is not at all unusual for people to lose keys, paperwork, etc., or otherwise fail to forward them on to subsequent owners. Based on this simple and obvious aspect of human nature, do you not see the flaw in your current system regarding this "red master key" and code card?

As I stated before, I had never purchased a bike with an immobilizer system before. Since the owner's manual was also missing, I had no way of knowing that the two keys delivered with the bike were not the complete set until after downloading the manual from the Ducati web site. I am extremely disappointed with the Ducati dealer who sold me this bike (with only 800 miles on it) without ensuring that something this important was included with the bike when it was traded in. I am also disappointed with a manufacturer who would sell such an expensive and sophisticated product that could not be serviced for a subsequent legitimate owner unlucky enough to have been unaware of the need for a "red key" and code card to be present with the bike.

Why isn't the red master key replaceable by the manufacturer, and why can't the immobilizer code be reset or otherwise recovered by a qualified dealer?

Please either reply or forward these questions to someone in a position to speak to me in much greater detail regarding these concerns, and possible solutions..."

As always, "buyer beware." Regards,
Bruce Johnston
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MotoVentures

Thank you for publishing Steve Larsen's superb and accurate article on Gary LaPlante's MotoVentures Dirt Bike Training School near Temecula, California (May 2003). After reading that article, I decided to attend one of MotoVentures' two-day riding clinics with my friend, Bob. We were not disappointed.

I would like to make some additional observations for the benefit of my fellow MCN subscribers who may also be considering taking Gary's school.

First and foremost, do not be afraid. This school is suitable for riders of all abilities from raw beginners to experts. It is not boot camp. Gary will help you reach your goals at your own pace. He will encourage you to improve and stretch your abilities, but you are always the one in control. Second, you don't need to live in Southern California to attend this school. By booking ahead, you can find relatively inexpensive flights to Ontario Airport and you can use one of

MotoVentures' bikes for very little additional cost. Third, the entertainment value of watching someone like Gary ride is worth the price of admission. His riding skills have to be seen to be believed. Last, but by no means least, Gary treats his customers like friends. His house is the base camp at the ranch and anyone is welcome to help themselves to drinks or snacks from the kitchen or lie down on his couch if they want to miss a session to recharge their batteries.

Bob and I had a great time at MotoVentures. We both learned and improved, and just as importantly (for us), we had lots of fun. Bob might have won the riding skills contest, but I won the water fight! Riding dirt bikes every day for a living is Gary's dream. Thankfully, for us mere mortals, MotoVentures gives him the opportunity to share his dream with us.

George Ledwith
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Brake Questions

My bike is a 1996 Honda VFR750. As much as I'm careful with applying my rear brake, I still end up locking the rear wheel from time to time. This leads me to avoid using the rear brake almost entirely. However, I still want (or have) to use it in some situations. I have read that some people 'weaken' the rear brake system so that it will not lock up, even under high (foot) pressure.

The book "Sport Riding Techniques" by Nick Ienatsch mentions removing material from the rear pads and/or restricting the pedal movement. Other options mentioned by others are: Introducing some air bubbles into the rear brake line, using pads with low friction coefficient (If there are such pads, would this be the easiest way?), polishing the rear rotor, and shortening the brake pedal (less leverage).

I think that this is a major safety issue. In a real emergency situation most people will panic and lock their rear wheel (according to statistics). A weaker rear brake may not be ideal, but it is certainly better than locking the rear wheel.

Can you please comment on this issue?
Thanks,
Dan Resnick

Dan, before you attempt to make your rear brake less efficient, consider that the reason you lock the rear wheel inadvertently can be because it lacks sufficient feel (see Tony Foale's "Feel, Part I—Brakes," in the August issue).

Brake lines that swell, air bubbles, etc. cause a disconnect between the lever movement and the braking force, absorbing movement we presume is producing more brak-

ing force. At the point of lockup, just a slight additional movement will create lockup without warning. The same pressure will still be necessary, but we determine a lot of the braking feel by travel.

I had a similar situation on my Yamaha FZ1, and by replacing the rear brake line with a braided stainless type from Galfer and bleeding it thoroughly, the feel improved to where this was no longer a problem. Try it.

—Dave Searle

"The Ventilator"

Now I've seen it all. A \$20 coat hanger, with a \$5 optional "pants hook." Come on guys, can't you find something better than this to feature and waste money on. Really, this is truly absurd.

Gary Spitz
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Gary, I'll bet you don't own a set of leathers that set you back nearly a thousand dollars, do you? The product makes sense if you do.

Removing Stripped Nuts and Bolts

I read with interest your article on removing stripped nuts and bolts. Most people have a tool at their disposal that will work better than any of your recommended tools.

The best tool to remove a stripped bolt is a plumber's wrench. As you rotate it the wrench will tighten. It works better than any sort of vise grip. I have easily removed bolts that I have twisted the head of the bolt clean off leaving only the threaded shaft sticking out. Try it next time. You will be impressed and amazed.

Gary Crawley
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Discrepancy: V-Rod's Maintenance Cost

What's the scoop on the V-Rod valve adjustment cost? I just read that the engine has to be dropped from the frame to do a valve adjustment, cost \$700, but your test date on the V-Rod shows the cost for this only \$216. Which is correct?

Kim McKinivan
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We didn't know about the engine needing to be dropped. When we price out the maintenance chart, we ask for the price of any adjusting shims, figure that half will need to be replaced, plus the price of any gaskets that need to be replaced when the valve covers are removed. The bike was so new, the dealers probably didn't have that information, which often happens with brand new machines.

—Dave Searle