

Lessons from the loose stuff

MCN's newest rider heads to Salisbury Plain to discover how a guided trail ride will boost your biking

By Joseph Wright
VIDEOGRAPHER

Tarmac roads are smooth, grippy and (occasionally...) well-maintained, making it easy for motorbikes to reach their destinations with relatively little effort. So why do some riders ditch this predictable surface in favour of bumpy, loose and unmarked trails? Because, sometimes, a little chaos is more fun than a smooth ride.

This year, I've been riding the all-new Royal Enfield Himalayan 450 as part of the MCN fleet. To fully explore the potential of this adventure bike, I made it my mission to learn how to ride off-road. However, enthusiasm can only get you so far and as I quickly discovered, off-road riding requires a whole new skill set and is a lot harder than it looks.

As the videographer at MCN, I'm constantly filming skilled riders tackling off-road terrain with apparent ease. With this impression

in my mind, a little while ago I confidently headed out on the Himalayan to my nearest green lane, expecting to glide effortlessly over every rut and bump. I made it less than 50 metres before the tyres clogged up, the front-end felt like it was folding everywhere and I ended up cross-rutted, out of breath and thoroughly humbled. Time to go back to school to develop my skills in the dirt with the help of off-road training experts Phoenix Trails.

Location, location, location...

At Phoenix Trails, all you need to attend is a valid motorcycle licence and a spare pair of socks for your journey home. Although, I forgot the socks, making for a long ride home with the risk of contracting trench foot after a day of puddle jumping. Everything else is provided, including the bike, fuel, gear and even a spot of lunch. But what really appealed to me about Phoenix Trails was their location.

Continued over

Phoenix Trails

If you're interested in enhancing your off-road skills, consider checking out the team at Phoenix Trails. A full day of riding is £270 and if you hold a full licence or even an A2 licence like me, you're welcome to join in.

www.phoenixmotorcycletraining.co.uk



Joseph with the Salisbury Plain Stig...



'Sometimes, a little chaos is more fun than a smooth ride'

No wonder they suggest taking spare socks...



It's a whole new world of riding



Now it's time to get out exploring



Kit, a bike and lunch are all included



Stand up and look well ahead

'Happy with my progress, Justin takes me out on proper trails'

Based in the heart of Salisbury Plain (they also run schools in the North Downs of Kent, West Pennines and Peak District) the Salisbury Plain school boasts an on-site private beginner's circuit, which is perfect for mastering the basics. Once confident, you progress to the surrounding area, over 300 square miles full of every kind of trail imaginable to thoroughly test your new skills and satisfy your off-road cravings. With instructors who know the area like the back of their hand, the difficulty level of the trails can be ramped up or reduced depending on how you are getting along, meaning you never feel out of your depth or under-challenged.

Learning the ropes

My instructor for the day is 'the Salisbury Plain Stig', or Justin as he is also known, who promises me the session will be "the best fun you can have with your clothes on". Spoiler alert - he was right.

After gearing up using equipment provided by the school, we head out to the grass circuit to complete a few laps so Justin can assess my riding

skills. "Your riding is good... for the road. Now let's change everything for the dirt," is his conclusion before explaining that finding traction off-road requires doing the opposite of what you do on the road - standing up, keeping your weight centred on top of the bike and pushing the bike over into turns. Initially, this feels unfamiliar as I'm used to hanging off the bike, but once I started weighting the bike correctly and pushing it down, it felt much more predictable and stable in the turns.

Next, we focused on throttle and braking control. Justin demonstrates how the lightweight enduro bikes the school use (Honda CRF250s and Fantic XEJ250s) are almost impossible to stall by performing countless figure-of-eights without using the clutch or throttle. When I try it myself, I quickly grasp how forgiving these off-road orientated bikes are compared to standard road-going ones. I then do some final laps on the circuit, picking up the pace and implementing trailing the rear brake to scrub off speed. Happy with my progress thus far, Justin

suggests we head out to explore some of the proper trails.

Trail training

The biggest difference between the practice area and green lanes is the unpredictability of the trail and not knowing what is around every corner. Regulating my speed using the rear brake and throttle, one nugget of advice that really helps me was to keep looking as far ahead as possible, allowing me to adjust my speed to the conditions. As I gain confidence and pace, I find that more technical sections become manageable when I relax, loosen up, and let the bike flow over bumps and drive out of muddy parts. But not everything comes easily and ruts quickly prove my nemesis.

Even after the training I still struggle with deep ruts, mainly because of the lack of an obvious and easy escape route makes me tense and nervous. Justin spent a lot of time with me working on transitioning from standing up to paddling, which is where you sit back down on the bike and use your feet to dab the ground to maintain balance, and while this technique



300 sq miles of land to enjoy

helped me conquer sections that previously would have left me on my backside, it's an area I certainly need more work on. Alongside how I manage my energy.

Fit to ride

Throughout the day, Justin puts a massive focus on being as energy-efficient as possible with everything from picking up, getting-on and riding the bike. Not quite grasping the importance of this, it was only towards the end of the day when I was feeling super-tired and started making more and more fatigue-related mistakes that the reality of his advice dawned on me. While you don't need to be super-fit, I'd definitely recommend building up a decent aerobic base to get the most from your day's riding. Justin was always on hand to help pick up the bike, which helped me regroup my thoughts and concentrate on the riding, but a bit of extra fitness on my side would have been beneficial.

Unexpected benefits

Since my training day with Phoenix Trails, I've been putting everything I learned into action. Granted, now it's on a 200kg Himalayan rather than a lightweight enduro, but my newfound confidence and knowledge has allowed me to feel right at home in the dirt and boosted my confidence levels enormously.

I now thoroughly enjoy the challenge of trail riding and am looking at doing even more in the future. And this new skill set has also had unexpected benefits for my road riding as I'm finding myself implementing more of a gymkhana-style to navigate slow, tight corners to maintain a good view of the road ahead as well as control over the bike.

Thanks to a bit of wise advice and instruction in off-road skills I'm now a safer, more confident, rider on both the tarmac and dirt. What more could you ask for? [MCN](#)



Watch out for any branches...



JOSEPH'S TRAIL TIPS



Joe gets some useful pointers

'A quick lesson really pays off'

1 Think differently

A lot of what you know about riding a bike changes when you head off-road. It's important to re-program your brain when transitioning from the road to the dirt to get the motorcycle to behave how you need it to.

2 Energy conservation

Save your energy. Keeping relaxed on the bike prevents you from using up too much stamina. If you start to feel tired, take a break before you make a silly mistake that might dent your confidence and enjoyment of the day.

3 Seek expert advice

Venturing off-road when you're not feeling in control of your machine is never going to be a great experience. A quick lesson on a more manageable bike will help you get to grips with the basics for the future. Don't underestimate the positive impact a single training session can have.

4 Expect the unexpected

There's no need to risk injury to yourself or, more importantly, to other trail users by going too fast or getting out of control. Be prepared to encounter dog walkers, cyclists, and even tanks (in the case of Salisbury Plain) along the way.

5 Safety in numbers

Riding off-road alone is never advisable as you can quickly find yourself in a tricky situation, as I did on my first green lane. When riding in a group, the day becomes almost effortless with people around to assist you when needed and it's more fun too.

'Take a break to keep your energy levels'



Gotta keep those energy levels up



The site has something for everyone



Don't ride alone... it is safer and more fun with others