

HOW FAST IS



FAST?

SHOW ME SOMEONE WHO says they never break the limit and I'll show you a liar. Speed is one of the reasons we ride bikes. One of the essential sensations we all crave. If we didn't feel that way we'd take the bus or join a band of woolly-hatted rambling enthusiasts. Speed is a drug and we're all addicts.

The roar of the wind, the grey blur of the Tarmac passing inches beneath your feet, the bugs splattering over your visor... On a motorcycle you read, filter and process signals on a heightened level: that's why every ride leaves you craving the next. Meanwhile car drivers are cocooned in their tinny cells, slowly going to sleep,

with their senses dulled and all the life-enhancing properties of rapid motion utterly lost to them.

But speed has surprisingly little to do with numbers on the speedo. The magic line, where ho-hum becomes oh-my-god, is a variable one. After all, you're hardly likely to be panting with pleasure as your charter flight to Greece breaches the 300mph barrier. But try doing it on a bike and... well, you'd be on an adrenalin high for weeks.

So if there's no fixed point where speed becomes intrinsically exciting, how much does it move? Who's having the biggest speed buzz and at what speed are they having it? How fast is fast? >>>

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FIRING UP the engine of a CCM 644, I hear the crackling thunder of a deafening race can. The bike starts to tremble. So do I. Anticipation always gets me when 'a bike I've never ridden' is tempting me to test its wares. And testing for speed over rough ground on unfamiliar territory means this beast has the advantage.

Donning kit and some goggles, still ingrained with mud from their last outing, I swing my leg over the high seat and the springy suspension catches me like a hammock. My tiptoes touch the track; I'm high above the ground, hands resting on the wide bars, back straight with a commanding view of rolling roadless countryside.

Feet up, goggles down, I wind it open and it roars at me. Feeling my way, testing the ground for a few metres, I roll off and savour the big single's bark echoing through the wood. Birds scatter from the trees.

Onward as the track rises and my confidence grows. As it does, so my speed increases but the needle's barely topping 25mph. All my senses revolt against it, and I begin to wish I'd taped the damn clocks up. It feels so much faster. But I'm being fooled.

Trees close in around me and I duck, last minute, to feel the whip of unseen overhanging branches against my helmet. Long grasses thrash my legs and I swallow insects whole. There's no time to know they're there until they're stickily tickling the back of my throat; willed up by choking, forced down by gravity.

I hit the dips and troughs, hidden by summer growth and the bike shudders. A damp patch now – the tyres slew and the engine note soars. I roll on through, steady throttle, and the back catches again. I love those momentary feelings of loss of control.

Dead wood in a ditch to the side of me catches the light and turns into a suspiciously body-shaped blur. I have to stop, go back and look, just to check. Withered bark. Must stop watching Crimewatch.

I glance at the speedo. Tap it. As if that's going to make a difference. Further down the track and the trees thicken, offering dark, dappled shade from the hot sun. I brake and slide the front a little, bringing the bike to a halt. I kill the engine and suddenly the forest is silent. I take off my lid, grateful to feel a slight breeze on my damp forehead, light a fag and pause for thought.

Man, it's hot. I feel like I've been on a big adventure. A long, fast one. The clock on the bike tells me it's been just a few miles and only a few more minutes. I look down. My legs are sweaty from the heat of the engine and my boots are sticky with pollen.

25mph my arse.

110mph through the desert...

Off-road expert and Dakar veteran, Simon Pavey, knows a thing or two about the combination of dirt-riding and speed.

"It's natural that Liisa thought she was going faster than she was. When you're riding on say, a green lane, there are many factors that can fool you into just that. It's largely down to how close you are to your surroundings.

"If you're travelling on a wide open plane, for example, the nearest tree can be miles away – you don't have that sensation of rushing past them. But at as little as 15mph when the trees are just an inch from your bars, it winds the whole thing up.

"Doing the Dakar, speeds can get up to 110mph. You're almost blinded by the environment you're in, by the terrain: dunes, rocks, you name it. Half the time you're riding on faith."

25MPH

HOW FAST IS FAST... **ON GRAVEL?**

"Trees close in around me and I duck to feel the whip of overhanging branches against my helmet"

HOW FAST IS FAST... 16_{CM} OFF THE GROUND?

IT'S A GLORIOUS day at Cadwell Park and Steve Sinnott is getting his sidecar outfit ready for the track. It, and he, have just returned from the TT (where Steve has been racing since 1967) and today... Today I'm getting a go. Another ambition coming to fruition.

I'm not nervous, I'm excited, as I clean my visor and zip my leathers together. But then, with a push start, the engine fires up and we await the all-clear on the slipway down to the track. It's a noise I've heard before as a spectator: that deep, pulsating throb as the sidecars line up ready to tackle the course. OK. Now I'm nervous.

I'm all of 16 centimetres above the ground, crouching on a tiny platform with only spindly-looking handles to hang on to. But you've got to do more than just hang on: you've got to hurl myself about. My job is to steady an inherently unstable vehicle round some of British racing's most demanding corners.

The marshall nods and waves us on and Steve revs for all he's worth. No time to think about technique. My body is sent lurching sideways as the first left-hander is upon us. There's a rumble strip. My skeleton rattles.

A right-hander coming up. I fumble for the far handle and cling on for dear life until the start straight appears. Feet dangling, I can feel the Tarmac sucking at my toes as the painted grid passes inches below. The approach of Charlies tells me to hold on to the left. Great. Until the right-hander immediately after takes me by surprise and my ribs crunch onto the fibreglass bodywork.

Every inch of the track rushes towards me. I'm virtually level with it. If you want to feel speed – every part of every mile-per-hour – this is the way to do it. When the surface you are travelling over is as close as this, there's no room for ambiguity. Or comfort.

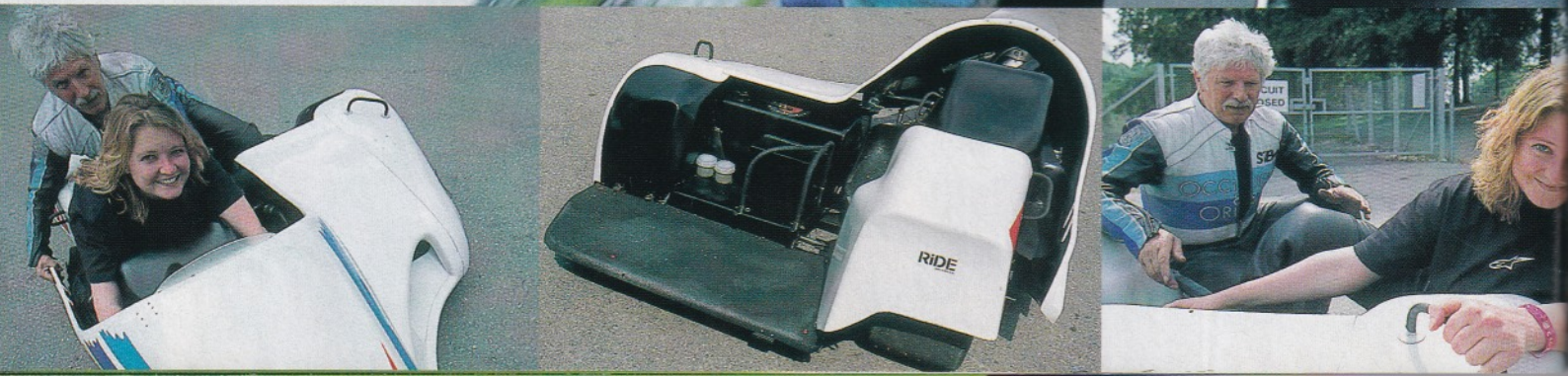
I'm so busy grinning I'm ill-prepared for the continuous stream of right-handers that start at Park bend and don't stop until the Gooseneck. My hands flit in a flurry of confusion and, for a micro-second, I'm holding on to buggery all. Grasping, I find the handles and my muscles take a battering as momentum heaves us down through the plunging left-hander of Mansfield.

Then I remember the Mountain is coming up. Steve said he'd be gentle. And he is. Thank God.

By the time we start the second lap I feel like I've been doing this for several days without sleep. Steve winds up the speed and as he does, corners get sharper and straights get shorter. I know Steve could really open it up but he seems to know my limit. Anyhow, I haven't walloped him on the back (our arranged code) for going too fast so he knows we're in a safe(ish) zone.

After 16 laps I'm a gonner. Knackered? I will never use the word in vain again. My body is jarred and already aching. It's proving hard to walk in a straight line. I'm having problems speaking, thinking, writing... but I'm exhilarated. Utterly, utterly exhilarated. I just manage to gather the presence of mind to ask Steve how fast he reckoned we were going. He tells me. Scratch what I said before – 120mph is fast.

120MPH





"Every inch of the track rushes towards me. I'm virtually level with it"

It's a way of life...

Steve Sinnott is an old hand at sidecar racing, having started his career back in 1963.

"My brother-in-law bought a bike and said he was going to race it solo. I had other plans...

"Racing sidecars is all about teamwork and the guy in the chair needs skill. He needs to think like a driver, act like a passenger and be very fit and agile. And he needs to trust me.

"It's not about just a speed fix. If you don't both know what you're doing, you crash. With a good passenger, you don't even know they're there and sometimes you think they've gone.

"As for me, don't ask what I think about being in the chair: I've never done it!"



HOW FAST IS FAST... **ON A 180_{MPH} BIKE?**

"My head's going numb.
175mph. Dammit. I should
have been redlining
it in top ages ago"



I **AT THE END OF A DISUSED RUNWAY.** There's nobody here except me and nothing here except a big sky and a whole lot of Tarmac. In front of the bike it stretches out to the horizon, slightly care-worn, held together by over-banding and persistent tufts of grass, poking through.

More apprehension. I'm sitting on my ZZ-R1200, wiping the old flies off my visor – ensuring I'll get the clearest view and buying me a few more moments delay. What am I afraid of? Riding this bike as fast as it (or I) will go. But that's why I'm here.

I once glimpsed 160mph on the clock of an R1 and that, at this moment, is my limit; my safety margin.

Why do I feel more nervous than I ever do on the road? This strip is two miles long for crying out loud and I'm wondering if I'm going to run out of room. There are no cops, cameras or clots in Cavaliers to spoil my fun so... Ah. That's why. I'm under the knife. It's like someone's turned all the lights off, except the bloody great spot, shining down on me. Nobody else to blame. My speed, my bike, my boundaries to break.

I start the engine; give it a bit of a warm-up.

The airstrip is wide and dense lines of trees protect the perimeter. There are a couple of cones, scattered about and, disconcertingly, a pheasant wandering onto the runway. It doesn't appear to have any purpose there. Better give it some action.

Distant birdsong becomes muffled as the earplugs expand in my lugholes and a strange serenity descends. There's a heat haze rippling in the distance.

Helmet, gloves, visor down, deep breath. First gear.

I give it a couple of light twists and the engine rumbles.

The green lights flicker on my aftermarket electronic tacho. Rev the engine out and they'll turn orange and then finally red as you approach the limiter.

With my eyes fixed forward, I let out the clutch and wind the throttle open.

Me, bike, runway. Me, bike, runway.

The rev counter's lights stream through green, amber, red. Like a traffic light in reverse: how apt.

Try to keep it smooth. Moving through the gears the wind thunders around me as the bike and I cut through the air, gaining momentum. Oh boy, are we gaining momentum. The view ahead turns into a tunnel; a triangular course. The closest edges of the runway to the left and the right, with the far off end of the Tarmac the apex. Tucked in, head down, the fly-splats on the lightly tinted screen lengthen.

I see 90mph; 130mph; 160mph and have to remind myself it's not enough. Look ahead. Throttle pinned. Back harder. The bike responds; keeps pulling forward. I'm in its hands but it knows what it's doing. Which is more than can be said of me.

170mph and the triangle's apex surges towards me. It's getting harder and harder to read the signals, judge the distance. I push it harder. There's still more give in the throttle but my head's starting to go numb. No, seriously. 175mph. Dammit, what am I playing at? I should have been redlining it in top ages back.

I'm oblivious to everything around me: all I can see is what's ahead. Far ahead: but getting closer faster than anything I've ever seen get close before.

Come on. Come on. Come on...

Eyes dart to the speedo. Hand hesitating on the

throttle. Indecision. Sod it: of course I'll be able to stop.

One... hundred... and... eighty.

I relish it for a split second and back off.

Everything after, every speed I've just hurtled through on the way up, feels slow in comparison and I climb down through them off the throttle, on to the brakes.

My head is numb. It's beginning to thunder in my brain. Halt. Switch off. Gloves off. Lid off. My legs don't shake but my eyes hurt and my throat's dry.

I perch on the Tarmac and light a fag next to the ZZ-R. It sits there like a patient dog, calmly waiting to be taken on another run. I turn and look back at the airstrip. Latest news from the front: the meaning of the word 'fast' is officially 180mph.

Trust me, I'm a doctor...

Psychologist Dr Anthony Reinhardt-Rutland, of Ulster university, can shed some light on the scientific aspects of our speed tests and why we are prone to changing levels of perception.

"For a start, simply being in or on a vehicle can affect us because we lose our dependency on our own muscles and mechanisms to pick up signals. The vehicle is doing all our moving for us, therefore we become more susceptible to misconceptions about the speed we are doing.

"Furthermore, the environment matters. The airfield, for example, is an impoverished environment (or visual flow field), with little to provide information. By contrast, in the forest trees are all around, shooting past. This is a visually rich flow field. Depending on the amount of info, we can be prone to misreading signals: under or overestimating our speed."

180MPH



HOW FAST IS FAST... AT 12,000^{FT}?

I SEEM TO BE SPENDING an inordinate amount of time on runways lately. I'm at RAF Valley, in the farthest corner of Wales, and an orderly row of Hawk jets are lined up in the sun. A brisk, salty breeze breathes in off the Irish Sea, buffeting my khaki-clad body as a Wing Commander, a Squadron Leader and my pilot lead me towards one of the planes: #196.

My forehead is starting to get a bit damp under my helmet and the communications and oxygen set-up clank against my leg with every forward pace. Inside pristine, white kid gloves, my hands twitch.

On our approach, the guy from the ground crew levers open the cockpit canopy and I can clearly see the zig-zag line of explosive charge encircling it. Images from the earlier video briefing flicker into my head: if the pilot decides to abort the flight and eject the plane, one touch of the MDC (miniature detonating cord) button and the roof blows up, enabling you, strapped into your seat, to fly freely out into the sky. Good-oh.

It's been quite a morning. Back in my hotel, I had been fine until the sound of planes had fired up the sky at around 7.30am, but then my stomach had started to churn and my golden slices of toast had turned to indigestible doormats at the breakfast table.

Once at the air base, it was like a first day at school. Polished linoleum-floored corridors, the institutional smell of disinfectant, carpet squares and lines of be-capped pegs. And a room to change into

my uniform. Forget G-strings, G-trousers are the order of the day if you don't want to black out in the sky. Plus fire-proof undies (fetching Y-fronted long johns...) and a 'Kwik Fit' fitter boiler suit to round off the forces look.

A medical, a briefing and a meeting with the Commanding Officer over, I manage an enforced pasta lunch ("better to have something to throw up than nothing..."). Then it's out, through the throng of strapping pilots with my man John signing out his life and mine, and off to the plane we were about to fly.

So, back to #196 and, watched by the posse on the Tarmac, John helps strap me in. Seatbelts, oxygen, intercom and leg restraints (to ensure your limbs aren't ripped in half if you have to eject). Sick bags in the thigh pockets. Visor down.

John climbs in, the steps are taken away and the engine starts up, quieter than expected. We wave goodbye to our men on the ground.

I keep giggling nervously. I'm gleefully thinking 'fairground ride, fairground ride': my only fear is sickness.

Taxi-ing to the end of the runway there's a comparison with my last runway experience but here I am sheltered: no birds, no outside sounds, just the voice of my pilot and distant crackles on the headset.

We're going down the runway and the broken white line down its centre starts to run solid. My stomach leaps. It feels fun, that first, wobbly airborne bounce as the wheels leave the ground. The Wing Commander and his men are instantly minute as we pull up into the sky but already our speed is silent, my sense of it already evaporated.

Like any first-timer I'm all 'oohs' and 'ahhs' as the island of Anglesey shrinks and the sun-filled sky stretches out before us. Then the plane turns. John announces his intentions before he carries out each manoeuvre but the rapidity with which this plane can shift in either direction is violent. My body is jerked and rocked with minimal respect: the occasional glimpses of green valleys below a soothing balm next to this pummelling in the clouds.

John noses the plane down and the valleys no longer

**"This thing is violent.
My body is jerked
and rocked with
minimal respect"**

600MPH





"When fighter pilot John really wants a speed fix he gets on his bike"

command such a panoramic view. Now we're part of the landscape, following the contours, streaking over train set farms, villages and the specks of thousands of sheep.

Every rocky outcrop signifies a T-junction or a U-turn as John navigates by sight, speed and time alone.

Speed. Where's it gone? This sortie sees us reaching 483mph in the valleys but I can only feel it in my trousers... As we pick up 'G' they inflate (like when you're having your arm compressed during a blood pressure test, but right up and down your legs). Here, the impression is one smooth, fluid movement in a straight line, and violence in the turns.

That's when you aren't desperately trying not to vomit.

I fumble for my sick bag and prepare to remove my oxygen mask, hearing my breathing slow and deepen. John takes the plane up to soothe me. We level off at 12,000 feet, passing under cloud so close I could touch it... John tells me it's a thousand feet above us.

My senses are shot. At 600mph in level flight, I start to feel alright again. 600mph!

I guess it's just that speed in this instance manifests itself in G rather than wind through the hair, noise or the applause of your mates as you wheelie past your local.

John asks if I want to do a loop. A 360° up and over turn. Oh wow. He tells me to focus on the horizon and it'll be OK. My head is immovable against the seat as G-forces magnify its weight. I can feel the muscles in my

face smearing over my skull. Horizon? What horizon? And then it reappears, looming into view from above my head as the Hawk completes the roll. I struggle with the G: it's trying to stop me smiling.

After circling Snowdon's peak, we head home. A violent turn before we line up with the runway is my final reminder of what this plane can do. I've had a 50 minute trip combining bodily disarrangement and inexplicable peace. An amazing ride. But is it life-giving fodder for a speed junkie? No. This is for people, like John, with the discipline to teach their brain to think and their bodies to react at 600mph.

Speed, yes. Junkie, no (even if that's exactly what I look like, all pallid and sweaty as I wobble out of the plane). Which is why when John really wants a speed rush, he gets on his bike...

Wheels versus wings...

Flying Officer John Townsend used to race motorbikes until he took up flying RAF jets instead. "The faster we go, the smaller the margin for error. We're taught to react to 600mph as opposed to getting a rush off it. I've still got a ZX-7R. When I'm flying, I never feel 'wow, this is quick'; not like I do on my bike."

So how does he sum it up? "Perception of speed and speed of events are separate things."

Simple really.

SO HOW FAST IT FAST?

Mindblowing. That's the only way to describe the past few days. My nerves are still jangling and it's hard to wipe that stupid grin off my face. It'll be there for weeks.

But what's really shocked me isn't the outright speed (although 600mph-plus is hardly to be sneezed at). No, the incredible thing is how something as measly sounding as 25mph can feel ballistic in the right conditions. It might not make such a great yarn at the pub with your mates but doing this sort of speed off road with trees and branches rushing past will deliver a mighty (and achievable) buzz. It needn't cost the earth and it won't put your licence at risk.

The psycho-babblers have got it right when they say speed is all about perception. To my mind it's addictive too. That doesn't mean to say I'm about to fit a Gatso-dodging flip-up plate to my ZZ-R, I'll just have to find more imaginative ways of getting a fix. Sidecar racer Steve told me he was looking for a partner for the IoM next year. Now let's see, where did I put his number...

Thanks to...

208 Squadron, RAF Valley (www.rafvalley.org); Steve Sinnott; Jamie Hopper at Octagon; Andrea at Cadwell; Simon Pavey; Dr Anthony Reinhardt-Rutland; Danny Wyse at CCM; Des (as always).

