

The Definitive Motorcycle Leather Shopping Guide

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Brought to you by [Motorcycle Leather Web 2.0](#)

...an interactive biker website and leather shop

Table of Contents

Shopping for Leather Online

Shopping for leather motorcycle apparel online can be a daunting experience. There are literally hundreds of web sites that offer all types of leathers and styles. Who do you trust? Will your credit card and personal information be safe? How do you know if you'll get what you want?

As more and more consumers turn to the Internet for their shopping needs, technology has kept the pace by implementing stringent security measures, providing for more bandwidth via broadband and warning consumers of suspicious activities of web sites via various software applications.

Search engine technologies offer increasingly better results making it easy to find what you're looking for. Online shopping has never been more safe or convenient!

The Pros and Cons of Shopping for Leather Online

As with everything, there are advantages and disadvantages of shopping for leather online. Informed consumers know what they want and how to find it. They know what to look for in a reputable site, and are able to avoid the pitfalls of the unscrupulous merchant.

An informed consumer will find, do the research, and buy, coming out of it all with a pleasurable shopping experience the first time around.

As an informed consumer, you have a choice of shopping for leather online or locally, and understand the pros and cons of both.

First, to the Pros...

Consumers Have Choice

Probably the biggest advantage the online dealers have over your local biker shop is the huge variety of choice available to the consumer. Buy now, just about every manufacturer of leather motorcycle apparel is represented somewhere on the Internet.

Whereas a local bike shop may carry a number of leather products as a service to their customers, they are really more into the business of selling motorcycles. A true leather shop may have more variety, but where is one of those in your neighborhood?

Where to Buy?

Leather shops online are geographically independent. If you live in a place like New York City, then you're pretty well set to buy whatever kind of leather you want locally.

Fortunately for the online dealers, not everybody does. How far do you have to go to find a decent jacket or chap? It might just be a fun Saturday bike ride, but again, your choice will more than likely be limited.

Today, thanks to the Internet, bikers living in areas from across the rural U.S.A. to the Outback of Australia all have the same choices available to them, provided of course they have an Internet connection.

More Bang for the Buck

Another huge advantage of buying leather over the Internet is value. Ever walk into a Harley store and find the perfect motorcycle jacket for what, 399 – dollars?

Top quality naked leather motorcycle jackets from all the well known lines can often be found for hundreds of dollars less than what you would find in a brick and mortar store. How can they do that, you ask?

Overhead! For some online dealers, their biggest expense is a web site! There is however a lot of time involved in both maintaining that website as well as servicing the customer base. As businesses grow, so will the overhead.

While no legitimate business person would intentionally seek to depress the leather market, a smart consumer would do well to look far beyond the first page of the SERPs.

How Safe Is It?

Along with shopping online come concerns of identity theft, fraud, and credit card hijacking. While many leather sites incorporate their own shopping carts into their websites, more and more are turning to third party processors such as Google Checkout, or the most widely accepted, PayPal.

In the case of third party shopping carts, the merchant never sees your credit card information, and protections are put in place for both the consumer and the merchant.

Giving your credit card to a waiter at a restaurant is far more risky than a reputable third party shopping cart.

And now to the Cons...

The Pitfalls of Shopping for Leather Online

Will it Fit?

The biggest advantage a brick and mortar shop has over an Internet retailer is that you get to try it on! By far, the biggest problem with shopping for leather online is getting the size right. Most leather motorcycle apparel today is manufactured in Pakistan, and sizing standards will vary from manufacturer to manufacturer.

Also note that it is standard practice that the consumer pays for all shipping costs in a size exchange transaction, the logic being that if you had taken the time to measure you'd have gotten it right the first time! So take the time to read the size chart, and measure! Just because you normally wear a large is not going to cut it. Some very reputable leather apparel manufacturers recommend that you size up one, two, even three sizes larger.

The Female Body

Getting the right size of a leather motorcycle jacket for a woman can be especially frustrating. The size of a motorcycle jacket is determined by chest measurement. As you can imagine, women's breasts vary tremendously in size! If you are a woman of average proportion, then by all means measure, use the size chart, and size up when appropriate. If you are a 44 Double D and 5'4" tall, you can bet it's not going to be easy!

Most vendors genuinely want to get it right the first time, sparing their customers the expense of a costly size exchange. If you are a man or woman of extreme proportions, contact the merchant via the contact page. Indicate the item you're interested in, and provide them with your chest measurement (normally in inches), bust measurement or bra size, and waist measurement where appropriate. Sleeve and body length are pretty standard, so if you are extra tall, or have extra long arms, you may want to ask about tall sizes.

Just remember, if you normally wear a large, and end up with a 3XL, don't take it personally. It's not you, the jacket is meant to be upsized!

You're Charging Me for Nothing?

Some merchants will charge a restocking fee for returned merchandise, which can be anywhere from 10% to 30% of the cost of the product. This is a legitimate practice that offsets the cost that the vendor incurs from the warehouse, and is also meant to discourage frivolous shoppers, of which there are many on the web. Warehouses don't like straight returns, vendors even less so.

If you are browsing a site and see something you think you might like, you may want to see it first before you decide if you want to keep it. You may certainly do that, but keep in mind online shopping is not like going around the corner to your local Kmart.

Understand that the merchant first has to buy the product before it gets shipped to you. A straight return can take a month to six weeks for the warehouse to open it, inspect it, and to credit the funds back to the merchant, who then in turn issues your refund.

Think of the time the merchant spends on the transaction, at least triple that of a successful sale the first time around. Then add in the time they have spent answering your questions, or helping you find the right size, or answering your emails and phone calls of “where’s my refund”?

Any online leather dealer would much rather sell you something else than to go through the tedious return process. The ones that believe in their product, and know it’s presented in an accurate and upfront way, have a hard time accepting an “I don’t like it”, or “it wasn’t what I expected” as a reason for a return.

At the very least, even if the merchant doesn’t charge a restocking fee, you will be out the shipping charges both from and to the warehouse.

If on the other hand, the merchant is unable to accommodate the customer in any way, a restocking fee should never be charged. Contact your vendor if you think you have been charged unfairly. Most merchants of leather online want you to be happy no matter what.

The Ins and Outs of Stock

Think of a leather motorcycle apparel web site as a catalog. As an authorized dealer for one or multiple manufacturers, they will naturally want to promote many if not all of the products of those manufacturers.

It is a fact in today’s world that most leather motorcycle apparel is manufactured overseas, with the company having distributorships located in various markets around the world. These distributorships are basically repositories, or warehouses that accept containers of stock from overseas, then distribute it to retailers in their geographical market.

Product comes in and goes out of stock all the time. Once a particular item goes into production on the manufacturing side, it can take six to eight weeks to reach the warehouse, a month of that time being spent on the high seas.

You can expect that not all items in all sizes in the catalogue are in stock at the same time. Before you buy, it might be a good idea to contact the website (after carefully determining your size) to inquire about the availability of a particular item. In many cases, the vendor should be able to give you an ETA of the replenished stock.

Shopping for leather motorcycle apparel online can and should be a rewarding shopping experience. Online retailers like smooth transactions and are happy to take the time to assist the consumer in getting it right the first time. As an informed consumer, take the time to read the policies, know the pitfalls, and by all means contact the vendor if you have any questions or uncertainties before you buy!

The Drop Ship Phenomenon

Since its inception, the Internet has brought us a number of exciting innovations, including the advent of a widely adopted business model known as Drop Shipping. The drop ship phenomenon has allowed business men and women to offer all kinds of products to a whole world of consumers without ever having to stock the first piece of merchandise.

The concept of drop shipping was neither born of, nor is exclusive to the Internet. Construction contractors, for example, would often enter into a special relationship with their appliance supplier to have a refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher delivered directly to the building site, long before the world became so widely webbed.

What the Internet has brought to the table, along with the proliferation of alternative shipping methods like UPS and FedEx, is the ability for an entity like a website to promote and sell a single product, with the wholesaler taking on the responsibility of shipping the item to a third party (who already has a massive shipping facility anyway). The sheer volume of traffic to the site generated from the Internet is what makes this business model economically feasible.

Simply put, the drop ship process consists of the merchant selling a product at retail to the consumer, then buying the product at wholesale from the distributor. The distributor then ships the product to the consumer directly from the warehouse. The wholesaler charges the merchant for the shipping costs, which can either be priced into the product or passed on to the consumer. The consumer remains the merchant's customer, and the merchant is the distributor's customer.

A local bike shop might open up other avenues of revenue by establishing an Internet presence to promote the brick and mortar site, while offering an expanded line of motorcycle jackets to an audience that would never visit the geographic location anyway.

Having a physical presence however, is by no means a requirement for becoming a successful drop shipper. Many if not most of the leather shops you will find on the Internet are drop shippers. Many of the products you find on EBay and other auction sites are also being drop shipped. Craig list too!

So how does the Drop Ship model benefit the consumer? Low, deep discounted pricing! Drop shippers do have their expenses, but nothing like the rent, or the up front stocking of merchandise that a brick and mortar shop has to deal with.

Drop ship agreements vary between wholesalers. While the merchant is able to purchase product at wholesale, the price is usually not as low as the price offered a retailer that purchases in bulk. Some wholesalers will also charge the merchant a Drop Ship Fee, not on each item, but on the box regardless of the quantity of items shipped. This is the "handling" in the shipping and handling charges.

Another charge you might find from a drop shipper is a restocking fee. This also originates from the wholesaler and is often passed on to the consumer in the case of a straight return.

Even with these extra charges, there is plenty of room for the drop shipper to offer low Internet pricing to their customers, and still make a decent profit.

The Drop Ship business model has opened up a new tier of pricing for the consumer, and has allowed authorized dealers of leather to break away from local and regional confines. Anyone that has the mind to can become a drop shipper, and depending on the effort put into it, the potential to grow a thriving business is there.

That said, it is incumbent on the consumer to practice due diligence to avoid the unscrupulous merchant or the fly by night web site.

Finding a Reputable Motorcycle Leather Web Site

It's not that hard! Most leather shops online are legitimate, and offer fine quality products with excellent customer service. Here are a few tips to help you develop a process when judging a site.

Find Something You Like

This would be the first step. Use a Search Engine to find the sites that would most likely have the product you want. Searching for the term motorcycle jackets for example, will yield broad results and show you the most popular sites for that term. "Pink motorcycle jacket" will yield more specific results, if that is what you are looking for.

Find at least two or three sites and compare prices of similar items. Look for good descriptions and accurate depictions of the product. The picture on the product page should be clickable for a larger image (turn your pop up blocker off!). Make sure the web site gives you all the information you need to make an informed decision.

Things to Look For on a Motorcycle Leather Web Site

Get as much information as you can about the type of leather and its tanning process. Find out if the leather is Buffalo, Lambskin or Cowhide, and if it is top grain, naked leather, or split. A good website should be forthcoming with this information, and even provide you with the thickness of the leather, usually in millimeters.

Avoid sites that use the term "Genuine Leather". If you encounter terms like Aniline, Soft Milled etc., make sure you understand what that means. If the website defines those terms somewhere easily found, chalk that up to points for up fronted ness.

Look for detailed descriptions that provide you with all of the features of a particular motorcycle jacket, chap, or vest. Type of hardware, snaps, zippers, braiding or embossing, right down to the number of pockets and if they zip or snap shut.

While some written descriptions are all business like, others will highlight a particular feature that the merchant would like to point out, or even try to inject a little humor into the site. That's all right! If the written description doesn't itemize every feature of the product, look for a bullet list that does somewhere on the product page.

How Far Should I Go?

“Maybe I should stay on the first page of the search engine results to be safe”. Sure, go right ahead! But you’ll be sorry! While it has often been said that most online searchers only look above the fold on the first page, anyone that is looking to purchase a top quality product reaching well into the \$200 range would behoove themselves to search further!

The first page for the keyword term motorcycle jackets will certainly get you to the big boys, but not necessarily the best product, most scrupulous vendor, and for sure not the best deal. Think about it. I’m on the front page, got tons of traffic, why should I lower my prices? Do yourself a favor and explore beyond.

Read the About Page and take note of any contact information. In fact, to get an idea of their quality of service, go ahead and ask a question via the contact page. Speed of response should not be the only factor here. It may take a day or so, but did the representative actually answer your question? Suggest products you might be interested in? You get the idea, customer service!

Search engines say that two determining trust factors for a website are a physical address, and a phone number. That’s a great idea for a brick and mortar bike shop with a web site.

Which brings us to...The Web 2.0 Phenomenon: Enter the power of Social Media!

The Web 2.0 Motorcycle Leather Shop

Social Media opens up a brand new marketing frontier for small businesses of all types. Given the propensity of motorcyclists to join clubs, gather at rallies, and socialize amongst themselves, building a community of like minded bikers that offers entertainment, communication, and collaboration gives the leather merchant an opportunity to build lasting relationships with potential customers world wide.

A Web 2.0 motorcycle leather e-tail shop will usually take the form of a blog, with static pages being the basis for navigation, while the product pages are added over time as chronological posts. Each page and post is interactive, in that the visitor is invited to post comments on the content at the end of the page.

The consumer is now able to ask questions, comment about a product, give a testimonial, or note where there’s room for improvement right on the product page for all to see.

Customers are invited to collaborate by offering product reviews, stories of their own experiences, even suggesting things they would like to see on the site. For the merchant, the sense of community the people feel translates into a sense of trust, establishing the company and the customer as one on a level playing field.

A potential customer can subscribe to comments and to newly added posts via RSS feeds, or have the content delivered directly to their Inbox. A great way to stay informed about

newly added products, what people are saying about a particular subject, or to keep up with an item they might be interested in as it comes back into stock.

From E-Tail Store to Biker Site

Web 2.0 sites are all about building community, and as such you will find many leather shops expanding into more general fields of entertainment, adding articles, video, and news feeds on topics of interest not just to lovers of leather, but to the biker community in general.

Look for these sites to utilize all the other social media web sites as well. Staking out a presence on Facebook and My Space, joining and creating social networking groups, posting Video and Photos on YouTube and Flickr, and tweeting about things of interest to motorcycle enthusiasts all over the world are what broaden the audience of a Web 2.0 business.

These merchants of the Web 2.0 world may not want to post an address on their site simply because they do not want to be seen as local. After all, the entire world is their stage.

With all the forms and forums of communication available in the Web 2.0 format, some sites may not want to post a phone number. The concept of Web 2.0 dictates that questions and answers, comments and queries be posted for all to see, and are indeed themselves the seeds of discussion and conversation.

As a business person, the merchant of leather must be able to differentiate between the general community and the potential customer. Most e-tailers also understand that many potential customers want to hear a voice behind the product. In the interest of building trust, no reputable merchant would deny them that.

If you do not see a phone number on the site, use the contact form to ask for a private conversation, going in to as much detail as you can so the representative can do the research. Ask to exchange phone numbers, and they should reply with their own toll-free number.

The social media frontier calls for a new relationship between the company and the consumer. As the community grows, comments and replies by members take on a life of their own, generating threads of informative and entertaining conversations relevant to lifestyle and product alike.

The role of the merchant changes from salesman to moderator, as sales become generated by peers in the community itself. The Biker Leather Shop Web 2.0 style: If You Build the Community, the Sales Will Come!

Motorcycle Safety Gear from Head to Toe

There is an inherent danger in the riding of any two wheeled vehicle that increases exponentially when a motor is thrown in the mix. It is not so much that “Speed Kills” in the case of a motorcycle accident as it is colliding into an object at a high speed, something that any sane motorcyclist would like to avoid.

As automobiles and trucks have evolved to include a number of built in safety features, by nature, the motorcycle itself is limited to loud pipes and a good set of brakes. Seat belts for motorcycles are deemed inappropriate, as no ones wishes to be tethered to a 300 pound object sliding on its side on a trajectory leading to the underside of a sixteen wheeler. The idea of an air bag deploying from the dashboard of a motorcycle...well, you get the picture.

In the case of an imminent collision between a motorcycle and a car or truck at high speeds, the best outcome a motorcyclist can hope for is a mangled sacrificial vehicle that he manages to bail out of in the nick of time, suffering only some minor cuts and bruises. That’s a best case scenario, and it can and does happen...with the help of the proper motorcycle safety gear.

Rule # 1: Save the Head

Let’s face it. If you are in a high speed motorcycle accident and your unprotected head hits the road with any kind of force (which it probably will), you are road kill!

Bikers are an independent bunch that like their freedom and are willing to fight for it. In many states in the U.S. bikers have won the right to choose for themselves whether to wear a helmet or not. Even so, bikers are not stupid, and you will see the majority, especially on highways and well traveled roads, sporting the most important piece of motorcycle safety gear available: a DOT approved motorcycle helmet.

Choosing a Motorcycle Helmet

Avoid choosing a motorcycle helmet to make a fashion statement. If you think it would be cool to ride around town with a beanie fastened to the top of your head with a chin strap, just know that if and when you do hit the road, that novelty helmet is going to do you little if any good.

By the same token, a novelty style half or three quarter helmet may offer slightly better protection from a bump, but will do little to protect your nose, chin, and cheeks while sliding belly down on an asphalt pavement.

A DOT approved full face helmet with a shield is the minimum one should look for in a helmet, and has the added advantage of keeping the bugs out of your face! Why DOT approved?

The technology of helmets has improved dramatically over the years thanks in large part to the NFL. New and better materials for padding, external materials and components, even best fit and sizing considerations have been scientifically studied, all for the stated purpose of minimizing head injuries to football players.

It is only natural that these technologies and scientific studies would cross over to the motorcycle safety gear manufacturers, being that both these entities have the same goal in mind.

The DOT standard is a minimum. You can buy this helmet technology up to any extent you are willing to pay for, and it will always be DOT approved. With helmets that do not have the DOT seal of approval, you can pretty much bet they haven't put much thought into keeping your brain from turning to mush.

Sizing is a very important factor when choosing a motorcycle helmet. Too tight and it could reduce blood flow, do more harm than good against bumps, or at the very least make you feel like a prisoner in your own head, thus ruining a perfectly good riding experience.

A helmet that is too loose can beat against your head, and likewise will not protect to its potential, a real headache when riding your bike. Do yourself a favor and try before you buy!

So now you've found a great selection of full face DOT approved motorcycle helmets, and they all have face shields to keep out the bug juice! With all of the bright colors and creative designs available to you, now is the time to go ahead and make that fashion statement!

Preparing for a Quick Recovery

There you are with your shiny brand new motorcycle helmet; it's a sunny Saturday so you decide to scoot on down to the beaches. Entering the on ramp at the boulevard, the car in front of you slams on its brakes and you have no choice but to jettison your ride and take the slide of your life.

Lying on the side of the road as you wait for the ambulance to arrive, you realize that you just narrowly cheated death, and thank God for guiding you to that motorcycle helmet shop. Or...

As the adrenaline starts to fade, an excruciating pain enters in waves. You remember you were going to the beach, all decked out in your flip flops, baggies and t-shirt with the clever slogan, hoping to score some chicks by taking them for a ride on the back of your scooter.

The ambulance arrives; the paramedic takes a look at you and says, “Nice helmet dude, but you’ve got a serious case of road rash!”

Rule # 2: Save Your Hide

You survived the accident, now the question becomes how long and how painful will the recovery be?

Broken bones aside, failure to protect the upper and lower torso from the sandpaper like abrasions that an asphalt road produces can lead to protracted sessions of skin grafts and plastic surgery, lasting long after the bones have healed. Complications and setbacks from infections can occur as a result of having no skin, further extending the recovery process.

Motorcyclists are acutely aware of the dangers of the road, and just like the helmet manufacturers, the motorcycle apparel industry is constantly innovating with new technologies to minimize the effects of what could have turned out to be a tragic accident.

Leather: The Tried and True of Motorcycle Safety Gear

Putting aside the cult of personality surrounding the leather motorcycle jacket, fact is that leather has been the material of choice for motorcyclist since the early 30’s for one very good reason: it serves as a second layer of skin, disposable and happily sacrificed in a high speed slide on an asphalt pavement.

While the properties of leather allow for a clean slide without bunching up or disintegrating, it should be noted that all leathers are not the same, thus the term “riding grade leather” was coined.

Originally it was horse hide that was widely available and manufactured right here in the U.S. Today, most motorcycle leather apparel is made in Pakistan, India, or China, and can come from goats, pigs, water buffalo, or cow hides. Some motorcycle jackets today are even starting to be made from kangaroo hide, a novel idea as most things are down under!

Riding grade leather indicates a material that is thick, and resistant to tear. It for the most part utilizes buffalo or cow hides that have gone through the top grain or naked leather tanning process, and is of a thickness anywhere between 1.2 to 1.5 millimeters.

Pig skin or pig nappa, while soft and thick, tears easily and is not considered to be riding grade. Goat or lamb skin jackets are soft and attractive, but these are light weight leathers, not reaching the thickness or durability standards to afford the necessary protection.

Splits can be made from cow or buffalo, but because they are from the bottom part of the skin they have no epidermis, or grain, which is what gives the leather its strength.

While the standard motorcycle jacket is usually dyed black, this is not always the best choice from a safety perspective. Visibility on the road is a valid concern for motorcyclists, and today's modern leather jackets address that issue by adding colored accents or reflective piping, especially useful for night riding.

Don't Forget the Legs

Although a pair of jeans may be made of a thick and heavy material, they will pretty much disintegrate when making contact with the road. Motorcyclists have taken a cue from the cowboys by adopting the chap, a leather over garment meant to be worn over jeans, protecting the legs but leaving the buttocks and genital area exposed.

Another option that offers maximum protection for the lower torso is a good pair of riding grade leather pants. Leather overpants are also available, meant to add an extra layer of protection over your jeans.

Riding grade leather motorcycle jackets, chaps or pants when worn together have been proven over the years to offer the best protection for the upper and lower torso. Leather, however, is not the only option available for motorcycle safety gear, as a whole new generation of synthetic materials emerges aimed specifically at the outdoors adventurer.

Textile 101: Ballistic Nylon, Kevlar, and Goretex

The Textile Industry has been experimenting for years with synthetic blends aimed at producing suitable apparel for the extreme conditions often found in the great outdoors. A whole new breed of outdoor wear has evolved resulting in added comfort and safety for adventurers pursuing such activities as skiing and snowmobiling, mountain and rock climbing, dirt biking, road racing, or just motor biking down the road.

For the motorcyclist, high density ballistic nylon, better known as Cordura, combined with Air Mesh or Stretch Kevlar blends for reinforcement, offer a textile alternative to the often hot and heavy leather motorcycle apparel.

The Cordura Alternative

Cordura based motorcycle jackets are light weight and water resistant, a desirable quality in warmer and wetter climates. Performance ratings for such criteria as resistance to abrasion and maintaining integrity in the event of a crash are comparable to their leather counterparts. Heat resistance and breathability of synthetic textiles are an added measure of comfort and safety, and these ballistic nylons are designed not to “grab” the road, allowing for a clean slide as opposed to a dangerous tumble.

A good Cordura motorcycle jacket will offer seam sealed protection to keep out moisture, yet be vented to allow for a breezy, comfortable ride. Zip out linings offer an extra layer of warmth, and can be made from moisture resistant insulating materials like the water repelling synthetic Goretex.

Cordura motorcycle pants will often have heat resistant material at the inner calves to avoid melting down at close proximity to a hot exhaust pipe, and stretch material or panels can be located at strategic locations for added maneuverability.

Added Protections: Following the Lead of the Racing Industry

Perhaps because these textiles are much thinner than leather, a small bump on the elbow is likely to hurt a lot more. Motorcycle apparel manufacturers have incorporated the use of extra protections for the most vulnerable parts of the body that have long been utilized on the motorcycle racing circuit.

Extra padding made from shock absorbing material like Tempra Foam, Dual Density Foam, or hard rubber, can be strategically located at the shoulders, elbows and knees, and in the case of many cordura motorcycle products, are removable.

Look for these protections to be CE approved. Certifigue Europe is a European organization similar to the DOT in the U.S. that attempts to establish a standard for body armor in the European community. Arguably, there are many perfectly good protectors out there that just have not been submitted to the CE for approval, but as far as standards go for motorcycle safety gear, it's all we have.

Extra protections in the form of CE approved body armor are by no means exclusive to the textile motorcycle apparel industry. Modern day leather motorcycle jacket designs are using them more and more, and professional motorcycle racing suits, leather and otherwise, have always incorporated these features for the safety and protection of their racers.

There is, and always will be camps on both sides of the issue of leather vs. textile. Some say that no textile can hold a candle to a riding grade leather product in the event of a crash. Others will say a light and breezy cordura jacket is like a breath of fresh air, as opposed to a stifling, heavy leather jacket on a hot summer day.

The bottom line is the choice is yours, and the determining factor may be as simple as the place you live.

Thirty years ago things were different. It was either get the leather, or hit the road, Jack!

Leather or Cordura motorcycle gear, along with a DOT approved motorcycle helmet, will go a long way in saving you a lot of pain and suffering. Indeed, they can save your life.

Motorcycle Safety Gear: Protecting the Hands and Feet

But what to do about the extremities? Many of us have become attached to our hands and feet and would like to keep them! Broken bones and amputations can and do occur as the result of a serious motorcycle accident, but there are things you can do to minimize the injuries.

Rule # 3: Protect the Extremities

It is human nature, a basic instinct, to use your hands to stop the momentum of an involuntary slide. More often than not, the heel of the palm will bear the brunt of the load when putting on the brakes in a prone position, and the quality of your motorcycle gloves will likely determine whether you end that slide with skin on your hands or not.

Motorcycle Gloves

Once again, leather is the obvious choice. When choosing a pair of leather motorcycle gloves, remember why we use the term riding grade. While a good glove does not necessarily need to be made of 1.5mm thick naked cowhide, a fashionable ladies lambskin riding glove probably won't offer much protection either.

Look for some kind of reinforcement material at the palm and thumb area of the glove. Gloves are often made from a hybrid of materials, incorporating leather, ballistic nylons, mesh, and Kevlar in a maze of colors and stitching patterns. Look for some kind of logic in the pattern, with the Kevlar reinforcing whatever material at vulnerable areas of the glove and the hand.

People use their hands and their feet to actually drive a motorcycle, so the tactile qualities of a glove should also be considered. A good non slip grip is essential in controlling the vehicle, and some gloves even have pre-curved fingers to help you with that. Many gloves are lined with insulating or waterproof material, convenient for inclement weather, but don't lose your touch.

The longer the glove the better. A glove that barely covers your wrist is obviously going to expose some skin as the jacket rides up your arm. Gauntlet style gloves will cover the most area and have the added advantage of preventing drafts up the sleeve for cold weather riders.

Needless to say, fingerless gloves, leather or not, may be a fashionable statement in some circles, but are pretty much useless from a motorcycle safety perspective.

Motorcycle Boots

Being on the underside of a falling 300 lb motorcycle is likely to cause injury to at least one foot, ankle, or leg, the severity of which can be greatly minimized by a good, stiff pair of boots. While you will often see bikers cruising down the road in a pair of hiking boots, there are boots that are specifically manufactured to protect the foot, ankle, and shin in the event of a motorcycle accident.

Just like the rest of your motorcycle safety gear, motorcycle boots should be made from materials that are abrasion resistant, and will maintain their integrity in a crash. The higher the boot, the more it protects, and similar to the concept of body armor, rubber or metal reinforcement can be located at the heel and toe, with added shock absorbers at the ankle and shin.

The boot should be moderately flexible with an oil resistant sure gripping sole to maintain your position on the bike. A wide, stiff sole will help prevent the crushing of the foot in a fall.

As the feet are also used to balance the bike in a stationary position, heels should be wide and flat for optimal sure footedness.

Many styles of motorcycle boots are available, and if you choose one that laces up, just remember to keep them tied. Nothing like having your leg pulled through a spinning wheel at 70 mph!

Following these guidelines and exercising due diligence when purchasing your motorcycle helmet, jacket, chaps or pants, gloves and boots, will have you covered head to toe: the best insurance you can buy!

Motorcycle Jackets: Style Matters

Although making a fashion statement should not be the number one concern when purchasing a motorcycle jacket (unless of course you don't ride), human nature dictates that we all want to be comfortable in our own skin. Style matters will inevitably play a part in any decision, hopefully only after careful consideration of the protection factors involved in such an important part of your overall motorcycle safety gear.

Motorcycle jackets are generally thought of as being made of leather, and for good reason: most of them are. Leather has proven over time to provide the best protection from the elements and the road for the all too exposed motorcyclist.

Black leather motorcycle jackets have become the norm, but that is by no means the only choice available, and arguably not the wisest choice from a safety perspective. Bright, eye catching color combinations of leather and synthetics are widely available, and many styles come with reflective piping to improve visibility at night.

Leather motorcycle fashions break down into basically three styles of jackets, each with their own unique flair.

The traditional motorcycle jacket is the best known. Often called the classic style, it was originally intended to keep out the wind, and provide plenty of secure storage in the form of pockets that zip or snap shut.

The Scooter Jacket is defined by its Euro style collar, and in fact has its roots in the UK and Eastern Europe, with the advent of the Italian made Vespa scooter and its wide adoption across the continent.

The third style of motorcycle jacket is kind of a hybrid that, for lack of a better name, I like to call a cruising jacket. The defining characteristic here is a shirt type collar that will usually snap down to prevent it from flapping in the wind.

Each of these styles will borrow characteristics from one another and variations are limited only by the imagination. For the rider, style matters in the type of riding you do, and the type of lifestyle you lead.

Let us examine these styles of motorcycle jackets in a little more detail.

The Traditional Motorcycle Jacket

This is the style that jumps into everybody's mind when the term motorcycle jacket is mentioned. Necessity being the mother of invention, this style was first introduced in 1928 by apparel manufacturer Schott NYC. The Perfecto, as it was called, was the first leather jacket made that had an off center zipper that when closed, would create a seal through which no air would pass.

Other distinct characteristics of the horsehide Perfecto include zippered pockets and cuffs, a belt in the front, and the decorative epaulets on the shoulders.

The traditional motorcycle jacket is built to protect the rider from the road and the wind, and to provide multiple secure storage compartments in the form of pockets that zipper or snap shut. Snaps, zippers, belts, and various side adjustments are designed to provide for a snug fit, and to keep things from flapping around in the wind at high speeds.

The modern day traditional motorcycle jacket can include many variations on these themes, all as a means to the same end. Some jackets will lose the epaulets (not that functional anyway), utilize spandex, laces or buckles for side adjustments, feature a full or half belt, or none at all. Air venting systems are often included for the riders comfort, and some models include removable CE approved body armor for added protection.

Storage space is premium real estate on a motorcycle, and the traditional jacket can have any number pockets of all shapes and sizes. Side pockets, D shaped pockets, cargo pockets; even large slanted "Pistol Pete" pockets are utilized in the style, zippered or snapped with heavy duty hardware to keep your valuables secure.

Typical of the traditional style is a small change pocket with a flap that snaps shut, great for cruising through toll booths. Of course, in the interest of extra storage, you will almost always find an inside pocket or two.

The traditional style leather motorcycle jacket first gained cult status in "The Wild Ones", a movie starring Marlon Brando released in 1958. Subsequent portrayals by such disturbing figures as James Dean have elevated the jacket to a very cool, but seemingly outlaw status. Motorcycle clubs seen by the public more as gangs did not help the perception as they sewed their various club patches onto their jackets, and authorities have even banned students from wearing their motorcycle jackets to school.

Today the majority of Bikers are in the mainstream. Doctors, lawyers and other professionals that choose to spend their leisure time on a bike. They organize rallies, rides and events, pumping in millions of dollars to charitable causes and raising awareness on all kinds of issues.

Having gone in and out of fashion a number of times since its inception, the serious biker will be more interested in the utility and functional aspects of the jacket rather than its perceived status. Although the traditional classic motorcycle jacket will probably always

remain a symbol for non conformity, they accept it for what it is; a heavy duty piece of motorcycle safety equipment that has passed the test of time.

The Scooter Jacket

As bikers all over the world were cruising around on their Harleys and Ducattis, a new class of two wheelers emerged in the 1960's that would spur a culture of its own.

Introduced to the world by the Italian company Vespa, the lighter, less powerful Scooter was designed simply to transport the rider from one place to another economically. As the price of gasoline began its meteoric rise in the 70's, the European community was especially hard hit, and the Scooter Phenomenon spread like wild fire across the continent and into the UK.

As is often the case in the fashion world, the trendy scooterists soon had their own distinct line of apparel and accessories, separate of that in the already well established Biker culture.

The Scooter Jacket style is exemplified by the so called Euro Collar, a stand up band of material wrapping around the neck and usually fastening with a snap or a button to keep the wind out.

Although originating from the scooter culture, today's modern scooter jacket is by no means limited to 50 cc's. The safety concerns of scooterists are not unlike those of the motorcyclist, and as such, functional scooter jackets are made from the same protective materials found in the traditional motorcycle jacket, rendering them suitable for any size vehicle from a safety perspective.

Scooter jackets made from riding grade leather share many characteristics of the traditional jacket, including zip out liners for warmth, and intricate venting systems for optimal air flow. Heavy duty hardware used for zipper pockets and snaps, strategic placement of stretch materials, and the classic zipper cuffs are all common properties.

Normally you would not find a belt buckling in the front of a scooter jacket, and you would also be hard pressed to find one with side laces. The scooter jacket has a cleaner, less cluttered look than the classic style, but you will find decorative braiding, multi colored panels, or reflective materials jazzing things up some.

Today's well made scooter jacket has become equal to the traditional classic style in functionality and protection, and can be found on the backs of riders of Harley's and Honda's on the street and the dirt.

Motorcycle racing jackets tend to follow the scooter model, perhaps for its sleekness and aerodynamic qualities. As is the case with any style motorcycle jacket today, options for body armor are prevalent in the cruising market too.

In recent years, the U.S. has seen a resurgence of scootering with scooter dealerships popping up all over the place as a result of gas prices reaching the \$4 per gallon mark.

Commuters, especially in metropolitan areas, are going green by producing fewer emissions, and saving green by getting up to 100 miles to a gallon of gas.

You may remember back in the 60's of hearing about a clash of cultures between the Mods and the Rockers in the UK. Bikers and Scooterists rioting at the beach, as portrayed in The Who's film *Quadraphenia*.

Today's modern scooterist is much more main stream, with women comprising as much of 40% of new scooter sales. For the stock broker or banker commuting to work on a scooter or bike on a cold New York morning, the Scooter Jacket offers a warm and safe alternative to a possibly inappropriate bad boy biker look of the traditional classic style motorcycle jacket.

The Motorcycle Cruising Jacket

The cruising jacket implies a more casual style of motorcycle fashion, something one would wear for a slow ride to nowhere on a big, fat Hog. Cruising down a country road on a lazy day still requires attention to the road, and a good leather cruising jacket promises to provide all the comfort and protection typical of any motorcycle safety gear.

The defining aspect of a cruiser jacket is once again found in the collar. Somewhere in between the large, folded snap down collar of the classic style, and the rigid wrap around Euro or Mandarin collar, the cruiser collar resembles that of an Oxford shirt.

Cruisers run the gamut from the simplistic no frills jacket, to intricate decorative braid, form fitting stretch panels, and full or half belt options. Many of the embroidered and leather fringe jackets you will find are made in the cruising style.

Not as common on the road as the classic or scooter jacket, a cruising jacket may be just the thing for the person that doesn't want the biker look, and finds the scooter jacket a bit too stifling.

With the many variations of the cruising style offered on the market today, it should not be too hard to find an excellent quality leather jacket with a casual flair that will compliment, indeed enhance your own unique look.

Understanding Your Choices of Leather

As motorcyclists, we understand the role that leather plays in our culture is not just a trendy fashion statement going in and out of style every few years, but is a time proven necessity for the comfort and safety of the environmentally exposed biker, traveling the roads of the world at some very scary speeds.

Since the late 1920's, motorcyclists have been dependent on the skins of dead animals to keep out the bone chilling cold, and to lay down between the rider and the road when things don't go exactly as planned.

We have utilized leather from head to toe over the years. Leather motorcycle jackets, pants or chaps protect our upper and lower torsos from the abrasive qualities of asphalt, as well as the meteorological extremes of Mother Nature. Stiff leather motorcycle boots protect our feet, ankles, and shins from the potentially bone crushing weight of our two wheeled vehicles. Leather gloves keep our fingers nimble and warm, and in times of lesser technological means, a thick leather helmet under a hard shell was about the best we could do to cushion a blow to the head.

Yes, one could say that these donated animal skins have saved many a hide over the years. Broken bones and concussions aside, the use of leather has prevented a lot of pain and suffering by allowing the unfortunate accident victim to arise from the scene with their own skin intact.

As a consumer of leather motorcycle apparel, the choices of leather are vast. One must judge the quality of a leather garment not only by touch, feel, or good looks, but by its origin, the animal that donated the skin, and the way in which it was prepared to keep it from rotting.

It is incumbent on the consumer to know what kind of skin they are getting into, and to be sure that the garment they are shelling out no small amount for is indeed "Riding Grade Leather".

All Leather is Not Equal

Just about every animal has a skin. Thus, "genuine" leather can come from just about any animal. Leather is produced by tanning the hides of rabbits, deer, horses and cows; crocodiles, snakes, calves and kangaroos.

While a nice pair of alligator boots might be appropriate if properly reinforced, depending on a snake skin motorcycle jacket to protect you from an accidental case of road rash is generally not recommended.

When it comes to riding grade leather motorcycle apparel, it's all about the thickness, thicker being better from a protection perspective. But can leather ever be too thick? Yes: When it's so thick and heavy that it drags you to the ground when you're leaning into a turn!

With all of the choices of leather available in the marketplace today, there is plenty of room for compromise between comfort and safety. A leather motorcycle jacket made from the right animal skin that has followed the proper tanning process can and does provide adequate protection and comfort. It is when you are doing a belly slide across the road where thicker is obviously better, but a good riding grade leather of medium thickness should hold up fine under most circumstances.

In the following chapters we will discuss how leather is prepared, and offer a short history of the tanning process. We will examine the animals used for the soft, light weight leathers as well as the heavier leathers, and what it is that constitutes riding grade leather.

From a riding perspective, we will explain the leathers to avoid and the leathers to embrace, where in the world leather is produced and the quality of apparel to expect. And finally, we will provide some insight into how to distinguish between the types of hides, and the tanning process used in manufacturing the finished product.

In the end, it is our hope that you, as an informed consumer, will be armed with all the knowledge you need to make an intelligent decision, based on your own needs and wants, when choosing your next leather motorcycle jacket, chap, or pants.

A History of Tanning Leather

The tanning of leather is an ancient technology dating back to 7000 B.C., as evidenced by a description of the process in Homer's book *The Iliad*.

The purpose of tanning an animal's skin is first and foremost to halt the decay process typical of all organic material, and to render it pliable enough to be used in the manufacturing of shoes, furniture, belts and bags, and of course, leather motorcycle apparel.

Over the years, a number of tanning methods have evolved. It was a stinky, environmentally unfriendly process that at times utilized dog feces, urine and brains. In Medieval times, tanneries were segregated and banished to the outskirts of town, the actual jobs being reserved for the lowliest of class.

Native Americans and the early pioneers were fond of using the animal's brain to tan the hide. They would concoct a brain soup, adding water and smushing it up over heat, then spreading the soup and rubbing it into the skin. Thus the phrase "Every animal has just enough brains to tan their own hide".

With the Industrial Revolution, hides moved from open vats to rotating drums, automating the process, and along with other innovations, reducing the time and cost of tanning a hide.

Later in the 20th century, with the introduction of all the chemicals and the awakening of the public to environmental hazards, most leather manufacturing moved from the industrialized nations to the emerging economies of Pakistan, and later India, then China. These nations would gladly take on the lucrative leather market regardless of environmental harm.

Leather Goes Green

In recent times, new state of the art manufacturing facilities have popped up all over India, Pakistan, and China, reducing the impact on the environment. In 2005, researchers in India announced a reverse tanning process that promised to revolutionize the leather industry.

Reverse Tanning essentially starts where the tanning process ends and works backwards. Production efficiencies are realized by reducing the steps, and thus the time it takes to tan a hide. Additionally, substantial reductions in chemicals, energy, and waste water are said to cut emissions of key pollutants in the tanning process by as much as 79%.

The Leather Tanning Process

Native Americans did not take killing an animal lightly, and believed that if you did take something from Mother Nature you should use it to its full extent.

Most animal hides that are to be used for leather are a byproduct of meat, originating at the slaughterhouse, where they are gathered and shipped off to a Tannery for further processing. At least in this case, one could say that the entire animal is being used with a minimum of waste for the benefit of the human tribe.

The leather tanning process can be broken down into three stages: Preparing the hide for tanning, the actual tanning of the hide, and the finishing stage. While it used to take weeks or even months to tan a hide, today's modern tanning processes have reduced the time and energy spent to a matter of days.

Preparing a Skin for Tanning: The Beamhouse

The first thing to do is to stop the putrefaction process, which is done in what is known as the Beamhouse Operations. The hides are first cured with salt, either by a process called wet salting, where hides are heavily salted and stacked, or by soaking them in a brine solution. Wet salting takes about 30 days, whereas Brine Curing can be done in about 16 hours, making it the preferred method today.

Next, the hides are soaked in a clean water solution to remove the salt, and to rehydrate the badly dried out skins.

Following a good soaking comes the liming stage to prepare the hides for dehairing and to further remove left over biological materials. The majority of the hair is removed by a machine, and what's left is removed manually with a dull knife in a process called scudding.

Hides will then go through deliming process to bring the down the pH of the collagen to an acceptable level for the actual tanning process.

Tanning the Leather: The Tanyard Processes

Either during or after the deliming process, the leather is treated with enzymes to impart softness, stretch, and flexibility in a process called baiting. Pickling is done by treating the hide with a solution of brine and sulfuric acid, and is the last step before the actual tanning process begins.

Vegetable Tanning

The oldest if not the original tanning method is Vegetable Tanning. Hides are treated with the barks of trees that contain the naturally occurring element Tannin, from which the term “tanning” originates.

The skins are stretched onto frames and immersed into a series of vats containing higher and higher concentrations of tannin, until the tanning material penetrates to the center of the hide. This process of Vegetable Tanning takes about three weeks, as opposed to the Mineral Tanning process that can be done in a day.

Vegetable tanned leather is stiff yet pliable and is used for leather shoes, belts, bags, and luggage.

Mineral Tanning

The Mineral Tanning process makes use of chemicals, most notably chromium sulfate, and is sometimes referred to as chrome tanning. Pickled hides with a pH of 3 are immersed in a bath to which the chrome tanning materials are introduced to raise the pH.

Chrome tanned leather is soft and pliable, and is the most used method for treating the skins of cattle, pigs, goat and lamb. It produces a flexible, stretchable leather that is suitable for garments, and of course, leather motorcycle apparel.

After the tanning cycle is complete, hides will be graded for quality, split into flesh (bottom) and grain (top) layers, and then shaved to their desired thickness.

More typical with chrome than vegetable tanning, the grain leathers will then go through a retanning process. The leather will then be dyed, usually with an aniline based dye that permeates the skin to the center.

The last step before drying is fatliquoring, a process where oils are introduced to the leather to replace those lost in the Beamhouse and Tanyard processes.

The Leather Finishing Stage

Leather can be finished in a variety of ways, or not at all. It is at the finishing stage that is determined what the leather is going to be used for, and in the case of motorcycle jackets and chaps, the grade of leather from a protection perspective.

Shiny patent leather is made by adding pigments or dyes, and applying a urethane lacquer to the material. Patent leather is used for handbags, saddle bags, and women's popular fashion apparel.

Abrasive buffing of leather will produce a suede finish, very popular with the lighter leathers. Sued coats and vests are also very popular in the fashion garment industry.

Leather can be waxed or shellacked, treated with resins, water or solvent based finishes, and can be dyed to any color desired. Vegetable tanned leather is finished to produce leather bags, belts, or shoes, and leather that has gone through the mineral tanning process will be finished to produce softer, more pliable leather suitable for apparel.

Grain leather with imperfections is sanded down to what ever degree, and then a paste is applied to even it out. Milling towards the end of the finishing process consists of throwing it in a drum one last time, producing a softer, more worn in type of leather.

Splits, which are from the bottom part of the hide have no grain, and are thus weaker than their grain leather counterparts. Oftentimes, finishing will include stamping the leather to reinforce and produce an imitation grain pattern on the split leather material.

For the best quality hides, about 10% of all leather manufactured today, the finishing stops at the dyeing process. Known as Naked Leather (without embellishment), nothing is added except the dye, keeping the natural grain intact.

Naked leather is the most desirable and most expensive grade of leather used in the manufacturing of leather apparel, motorcycle jackets, and chaps.

