

Back to bike school: Can Mirror editor Lloyd Embley pass his motorcycle test?

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Hotseat: Lloyd Embley (right) at BMW training centre with instructor Ian Biederman

Fact one: if you're in your mid-40s and disappear for a few days only to return clutching a motorbike licence, you'll hear the words "mid" and "life" and "crisis" a lot.

Fact two: you won't give a damn what people say because you will have had so much fun.

Men have always loved motorbikes, well they've certainly loved the idea of them.

It may be the Brando-esque romance or Steve McQueen-style coolness - but for me, it is their incredible ability to deliver exhilaration at speeds at which a car driver is on auto-pilot.

Modern cars are so well made, so sound-proofed, so cosseting that the only chance they have of making you grin from ear to ear is on a race track.

Bikes certainly haven't been left behind in the technological revolution but one thing remains the same - your exposure to the great outdoors.

Riding an unfaired bike - or I as I now feel qualified to call them, a naked - at 60mph on a twisty road is a heart-pumping adventure.

Even better, the same stretch of road can deliver a totally different experience every time you ride it.

This is what makes motorbikes such an attraction.

Of course, the first obstacle in the way of achieving this motorised Mecca is obtaining your licence.

Much has been written about the motorcycle test process.

Many riders with decades of experience have been critical of certain elements but, having just been through the process from start to finish, I am not in the camp that claims it is too tough.

For all the fun, riding a bike comes with inherent dangers and I, for one, wanted to learn how to do it properly and safely.

If you can find the time and the money to do it, I would definitely recommend signing up to a direct access scheme (DAS).

The exact course and licence will depend on your age but if you are 24 or over you could be the proud owner of a full bike licence within a week (or even less if you already have your CBT).

There are many motorbike training schools around the country and it is worth doing some research.

I opted to do my DAS with BMW at their new training centre in Royston on the Hertfordshire/Cambridgeshire border.

Why BMW? Well, two years earlier I had joined my brother to do a CBT plus course at their previous training HQ in Wales.

He had been given the course as a birthday present and was able to bring a friend at a knock-down price.

The quality of the set-up, from the clothing to the bikes to the instruction, was superb.

When I finally got round to deciding I wanted a full licence, my experience in Wales meant the decision was easy.

That's not to say, of course, that other schools wouldn't be impressive. It's just that I had a small window of opportunity and I simply knew I could bank on BMW to deliver. One element of risk - the standard of the training - was immediately removed.

Royston isn't the Brecon Beacons but the centre is every bit the equal of the Welsh set-up (and much easier to get to from most of the country).

Chief instructor Ian Biederman was my mentor and, after the formalities of paperwork and briefings were out of the way, he introduced me to my other half for the next few days - a BMW F700GS.

These are great bikes to learn on - rider-friendly, low mileage machines with a range of seat heights to suit all shapes and sizes.

Passing the bike test is a combination of coping with both the physical and mental challenges.

It's a very long time since I have come under the scrutiny of an examiner and it's incredible how stressful the experience can be.

Ian explained at the outset that his intention was not simply to get me to a suitable standard to pass the test but to aim for a level comfortably above that.

This is the BMW approach and, for me, it works for two reasons.

Firstly, it should make the two modules of the test themselves more comfortable.

Secondly, and arguably more importantly, I don't just want to be able to ride a bike, I want to be able to do it well.

I am pretty sure that doing the DAS will not be my only bike instruction so setting the bar higher certainly appealed.

The results speak for themselves. The pass rate at the local test centre averages about 67% but BMW achieve an 85% success rate.

Thankfully I didn't damage their statistics (all the credit goes to Ian) and am now a "newbie" excited at what the future holds and uncertain what kind of bike I actually want to ride.

I know one option will be the all-new water-cooled BMW 1200GS.

When we returned to the training centre after my test, I was lucky enough to take one out for a ride (accompanied by Ian).

Obviously I am not the world's greatest judge as I have only ridden a couple of bikes but what I definitely can say is that the GS is a confidence-inspiring machine.

After training me for several days, Ian said he thought I would be competent enough to try the latest incarnation of the world record-breaker made famous by Euan and Charlie.

I spent an hour on the 1200GS and loved every second. For a big bike it feels incredible balanced and agile.

With 125bhp, it is also pretty rapid and an even more impressive mile muncher than its air-cooled predecessor.

With my limited experience, I am already beginning to understand why a number of bikers I know have several bikes at once.

Now, what am I going to try next?