



## Used Motorcycle Buyers' Guide

By Rob Martin

Things to look for when buying a used motorcycle

It *IS* exciting. You've seen the bike of your dreams advertised, contacted the seller, and arranged a viewing. Ringing the doorbell, you can hardly contain your enthusiasm. The seller opens their garage door – *and there it is* – just as you imagined it! You can already see yourself riding on the open highway to the tune "Born to be Wild". The colour of the bike is even better than you thought. And it's *shiny!*

(Note to sellers – polish the bike first please – it will help with the sale!)

So you thrust a wodge of cash into the sellers' hands (very few sellers will accept a personal cheque or credit card), jump on, and head off into the sunset.

Four miles down the road the engine dies, along with all your enthusiasm.

Yes, all right, that is a slightly pessimistic view. But if you're properly prepared, there's no reason why the sunset scenario above shouldn't end happily.

Remember – you don't **HAVE** to buy the bike. Yes, it may be the exact model you wanted. Yes, the colour may be exactly right. But if there's anything at all wrong with it, walk away. There will be another opportunity.

I can relate a personal experience of this. I found a 2001 Honda ST1100 Pan European for sale at a local motorcycle dealer/repair shop (not a Honda agent). In Midi Blue Metallic, with only 27,000 miles on the clock. Perfect. It had been checked over by the dealer (whom I know from past experience is trustworthy) and there were no faults with it at all. The only problem was, someone else was interested. I offered to pay for it there and then – but the dealer quite rightly refused. The other interested party had just gone home to make sure the ST1100 would fit through their garden gate!

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So I lost out on that one. But less than a week later, I found a 2000 Honda ST1100 Pan European, in Midi Blue Metallic, with only 9,068 miles on the clock, *for the same price as the one I'd previously seen!*

All of this goes to say – **DO NOT BE IMPATIENT.**

Read the rest of this carefully – and print out the checklist at the end of this ebook to take along.

Before you even look at the bike, chat to the seller. You'll soon have a good enough idea of their level of enthusiasm about the bike they're selling. Asking them why they're selling it is a good idea. THERE'S NO RUSH.

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- Ask the seller about a test ride. Be prepared to leave some sort of guarantee – from the seller's point of view, he doesn't know you from Adam, and the last thing he wants is for his bike to disappear into the sunset without having been paid for it. Perhaps he'll accept a deposit as collateral – ask. Or if you've turned up in a car, perhaps he'll take your car keys as security. Or take a mate along and leave them as security!

Another option is for the seller themselves to come along as a pillion passenger. At least that way if you get lost during the test ride, the seller will be able to guide you back!

If the seller refuses to allow a test ride – move on to the next seller.

- Make sure you know the registration number of the bike so that you can check whether the bike is stolen, written off, or has finance outstanding – *before you even leave home*.
- Make sure that you have valid insurance cover.
- Take a friend along to provide some guarantee the seller doesn't run off with your money, leaving you with a stolen bike. Of course if you're seeing the bike at the seller's home address, this is probably not necessary – but there could be a slight complication if you drive/ride there on your own – who will drive your vehicle back?

## What to take

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At the very least, take along a pair of overalls, and/or a blanket or piece of old carpet to lie on. You're going to be getting up close and personal with the underneath of the bike!

A piece of string about 10' (3m) long. String? You'll see. Not fishing line though.

A helmet and your usual riding gear – if you make a successful purchase you're going to need to get your new ride back home. Unless you use a trailer of course.

A means of payment – usually cash. You may also want to consider using an Escrow service.

A friend. As moral support, added security for the amount of cash you're carrying, and at least when you're off on the test ride (if the seller doesn't come with you!), your friend can keep the seller from feeling lonely...

- Before you get your hands too dirty, look at the documentation. Check that the serial numbers of the frame and engine match those on the logbook. Beware of any evidence of tampering with these – if it looks dodgy, walk away now.
- Make sure the mileage is genuine; check any service records or available documents.
- Service history. This may or may not be in the form of a stamped owner's logbook; the seller may well have done all his servicing himself. This is not a reason to walk away - there are "cowboy" motorcycle dealerships out there, just as there are meticulous owners. Ask to see any receipts for work done or parts replaced.
- Electrical. Check the operation of lights, indicators, horn and switch gear.
- Frame Check the crash bars (if fitted) for any damage. Look at the alignment of the side stand and/or centre stand. Does the bike "look" straight?
- Wheel Alignment – see next section
- Rear suspension. Check the shock absorber unit and any linkages for rust, leaks, wear or seizure. With the bike off its stand but supported, push down on the rear. It should not be too "bouncy".
- Rear wheel. With the bike on its centre stand, rotate the rear wheel. Check its trueness, bearings and spokes (if applicable)
- Rear brakes. Check the discs, pads, pistons (what little you can see of them) and calipers. Whilst rotating the rear wheel, press the brake pedal to check operation.
- Rear tyre. Check the condition and tread depth.
- Swing arm. These have a tendency to rust, especially in the UK due to the winter gritting of roads with salt. A proper inspection requires the removal of the rear wheel; failing that, the condition of the centre stand should give some indication of the condition of the swing arm. Check for any visible damage or kinks. Your overalls and/or piece of carpet should come in handy here!
- Exhaust. Check for any evidence of leaks or rust. Assess its general condition. Is it legal for road use?
- Battery. Check cell levels (if applicable) and condition, paying special attention to the battery terminals.
- Cooling system. Check the coolant level, inspect the radiator for any bent or damaged fins, and see if there are any leaks from the radiator or hoses. Are the hose clips tight?
- Fairing panels. Check condition for scuffs and scrapes. Pay particular attention to panel alignment – are there any gaps? This could be an indication of crash damage.

- Front suspension. Holding the handlebars, try pressing the front down a few times. Check for any leaks from the fork seals. Are the fork tubes properly aligned in the yokes?
- Steering. With the bike on its centre stand, have the seller sit on the passenger seat so that the front wheel is off the ground. Grasp the front forks at the bottom and try pulling them towards you; there should be no obvious movement. Turn the handlebars from lock to lock; they should move smoothly without any "notchiness".
- Front wheel. Whilst the seller is sitting on the passenger seat, spin the front wheel to check the condition of the front wheel bearings. Check the spokes (if applicable).
- Front brakes. Check the discs, pads, pistons (what little you can see of them) and calipers. Whilst rotating the front wheel, squeeze the brake lever to check operation.
- Front tyre. Check condition and tread depth.

You can now let the seller get off the bike. Only a few more things to check, so a cup of tea may be in order!

- Handlebars. Look at the cables/hydraulics for any signs of wear and leakage.
- Key. Make sure the key fits the ignition, petrol cap and seat lock, panniers (if fitted), top box (if fitted). Is a spare key available?
- Engine. Check for any signs of fuel, oil or coolant leaks.

You're now ready for the test ride.

This is where you use your piece of string! (Fishing line *could* also be used although it can be difficult to see).

With the bike on its centre stand, ensure it is in gear so that the rear wheel does not rotate.

Find the midpoint of the string and pass it through the rear wheel, at the back. Wrap it around the outside edge of the tyre and feed both ends towards the front of the motorcycle. The idea is that the string will make contact with the sidewall of the rear tyre in two places on each side; both at the back of the rear tyre (where it's wrapped) and at the front of the rear tyre.

Ensure that the string is free to run to the front wheel, parallel to the ground, without fouling the belly pan, side stand, or centre stand.

Turn the front wheel so that it is pointing roughly straight ahead, and bring the free ends of the string forward to either side of the front tyre.

Using your blanket or piece of carpet (You did remember to bring it, didn't you?) lie down on the ground ahead of, and facing, the front wheel (so that you can see all the way to the back wheel).

Take each end of the strings and pull them taut. Starting with the free end of one string, grasp it several inches from the side of the front tyre and pull it towards the front tyre. Keep an eye on where the string touches the rear wheel – the idea is that you want the string to just touch the front side of the sidewall of the rear tyre. Hold the string in that position, and do the same to the other side.

When the string is tight against each of the rear tyre sidewalls and pulled straight forward, it forms a reference line for the alignment of the rear wheel.

With the string still carefully positioned, see how it lines up with the front tyre. You may need to move the front wheel left or right slightly in order to get it parallel with both sides of the string.

Now compare the distances - between the string and the side of the front tyre – on both sides. With correct wheel alignment, the string will be both parallel to the front wheel and equidistant on both sides. If the string is closer to the right side of the front tyre (your right, the bike's left) then the rear wheel is misaligned with its leading-edge right. If the string is closer to the left side, the rear wheel is leading-edge left.

On chain-drive bikes, the rear wheel alignment can be adjusted by using the chain adjusters. If the bike is a shaft-drive, something is bent somewhere – and this could work out to be expensive.

If the tyres have been on the bike for a while, and the pattern of tyre wear is uneven, this could also be an indication of misalignment.



Ready to go? Gentlemen, start your engines...

- Ignition. Switch on the ignition and make sure the ignition lights work. If the bike is fitted with an electric fuel pump, you should hear it priming.
- Engine condition – cold. Start the engine and listen for any knocks or rattles that could indicate a worn timing chain or bottom end bearing issues.
- Clutch. Pull in the clutch and listen for any odd noises which could indicate warped or damaged clutch plates or clutch bearings.
- Right, you're ready to go. Do you know where you're going? If the seller is not coming with you, the last thing you want to do is get lost, leaving the seller wondering whether you've stolen his bike.
- Engage first and pull away. Take it easy, but go through the gears ensuring each one engages properly.
- Then once the engine has warmed up, and ensuring it is safe to do so, accelerate hard in each gear - does it jump out of gear? Are there any flat spots whilst accelerating?
- Check front and rear brakes at various speeds, and see if there is any tendency for wobble, weave, or clunking noises (this could be an indication of worn steering head bearings, warped discs, sticking brake pistons, or even an unbalanced front tyre). If the bike has ABS, check that it is functioning correctly by pressing hard on the rear brake, trying to lock the rear wheel. If you can lock the rear wheel, the ABS is inoperative.
- Pull over and stop. Can you engage neutral?
- Pull away again (not forgetting everything you've learned about road safety – i.e. check for traffic!)
- Handling. Making sure it's safe to do so, take your hands off the handlebars. Does the bike wobble or pull to one side?
- Engine wear. In top gear, slow down to under 2000 rpm. Then see if the bike pulls cleanly when you gently accelerate – this will expose any bottom end issues.
- Engine condition – hot. When you return to the seller, listen to the engine again before switching off. Any new noises?

## Checklist

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Item	Details	√ / X
Run engine	Smooth? Leaks? Any odd noises?	
Electrical	Lights, horn, indicators all working?	
Frame	Any indications of crash damage?	
Wheel alignment	Are the wheels both pointing the same way?!	
Front suspension	Any leaks? Does it work correctly?	
Steering	Any "notchiness" or looseness of the head bearings?	
Front wheel	Bearings all right?	
Front brakes	Working? Any sticking pistons? Pad wear?	
Front tyre	Condition and tread depth?	
Rear suspension	Any rust? Bouncy?	
Rear wheel	Present and correct? Bearings? Chain ok (if applicable)?	
Rear brakes	Working? Any sticking pistons? Pad wear?	
Rear tyre	Condition and tread depth?	
Swingarm	Rusty? Any dings or kinks?	
Exhaust	Any leaks or rust? Too noisy?	
Battery	Condition of terminals? Does it start the bike?	
Cooling system	Any leaks? Loose clips? Damaged radiator?	
Panels	Any odd gaps anywhere? Any scuffs or scrapes?	
Handlebars	Cables / hydraulics all ok?	
Key	Fits ignition and other locks? Spare available?	
<b>Road Test</b>	<b>Details</b>	√ / X
Ignition	All operational?	
Engine – cold	Strange noises?	
Clutch	Strange noises or vibration?	
Where to go	Don't get lost!	
Gears	Does each gear engage properly?	
Power	Smooth? Does it jump out of gear?	
Neutral	Is neutral easy to engage?	
Brakes	Working? Smooth? ABS issues?	
Handling	Pulling to one side? Any wobble?	
Engine wear	Accelerate smoothly in top gear?	
Engine – hot	Any new noises?	

## A final word

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Check how much fuel is in the tank before starting the ride home on your new acquisition!

Oh – and make sure the seller gives you all the required paperwork.



I hope you have found this buyers' guide useful, and that you end up with the motorcycle you always wanted!

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