

BMW R1200S, K1200GT & R1200GS Adventure

BMW'S MULTIPLE NEW model introductions were held once again in South Africa, as it was the end of summer in the southern hemisphere where it *should* be predictably warm and dry when it would be just the opposite on the other side of the equator. SA is also a particularly friendly location for the hordes of European journalists in attendance, as there is no time change when flying due south and an overnight flight will allow them to rest as they travel.

It was a bit different for the 10-strong American contingent, which needed nearly 40 hours of travel time to reach the site of the launch in Franschhoek, a lovely town located a ways east of Capetown. Thankfully, we were all given a full day to rest and acclimate before the activities began in earnest—much appreciated.

Although the all-new F800 series would be the biggest news, there was plenty more: the long-awaited R1200S sports machine, the much anticipated GT version of the K1200S and the new Adventure version of the R1200GS. The F800 won't go on sale in America until next year, so we'll save that one for next month. The others will be available about the time you read this. So, with no further ado...

R1200S—"CHARACTER SPORTS"

Its predecessor, the R1100S, was something of an anachronism—the only model in the boxer lineup that had never been upgraded to the 1150 engine, with its improved performance and better transmission. But, as it provided the basis of the "Boxer Cup" series, it continued to hold a revered place in BMW's model lineup. Long overdue for improvement, it was completely revamped.



Like the Brits, the South Africans drive on the left, a crucial point to always keep in mind. The first few days included at least a few shivers of "what's wrong with this picture" in traffic for each of us. But, when you finally got used to the habit, you had to *unlearn* it when you got home, or at least I did.

Naturally, it shares the upgrades common to the rest of the R1200 series: A much improved transmission with ball-bearing-mounted gear shafts; helically cut transmission gears and light-weight "dog-shift" selectors for lower shifting effort. The rear end is the latest maintenance-free Paralever shaft final drive (no splines to lubricate and no rear gearcase oil changes required) and the front forks feature a forged aluminum leading arm for the Telelever front suspension. Its electronics use the latest CAN-bus single-wire system and the motor relies on the latest BMS-K engine management, which uses individual oxygen sensors, active knock control and dual-spark ignition for each cylinder—finally banishing poor low-speed running and "surging" to the history books.

To make the S-motor the most powerful production boxer ever, a variety of tried and true hotrodding techniques were employed. Most visible from the outside are the enormous 50mm exhaust pipes exiting the heads, a diameter that is shared with the cylinder's exhaust porting, to make sure that exhaust restriction doesn't reduce output—a claimed 122 hp @ 8250 rpm. The pipes are really big, 5mm larger than before, and even large in comparison to other high-performance twins, equal in size, for instance, to Ducati superbike headers.

New cylinder heads feature the highest compression ratio ever fitted to a boxer: 12.5:1, particularly to increase low and mid-range power. Maximum torque is said to be 83 lb./ft. at 6800—an extraordinary figure, if true, considering that most engines will produce a maximum torque equal to their displacement in cubic inches; i.e., something closer to 71 lb./ft. would be typical. The heads feature special tighter combustion chambers and are fitted with oversized valves, 2mm larger, now with two 36mm intakes and two 31mm exhausts apiece. To reduce flow restriction further, the valve guides are recessed, so that they don't intrude into the ports.

Beneath the heads are new forged aluminum pistons (vs. cast



At Killarney: The R1200S provides a comfortable ergonomic layout. Although a bit heavy-steering, it's stable and relaxed at high speeds.

on the other boxers) supported by updated connecting rods, stronger by virtue of a superior steel alloy. Redline is raised to 8800 rpm.

Longer duration, high-lift cams are matched with the higher compression, and to give adequate support to the cams' radical lobes, worked by stiffer tapered valve springs and reinforced rocker arms to allow more rpm, the cams themselves now use three plain bearings for support, rather than two as before.

Huge 52mm throttles feed fuel and air to the cylinders (by comparison, the R1200GS uses 47mm throttles). Single fuel injectors supply the gas, and German 98 octane (RON) fuel is specified, although the built-in anti-knock sensors will accommodate German 95 octane, albeit with "a minor reduction in power," they say. Precisely how these German octane ratings compare with US octane could not be explained, but we were assured the commonly available US 91-octane premium fuel works without problems.

The two exhausts are joined to an even larger single pipe under the motor, and this routes up the rear left side to an attractive underseat muffler that has two stacked outlets. Checking the exhaust flow with a hand over the outlets, it was clear that the upper one provides the greatest flow, at least at modest rpm.

In a clever twist designed to allow smooth throttle response, the engineers have devised a progressive throttle control system that uses offset overlapping throttle spools to produce a cam-action. The result is that 20% movement of the twistgrip gives only 8% throttle opening, 40% movement gives 20% opening, 60% gives 42%; 80% opening gives 70% and further opening become a linear relationship. However that might sound, engine control is very subtle when it should be, such as in traffic, and when ridden hard, as on the track, feels very fast and responsive.



Instrumentation includes a large analog-type speedo (left) and tach (top) together with the usual information display. The mirrors are good, but not as wide as they might be, and the handlebars, although they look low, are close and comfortable.

Like the rest of R1200 models, which received a balance shaft to reduce the vibration caused by greater displacement and reduced crankshaft inertia, the R1200S runs very smoothly and what vibration remains is never intrusive.

In addition to the heavily modified motor, an all-new chassis that's unique to the R1200S supplies the cornering clearance and responsive handling appropriate to the bike's racy appearance.

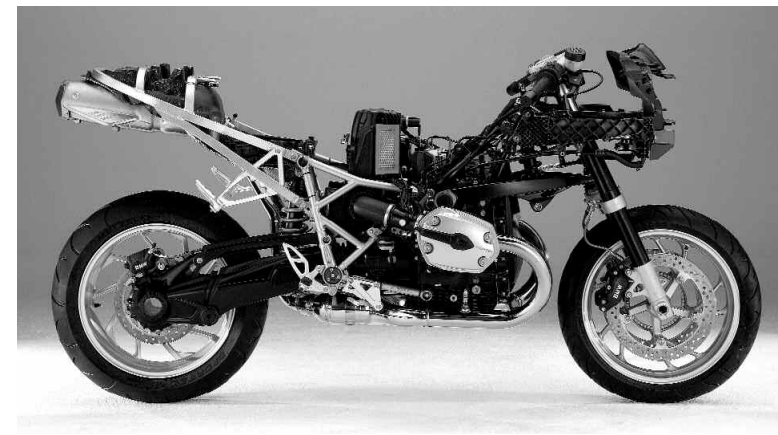
The main chassis is still in a steel tube format, but with additional bracing for greater stiffness and holds the engine approximately 20mm higher to allow a generous 52° of bank angle before the cylinder head covers start grinding against the pavement (2° more lean angle than before).

The rake has also been steepened 1° from the R1100S spec, and is now just 24°. Trail is also reduced: from 3.94" to just 3.43". To prevent any loss of stability, a steering damper is now standard. The wheelbase is actually a touch longer, 58.53" vs. 58.19" for more forward weight bias.

In keeping with upgrades common to the boxer line, the forks are now much beefier, 41mm units vs. the old 35mm tubes. Suspension is via Showa components at both ends, with the option of Öhlins at extra cost.

The rear shock provides travel-dependent damping (TDD) as a way to provide the progressive springing/damping of a linkage-type shock mounting to the R1200S' linkage-less, direct-mounted shock. With TDD, a tapered needle constricts a low-speed damping orifice as travel increases, to provide a similar effect.

The Öhlins suspension option adds improved adjustability to the mix in addition to its renowned damping quality. Up front, variable compression and preload, not provided by the Showa front damper, are added. And, at the rear, in addition to the



The bare chassis reveals the stiffer new main chassis, made from steel tube. The sub-frame is a separate bolt-on piece made from square-section aluminum. The instrument-supporting "head" frame is cast magnesium. Altogether, the new bike is said to weigh just 470 lbs. full of fuel. Although designated a "sport" bike, we'd call it a GT.

variable rebound and preload of the Showa shock, the Öhlins shock offers compression damping adjustability and also adjustable ride height to change the steering characteristics independent of spring settings.

A wider 6.0" rear wheel and matching 190-section tire are another option, vs. the standard 5.50" rim and 180 tire. Although the bike's power characteristic may not warrant more massive rubber and we usually find that a 180-section tire handles with more agility, you can't argue that the big tire looks the part of a sportbike.

The wheels are the same design as those used on the K1200S, with branched swirling spokes, and are 4.1kg lighter (than the R1100S) for a very noticeable 9 lb. decrease in unsprung weight.

Naturally, ABS is also optional, however this time the electrically power-assisted Integral ABS is ditched in favor of a non-power assisted "BMW Motorrad ABS" two-channel system. Rumors have it that the power-assisted Integral ABS may be dropped entirely across the BMW line as soon as this summer, to be replaced by the new system, which use a new type pressure modulator with variable cross-section intake valves that optimize the ABS pressure during activation. The biggest benefit of the non-boosted system is a smooth, linear feel for braking power. Even without the problems of sudden power boost failures, the Integral system's non-linear feel is detrimental to control.

An anti-theft warning system, two-tone paintwork and heated grips are further options, while a wealth of accessories will also be available. Four different colors will be offered: yellow with a black stripe (my personal favorite), flat black, silver, and red with silver stripes.

Stylistically, the new machine's shapes are very nicely proportioned and integrated.

We especially liked the new LED taillight and silencer treatment.

With an MSRP of \$14,700 and listed as a 2007 model, on sale this summer, ABS will cost \$795, the Öhlins suspension \$690, the wider wheel/tire combo \$190 and heated grips \$200; just like our test bikes.

Riding Impression: ROAD AND TRACK

During our day aboard the R1200S, we had a drive of perhaps 100 miles to the Killarney racetrack; part freeway and part mountain roads initially cloaked in pea soup fog, which thankfully cleared as we rode. However, farther, on the other side of a long tunnel, the fog returned and had to burn off once more. Although the clouds darkened throughout the day, it never did rain.

Contrary to expectations, the bike's seating position is very comfortable, and although the handlebars look low, they are close enough for a relaxed reach. And while the seat's shape looks curious at first, it's a comfortable perch; wide for steady body support and narrow at the front to make reaching the ground easier at stops.

The optional Öhlins suspension works very nicely; very well balanced with an almost car-like, stiction-free front response and excellent ride quality, reminiscent of the K1200S. Perhaps a tad stiff, some said, I thought it was perfect for the plan.

The ergonomic layout is comfortable, but the windshield is very flat on top and only protects to about mid-chest. We had some fairly vicious cross winds on the way to the track and the bike was very stable. I would guess that its center of pressure is slightly ahead of its CofG, but not by much. Although at first, on the foggy mountain roads, its rake felt very steep and the steering a tad nervous, I learned to accommodate the feeling and trust the steering damper very quickly.



Rear shot gives details of the exhaust system and another angle on the harmoniously shaped body panels. The silver model wears silver wheels.



The ergonomics are comfortable, the power more than sufficient for high-speed touring and the handling very well balanced for a satisfying ride.



The handlebar mounting allows four positions and is angled so the bars move away as they go lower. Note the braided stainless brake/clutch lines.



A look beneath the skin of the K1200GT reveals the high-tech alloy chassis and advanced suspension shared by the K1200S and R-models.

The engine power is quite surprising at higher rpm and very strong above 7000, whereupon it feels as if it runs out of revs shortly after 8000. Nonetheless, its mid-range torque is very good and broadly flexible. I don't find the engine vibration bothersome, but heard a couple of complaints about it. The engine's torque effect is minimal, either when accelerating or when I back off suddenly.

The transmission shifts very nicely and I never miss a shift. And, unlike most shaft-driven bikes, downshifts don't cause the machine's rear end to get light.

The mirrors are good, not quite great, but better than average and certainly adequate. Inside the tunnel, I notice that the instruments have a cool reddish glow.

My machine is fitted with Michelin Pilot Sport tires, which grain pretty strongly, indicating softish rubber and presumably good cornering grip.

For our first session on the track, we follow the instructor, who shows us the correct racing line for two laps, after which we have six more on our own. True to form, I build speed gradually, but a gang of French moto-journalists on track with me quickly pass and disappear.

The bike seems to have good grip and I'm obviously too cautious at first; braking way too early for some of the turns, but the track is bumpy and long streaks of oil dry running on into the entrances of the corners give me pause. I can't help remembering that I am a very long way from home and at the very beginning of a long trip.

As I go faster, the speed isn't intimidating as the bike is so stable, but I have to wonder if the steering damper doesn't mask some feedback from the front tire, as perhaps does the Telelever front end. Faster corner entrances are more a matter of trust than actual feel. The steering is a bit heavy, and with my toes on the pegs, I can feel the

swingarm moving under my right heel.

Because the ABS is still engaged (it can be turned off) I use only the front brake, not wishing to upset the front/rear balance by adding the rear brake to the mix (how do I know how much is being applied in such instances?).

The absence of front end dive from the Telelever isn't the issue I thought it would be, and I still feel as if I have good judgment of how hard I can brake. And braking is where I gain the most ground when I close on slower riders. In one left turn, I felt I was running wide, so I backed off the throttle, which caused the engine's back torque to lift the bike up, so that I was still running wide. Steadiness always pays, but even more so with a longitudinal engine's torque, and the effect is something one would have to adapt to their riding style.

On the track, the R1200S does nothing to hamper my efforts and judging by some very talented riding, can be hustled with remarkable speed around the track. It really sounds the part while doing so, too.

But rather than a true competition sports bike, BMW regard the R1200S as a "character sports," meaning that it has the character of a sportbike. Although it is a lot of fun to ride on the track, it's an even better street ride; smooth, comfortable and capable of relaxed high-speed cruising. It's more of a Grand Touring bike than a true sportbike, and that's probably just as it should be.

K1200GT—SUPER SPORT-TOURING

As the 2006 slant-block, transverse four-cylinder K1200S already made such a good sport-touring mount, we knew the K1200GT was unlikely to disappoint (not to be confused with the earlier, same-named K1200GT with the longitudinal, laid-on-its-side "flying brick" four-cylinder engine). Essentially the same mechanical platform under its more touring-oriented bodywork,

the GT brings the benefits of BMW's remarkable K1200 powerplant, Duolever front suspension, Electronic Suspension Adjustment, and a low center of gravity to those riders who would trade a little ultimate sportiness for superior wind protection and luggage capacity.

Rated at 152 hp, the motor is retuned slightly from its R-spec (163 hp) or S-spec (167 hp), to enhance low- and mid-range pulling power at the expense of high-rpm urge. Peak torque is rated at 96 lb./ft. at 7750 rpm and we're told that 75% of this figure is available from just 3000 rpm.

The final drive ratio of 2.82:1 is the same as the R-model's, so we might expect to record a top speed of approximately 160 mph, despite the power loss, given its superior wind penetration versus the R.

Fuel capacity in its new form is 24 liters or 6.34 gallons.

As with the rest of the new K1200 family, BMW's unique Duolever front suspension serves to create stiction-free travel while maintaining ideal anti-dive steering geometry throughout the suspension stroke. At the rear is a linkage-type EVO Paralever system for progressive suspension action together with torque-controlled shaft drive.

Braking is via electrically boosted Integral ABS in "partially integrated" form, meaning the rear brake pedal activates only the rear brake, while the front lever balances the operation of both.

CAN-bus wiring integrates the various electrical components which simplifies the addition of trip computer functions to the dash's "Info-Flatscreen" readouts. An electronic immobilizer (chip-controlled ignition key) anti-theft system is also standard.

In terms of ergonomics, the K1200GT has a full complement of adjustable rider accommodations: An electrically adjustable windshield that rises over a nearly 4" range—simultaneously tilting as it rises for

optimum placement; a two-position rider's seat (rated at 33.07" or 32.28" high); cleverly bolted four-position handlebars with angled mountings so that the bars move away from the rider as they move lower, and adjustable brake and clutch levers. Should these fail to adapt to all rider shapes, a seat, 8/10" lower, a footpeg relocation kit, as well as a windshield 2.4"-taller, are also options. Creature comforts like individually adjustable heated front and rear seats are also available.

Naturally, BMW's revolutionary electrically adjustable suspension is also offered. This allows the rider to set the suspension for a variety of load conditions before starting off, and once moving, to adjust the front and rear damping between Comfort, Normal and Sport as the road conditions or rider mood might suggest.

The bike is wrapped in bodywork that has a sharply chiseled frontal aspect featuring three headlights, a single low beam and twin highs. Although the overall effect is sleek from the rider's point of view, the sides of the fairing sport a deep reclining near-vertical line that makes the bike appear much more slab-sided and rigid in its bearing than its riding dynamics would suggest.

Three color choices: a charcoal "Dark Grey Metallic," dark "Deep Blue Metallic," and very Teutonic "Crystal Grey Metallic" are offered, with contrasting body side covers and seats. The MSRP is \$18,800 and includes the Integral ABS and hard bags. ESA adds \$775, heated grips \$200 and cruise control is \$210, among many other options.

Riding Impression—ON THE ROAD

The K1200GT shares the same endearing charms as the K1200S; a beautifully smooth-running engine and fine handling, while adding improved wind protection, adjustable height handlebars and much

roomier saddlebags.

But it has several of the same flaws too: the same Integral ABS that lacks a linear feel; for instance, so that brake force suddenly triples as your fingers pull just a bit harder. There is also a bit of on/off fuel injection snatch at very low speed, which is particularly noticeable when we all travel in a long accordion-like train of riders on tighter roads, constantly adjusting the distance to the bikes in front of us. The handlebar ends are also rubber-mounted, like the old R1150GS bars used to be, which was done supposedly to smooth throttle control. Because the throttle is so sensitive to slight openings, over time I learn to make very subtle twists—almost the thought of an increase in power is enough. In slow going, however, the combination of the odd brake response and abrupt fuel injection can be a real hindrance to smooth operation. But once I get an open road in front of me, and can flow with it, it all works very nicely.

Also, the use of the old-style tapered grips seems like a curiosity after using the straight grips fitted to the R1200S and F800 models.

The transmission internals are also carried over directly from the S- and R-models, but even fitted with the R-bike's shorter final drive gearing, the GT's first gear now seems a bit too tall for its touring role. Although the beefy multi-plate wet clutch is more than up to the job of a bit of slipping when getting under way, the downside to its engagement power is a heavy lever effort, reminiscent of a Ducati's.

The transmission shifts easily enough, but is often loud and clunky, although there is occasionally an elusive engagement point that allows a slick, quiet shift, when you happen to find it. Practice should increase the frequency of discovery.

Naturally, our test models are equipped with ESA. In operation, the three damping

performance steps are noticeable, but perhaps not quite so distinct as they are on the K1200S, although still great fun to change.

The multi-position-adjustable handlebars are a nice touch, and ours are set to full high. Loosening two torx bolts allows movement and I wonder if a position a touch lower might be even better.

Strangely, for a flagship sport-tourer admittedly targeted on the Yamaha FJR1300, the GT's seat is not particularly great. Not level, but tilted forward, the rider inevitably finds himself riding it full forward. Designed with a commendably narrow front section to ease reaching the ground at stops, I find the padding in front of the pelvic bones is very abbreviated, so that it provides very little support to the thighs, concentrating your weight on a smaller area. Should you try to sit back, the seat's upward slope is accompanied by domed rear upholstery, rather than a more appropriate dished shape. BMW knows very well how to make a "Comfort" seat, and the GT's stock seat is not up to par. However, the passenger's portion looks as if it would be pretty good.

Also, the knee cutouts in the fairing sides are once again a tight fit to my knees, even though I'd taken the knee pads out of my Aerostich for more knee room, making them less bulky than normal. Because the seat is adjustable for height, I also try the lower position, which gives the whole bike the feeling of a lower CofG and enhances control, but my knees are then in constant contact with the bodywork. I have to imagine whatever template BMW uses for knee room hasn't changed over the years, because I've had similar problems on their sport-tourers for a decade or more and my inseams are not freakishly long, but about 33 inches.

The wind protection offered by the adjustable windshield ranges from about

chest high to well over the top of the helmet, but the additional protection comes at a cost in sidewind sensitivity. Running toward George, we were cruising at 110 mph and I keep it low. But even at that speed, the engine smoothness is extraordinary.

The hand levers, although they are adjustable, are curious. The clutch reach ranges from long to way-too-long and the brake lever is also a good stretch even at its shortest setting. However, because the lever travel required by the Integral ABS is fairly long, I heard a few journalists say that even more reach would be desirable.

Fuel mileage checks: First mileage check: 252 km; 39.51 liters begin, 54.99 end. Second: 180.6 km; 39.5 liters start, 51.92 end. Third 169.6 km; 25.61 liters start, 37.03 end. Results: 38.29, 34.21 and 34.89 miles per gallon.

My only other concern is with the luggage: although roomy and beautifully finished, it was easily scratched. By the end of two days riding,

most the saddlebags on the GTs were scuffed by boots swung over the bike, and when you lifted the bags off to carry into your hotel, they were likely to be unsteady on the ground, and just rolling over, the paint was very vulnerable to damage.

Overall, the K1200GT provides a level of refinement and optional equipment that is unavailable on any other sport-tourer. Its engine is not only very powerful but uncannily smooth-running. And we know from experience that perfect heat management is one of the new K-bike's best engineered features, so that the lure of high power spoiled by wilting temperatures will not be the problem it is on its Japanese rivals. Capable of insanely high cruising speeds, should conditions allow. (On one stretch, dutifully chasing our tour leaders, I maintained cruising speeds of 240–250 kph! You do the math.) Even without testing its acceleration, we can't imagine any other sport-tourer offering significantly more.

Hopefully, the option of a "Comfort" seat will cure its only real flaw.

R1200GS Adventure—GS GRANDÉ

Clothing was a difficult decision for the 11-day trip. The South African weather reports showed temps in the low 80s, humidity as high as 94% and rain—standard fare prior to our departure. So I brought my Aerostich suit for rain, perforated leather Joe Rocket pants and multi-zippered Belstaff jacket for muddling temps, and the

BMW Venting Machine suit for really hot weather, hoping to cover all the bases.

But we hadn't been told to expect a dirt portion, so we were surprised to hear the GS Adventure would be ridden primarily in dirt, with only enough pavement to get us to our primary route—a crossing of the mountains via the 200-mile-long Bavarian-



PHOTO: CHARLES EVERITT

In one of the easier sections of the "kloof" we took turns shooting pictures of each other, to have a way to convey the conditions. Temperatures were mild, nothing like the high heat, high humidity and rain that had prevailed before our arrival.

skloof (Afrikaans for "baboon canyon")—and back again.

As first sight, the Adventure—or rather a full squadron of them (we numbered 18 including BMW brass and our local guides) simply reeks of testosterone. Tall and massive, decked out in its enormous aluminum side bags and top case, gargantuan 8.5-gallon gas tank reinforced with steel crash bars, bash plates, oversized windshield, extra lights and massive knobby tires, it appears that a team of Marines must be departing for a mission in Afghanistan...from the parking lot of a fancy South African hotel! Hotel guests are stopped in their tracks. Our group is excited to get started.

As we pack a wide collection of overnight gear—we will be camping tonight in the wild and don't know how cold it will be—it all barely makes a dent in the bike's storage capacity. The saddlebags are formed around tough-looking plastic corners, unlike the welded alloy construction of popular aftermarket types, and the full three-box set will retail for nearly \$2,000 with mounts. The Adventure's base price is \$16,600, the extra lights are \$375, ABS is \$995, but the crash bars are standard.

The huge fuel capacity is carried low, between two fat sides of a gastank made of nylon and protected by tubular stainless-steel guards with a bead-blast finish. BMW estimates the bike's range as 465 miles at a steady 56 mph (90km/hr). We won't need another stop for fuel until we leave the val-

ley, which has no gas stations. The standard GS models, ridden by other than the press corps, will need to refill before we enter the canyon's dirt roads.

The first revelation, one I was especially glad to see, is that the Adventure's seat is not so tall as the 1150-model's was. About an inch lower, the change makes a huge difference to my inseams. The seat is now a two-piece unit with the forward part height adjustable like the standard GS. The footpegs are wide steel cleated pieces, in recognition of its job description and there are no rubber inserts for less active street use. Both the shift and brake pedals are quickly adjustable for height, as riding from a standing position provides better control in demanding dirt conditions, and your feet need higher controls when standing as opposed to sitting.

The shifter adjusts via an eccentric, to make changes convenient and easy, and the brake pedal via a clever second pedal that can be set either up or down by simply pulling it back on a spring-loaded shaft. In the up position it's out of the way; down, it raises the pedal surface by about an inch (the see photo, p. 25).

Strong hand guards are also standard. Together with an improved windshield (still angle-adjustable) and the addition of clear flaps at the shield's base, the rider protection is even better for inclement weather.

The valve covers have pressed sheet alloy covers to protect them from rocks and the wire wheels have epoxy-coated rims.

The bike will be available in two colors: non-metallic Alpine White and matte White Aluminum with contrasting seat colors.

The suspension has 20mm (.79") more travel at each end and the rear shock is the TDD or Travel-Dependent Damping type.

Naturally all the Adventure's engine and chassis details are essentially identical to the standard R1200GS, with its advanced 6-speed transmission, superior engine management, greater power and next-generation Evo Paralever shaft drive. The rumors that said the Adventure would be based on the HP2 enduro bike were wrong.

Riding Impression—STREET AND DIRT

Rated at 563 lbs. wet (an accurate DIN standard), the bike is surely over 600 lbs. with loaded luggage. It feels heavy, too, and the knobby tires feel mushy (set for dirt work at 1.6 bar front, 1.8 rear I learn later, equal to 23/26 psi). It feels formidable to control on the street and on dirt, we may



This clever double brake pedal was my favorite trick on the bike; allowing you to change the pedal position from lower to higher in a brief stop (I couldn't manage it with my boot on the move, but maybe with practice). For nasty going, with the top pedal down, you can brake while standing.

may soon "live in interesting times."

Eventually, we turn single file onto the long dirt road across the canyon and spread out to minimize eating each other's dust while maintaining visual contact in case of troubles. The dirt roads are often narrow and not wishing to encounter trucks head-on in mid-turn, I keep well left on left handers (SA remember). At the first stop I notice a lot of fine scratches on the side cases, from brush. Call it "adventure patina."

From the first turn out of the hotel driveway, my impression is that the bike is hard to steer and hasn't got enough stability. Even modest dirt speeds are a high anxiety proposition when the ground is very loose or we encounter sand. Turns in such conditions require standing and leaning the weight of the bike into the turn while counterbalancing your body weight to the opposite side, steering as little as possible with the bars as the front end feels as if it constantly wants to wash out.

Soon after entering the dirt, we are given a test: a fairly steep jeep trail uphill to a lookout point. The only possible bike track is in the tire ruts, which are filled with rocks from baseball size on down. Keeping my eyes well ahead, picking the ideal track, the bike follows my lead and I manage to get up without problems. But the downhill return is even more nerve-wracking, as I know what to expect. Without incident, safely at the bottom, I come to a stop in the sand and promptly topple over as I can't reach the ground well enough! The time-honored "your back to the bike, lift the inside handlebar with your leg muscles," gets be a routine we all master.

At the end of a long day, the road to our campsite is a meandering trail with long sections of deep sand, and the anticipated antics of our big group have attracted a small crowd of locals, who line the tricky



The massive gas capacity is held low and forward, but puts additional weight on the front tire. The giant alloy cases have four tie down points on each lid, which will either pivot at one end, or can be lifted off entirely.

parts. They do get entertained. After showers, dinner and campfire we sleep like the grateful dead in individual tents; in our exhaustion, indifferent to the presence of any wild animals.

In the morning, still trying to figure a way to improve its stability, I ask if I can't add a bit of air to the front tire, because it feels as if the machine has too little trail. I'm strongly cautioned against the idea, advised that it, "wouldn't be so good for the water crossings." What water crossings? More surprises.

After breakfast, we are told by BMW's PR chief, Jurgen Stoffregen, that the second half of the trip will be "more challenging" (his laugh sounding too much like a mad pirate's). We know from maps that the next half will be much steeper, both up and downhill, meaning that the surface will surely be eroded by the recent rains to even an worse condition. Any of us who would rather return by the incoming route are offered the chance. Two of us consider that a good option. The old tendonitis in my elbows is badly inflamed already; the bike feels too unstable for more difficult conditions; and I know my wife will kill me if I get hurt and the crash doesn't finish me off. Live to ride another day, I figure.

But I remember the night before, over-hearing another journalist say he will take all the preload out of the suspension so the the bike will be closer to the ground and easier to hold up. I consider that remark and take one turn of preload out of my bike, hoping it might make some difference to the trail situation. On the road, perhaps it does, but it's hard to tell. After maybe 40 kms, I locate the preload knob on the right side as I ride and take one more turn out. It's maybe better. After another 30kms or so, I take another turn of preload out, and the bike does seem noticeably better, so I take

one more turn soon after. *Bingo!* The stability I remember from our first R1200GS dirt ride in South Africa has returned and, as a test, I take it up to 150 kph or 90 mph on a straight stretch. If it had only felt this good earlier, I'd have tackled the more difficult section of the ride, but at least it's finally stable. We're off the dirt soon after, and even without pumping up the tires, the bike is now much better in the paved corners as well, not hunting at the front as it had before.

In general, the experience has taught me that the Adventure's ride is extremely plush, even with four turns of rear preload. In rough going, the rear axle tramps badly when accelerating, but I find that giving it a bit of rear brake along with the gas helps reduce that tendency. Also, when shifting, the soft suspension and tires would allow the bike to gyrate noticeably front-to-back, an effect of the longitudinal engine layout—not threatening, just different.

On the dirt, we were advised to keep the ABS on, and I quickly learned that I didn't dare touch the front brake, and also that the rear was easily overdone—be extra careful.

My judgment is that the Adventure is borderline deficient in stability, and I've never ridden another bike so sensitive to rear preload. The Travel Dependent Damping is also critical in its effectiveness depending on rear preload, as the tapered needle attached to one of the shock increases damping as the shock compresses. but I wouldn't have suspected damping as a cause for the nervous front end.

With that caveat—zero rear preload—the Adventure is the virtual Cadillac Escalade of dirt bikes. Heavy, plush, smooth, but with the butch presence of a Humvee. Dirt expeditionary forces or Banana Republic poseurs will find it irresistible.

—Dave Searle