

The Devil Is In The Details

tips and tricks for cleaning your bike the right way

by Bill Shaw

ONE BMW RIDER was recently overheard saying that “a clean GS is a dirty shame.” The underlying implication here is that anyone with a clean motorcycle, in this particular case a BMW adventure touring bike, must not ride far or often, or would rather clean his/her bike than ride it. Well, we suggest that the two do not have to be mutually exclusive.

There are a number of advantages to periodically cleaning your bike; e.g., protecting your investment; taking pride in its appearance; or, for those attentive riders mindful of costly repairs, identifying problems before they occur. That’s why we recommend doing it with the same commitment and regularity as a 3000-mile oil change—it should be considered routine maintenance. Coupled with ideas given to us by friends, as well as information gleaned from the Internet, marketing literature and other reading material, the following is a compilation of techniques that we have been using for years to clean our bikes.

Tools of the Trade.

Begin by purchasing, stealing, or otherwise procuring two buckets that will be used exclusively for your bike(s). We do not recommend using a household bucket since it may have recently contained a bleach or ammonia cleaner that could potentially harm the finish of your bike. Conversely, you’ll want to avoid accidentally transferring harsh chemicals and contaminants used to clean your bike to the fine Italian marble floor that was just laid in the foyer. One bucket should be assigned permanently for washing the wheels, engine, drivetrain and other sullied non-body parts. The second bucket, preferably one in a different color, should only be used

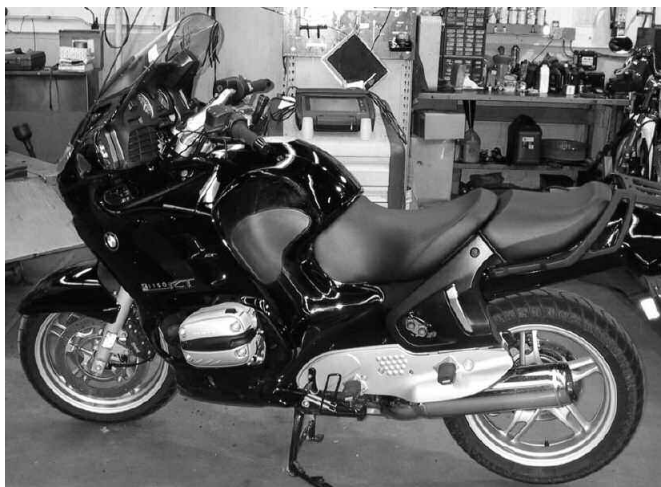
to wash the painted surfaces and windshield of the bike.

Next, buy the softest car-wash mitt available for the painted body parts and windshield. The best ones are made from natural fleece and have a thick mat/pile which is best for lifting and carrying away dirt, bugs, bit of Buicks and other unwanted debris from the paint surface without scratching it. While sponges have their purpose, we do not advocate using them on painted surfaces since they are not as effective as thick mitts for removing grime.

For drying, a synthetic chamois is very effective. It can be thrown in a washing machine when soiled and does not crack or become brittle with age. Real detailing aficionados do not use natural chamois fearing that the chemicals used in the tanning process might adversely react with a bike’s finish. Natural chamois also require more care, usually cost more, and do not last as long as a quality synthetic chamois like those sold by S100. (Several tricks to preserving a chamois, by the way, include always keeping it moist, storing it in its original container, and when saturated with water, squeezing the excess water out instead of twisting, since this will tear the fibers.)

Another tool that can be used to quickly dry your motorcycle is a silicone squeegee. The California Water Blade is one example. The manufacturer claims that it removes water in one-third the time of a chamois, has 15 times less friction than a terrycloth towel, and will not scratch the finish. We’ve had limited success with squeegees because of all the compound curves on a bike—they seem more suited for cars than motorcycles.

It’s also good to add several microfiber cleaning towels, 100% cotton cloth diapers, and regular cotton towels to your list, too. We use the diapers for applying polishes and waxes but prefer the cot-



Black is arguably the most striking color on a motorcycle. But darker colors not only show more dirt, they are harder to keep clean. So when washing and drying, or applying and removing polish/wax, use a front-to-back motion—not circular—to avoid accidentally scratching the paint. Scratches are most visible in darker colors and can easily be seen at right angles. And since swirl marks are minute scratches, they are visible from every angle.



There is a perception in some adventure touring circles that an owner of a clean bike, particularly one with a GS, KLR, V-Strom, KTM or DR designation, would rather clean it than ride it. However, this stereotype isn’t always accurate. Conscientious riders realize that cleaning their bike is important since it not only protects their investment, but identifies any potential problems too—especially if it’s ridden off road.