

ROAD TEST

★ BMW R1200GS 89%

BMW discovers its sporty edge

Bizarre as it sounds – and as odd as it looks – BMW's restyled giant trailie is just as happy devouring fast B-roads as it is touring across continents with a pillion

BY MARC POTTER PICTURES JAMES WRIGHT

WERE sports bike mad in Britain. Yet the onslaught of speed cameras, dodgy road surfaces, and ever increasing amounts of traffic means plenty of us are turning our attentions away from 160bhp race-rep missiles and looking for something a little bit different. That's where the R1200GS – BMW's latest take on its popular big-bore trailster – comes in.

As you'd expect, the 1200 will – as GS machines always have – effortlessly tour continents with a pillion or luggage. It'll also take you to work in comfort and sit at silly speeds on the motorway with ease.

What you don't expect is a giant trailie that at 199kg weighs the same as a Ducati 999 (both manufacturers' claimed weights are calculated wet, but without fuel). It only makes 100bhp, but is as fast on a mountain road as just about anything with two wheels.

Its looks aren't to everyone's taste, but at the world's first test on the beautiful roads around George in South Africa it proved to be a consummate all-rounder.

This GS is guaranteed to supply plenty of speed and thrills on your favourite roads. And without any of the excruciating back pain, or fear associated with the sort of power outputs of the latest sports tackle.

You can just gas the BMW and probably get the edge on a GSX-R1000

'You can just gas the R1200GS and probably get the edge on a GSX-R1000 to the next set of lights'

to the next set of lights. And at the end of a ride you'll be left excited but relaxed, rather than in need of a sedative and wondering how on earth you got away with that last big slide.

From the inception of the four-valve Boxer twin R1100GS in 1994, up to the R1150GS that was discontinued last year, the GS has always been an amazingly capable road bike. But like many BMWs it has always been just a bit too quirky to be a mainstream success.

The R1200GS is a development of previous big-cubed GS bikes. But it has



R1200GS keeps 1150's beaky, oddball looks but is now lighter, faster and punchier

been completely overhauled for 2004. At £9275 on the road, it costs £1000 more, but comes with ABS as standard – previously a £750 option.

The whole bike from the ground up has been re-worked. The 1200 is lighter, sharper, punchier and faster.

Sure, you get a 40cc increase in capacity, but all the engine internals are new as well, including the first ever appearance of a balancer shaft in a BMW Boxer. Engine vibration has been dramatically reduced and the gearshift action is lighter and more accurate.

External running gear, from the wheels to the styling, is new – as is the suspension, which is a vast improvement.

With 114,000 sold since 1994, the GS is BMW's best-selling bike ever. And the 1200 marks the development of a new, modern range of bikes. It represents a new sportier focus for the company – shaving a whopping 30kg off the old 1150GS's weight is a pretty good start.

The weight is carried much lower than on the previous model, something which is instantly noticeable.

And the bike is much narrower. The footrests are lower than before, but there's more ground clearance, and you sit closer to the bars.

The seat is adjustable, and two replacement seats are available to give a 810mm (32in) seat height for shortsies and a maximum lanky-legged 890mm (35in), although no prices are available yet. On the stock seat at its tallest position, the ride height is comfortable for my 6ft 3in frame.

It's a cinch to ride in town and will pull any gear you like. Maximum torque output is up by 13ftlb, from 72ftlb to 85ftlb at 5500rpm. And the added top-speed zasp is from a 15bhp increase to

last ounce of power.

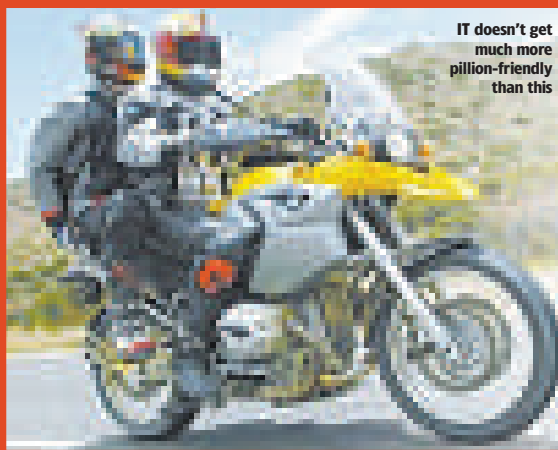
On mountain roads the 1200 really shows how entertaining it can be. Get hard on the ABS braking system, feel the tyre bite and pitch it hard on to its side. Where the old bike suffered from torque reaction, lurching to the right with high rev downchanges, this one is barely affected.

It steers amazingly quickly and once in a corner is totally stable. You could hit a brick mid-corner while tightening up a line and it wouldn't budge. Get a flow-on through tight or sweeping bends and you start to understand the bike. It's a trailie, but there's no bagginess from the lightened and revised suspension. It feels taut and lithe.

It's only when you really get to the point where the pegs are scraping that the front-end starts to feel remote. You know it can be pushed further, but the Telelever suspension just doesn't talk to you when you're at the limit.

Still, it's not bad for a two-wheeled version of a Range Rover – one minute carving up back lanes and shadowing the best supersport bikes, the next riding through a pebble-bottomed, fast-flowing river. Try doing all of that on a Ducati 999.

VIEW FROM THE BMW'S REAR



IT doesn't get much more pillion-friendly than this

THE first thing you notice when sitting on the back of the GS is just how low the pegs are. For a five-foot-something person it is like sitting on a breakfast bar stool. And even the tallest passengers couldn't complain about leg cramp.

The rear seat is so wide and flat, which combined with the feet position and bent knees, points to high mileage comfort. There's a big grabrail as standard with plenty of room to get a gloved hand round and hang on.

The bike isn't ruffled by the extra weight of luggage and pillion. Under heavy acceleration the front goes a bit light, but that's to be expected as the bike will happily make its front wheel leave the ground under acceleration in solo mode in first and second gear. There's so much room for passenger and rider that you don't get any unwanted close encounters with pillions.

If you've got a particularly heavy load, like a pie-eating pal who insists on taking their entire wardrobe – winding up the rear shock's remote pre-load knob is all you'll need to do.



Now even better off road...



IN the right hands, the GS can be used off the beaten track

ONE of the main reasons BMW wanted to save so much weight on the new GS was to improve its off-road ability. South Africa's roads have a strange and very regular habit of suddenly running out of Tarmac only to be replaced with quarry lorry droppings. On this tyre-kicking terrain the GS feels at home on its standard Metzeler Tourance road tyres.

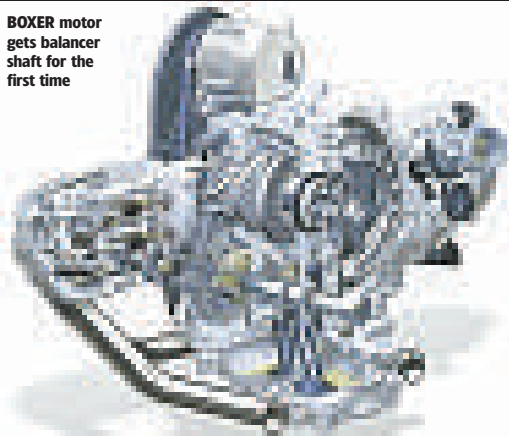
The rear wheel will spin up and flick sideways under acceleration, but the drifts are controllable. Although changing the standard cast wheels for the optional spoked ones (no price available yet) gives you a much wider choice of off-road tyres. The ABS braking system will pull you up without drama, but competent riders will be

rewarded with much better stopping power on the dirt with ABS turned off. When the going gets a bit tougher, the belly pan of the GS suffers from a lack of ground clearance, but it's a 30-second job to adjust the front pre-load, which improves matters.

On dusty tracks the 1200 feels a lot more capable than the old 1150. But after getting caught out in wet slippery downhill hairpins, I lost confidence in the standard tyres. Fit some tyres more suited to off-roading and it's genuinely possible someone who knows what they're doing could enter easy enduros without making a fool of themselves. The KTM Adventure is the only thing that gets close in that respect.

UNDER THE SKIN OF THE ALL-NEW BOXER MOTOR

BOXER motor gets balancer shaft for the first time



THE R1200GS powerplant is all new and shares almost no internal components with the motor it replaces. The new engine gets a 40cc hike in capacity from 1130cc to 1170cc. Peak power is up from 85bhp to 100bhp. But because the extra cubes have come from increasing the engine's stroke, there's a healthy boost in torque, too (up 72ftlb to 85ftlb at 5500rpm), making the engine far more tractable and easier to use at low and medium revs.

It's far smoother, too, thanks to a balance-shaft – a first for BMW and, indeed, any Boxer motorcycle.

Almost every component has been refined in some way, from the stronger and lighter crankcases, more compact crankshaft, lighter six-speed gearbox and bigger inlet and exhaust valves, all the way up to the modified cylinder heads. Despite all these modifications, BMW has still managed to knock an amazing 3kg off the weight of the motor. The firm even claims that the more efficient engine means fuel consumption is down by eight per cent.



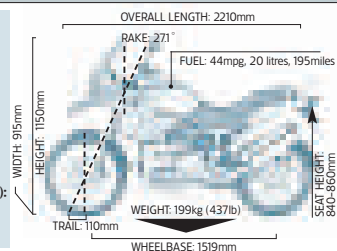
BMW sticks with analogue clocks on the GS



OPTIONAL hard luggage is built to last

BMW R1200GS \$9275

Available: Now. Two years' unlimited mileage warranty, breakdown cover.
Colours: Yellow, red, blue
New for 2004: New model
Insurance group (est): 13 (of 17)
Info: BMW UK, 0800-777155



SPECIFICATION:
 Engine: Air-cooled, 1170cc (103mm x 73mm) sohc four-stroke flat twin
 Chassis: Steel trellis
Front suspension: Telelever, with single shock, adjustable for pre-load only
Rear suspension: Paralever, single shock, adjustable for pre-load and rebound damping
 Tyres: 110/80 x 19 front, 150/70 x 17 rear
Brakes: 2 x 305mm front discs with 4-piston calipers, 265mm rear disc with 2-piston caliper

PROS ● Handles well for such a large bike ● Good long-distance comfort ● Road and off-road ability
CONS ● Too large for some ● £1000 more than old model ● Standard wheels limit off-road tyre choice

89%