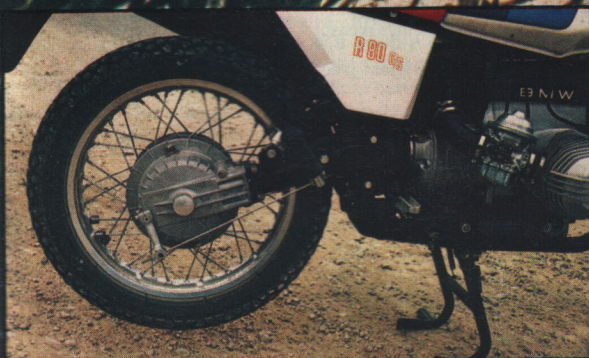


BMW Bites The Dirt

BMW have done a dirty with their shaftdrive flat twin and turned it into a dual-purpose machine. Barry Winfield takes the rough with the smooth at its launch in Avignon.



IT'S EARLY SUNDAY MORNING, AND you're making your way along one of your favourite greenlanes, breathing the Flash-scented forest air and being warmed by patches of sunlight beaming through spaces in the leafy roof. Coming towards you is another bike — an enduro bike you notice, because it has a front mudguard mounted way above the wheel. Then it passes, and you gaze with dropped jaw at what is unmistakably a BMW, but one clad in real trail bike livery with upswept exhaust, high bars and chunky tyres. And, jeez, take a look at that rear suspension system. It's got a laid down shock and only one swingarm strut. A BMW dirtbike? A shaftdrive off-roader? This can't be real — BMs are pure roadsters, man, the definitive long distance touring mount.

But it is real. It's the result of an appraisal of real market requirements, a real development programme to adapt current BMW design to the demands of off road conditions, and a real nice bike as a result. Yes, I know you've read my stuff about BMWs before and I'm not to be trusted as an impartial witness, but the new R80G/S is possibly the most delightful Bee Em ever.

Contributing generously to the new friendly personality of the bike are three basic factors. The first is a reduction in weight from that of the stock R80 roadgoing machine, achieved by adapting the R65 chassis for the job. The dry weight is a low 370lb. The second piece of trimming took place in the clutch housing, reducing the heavy roadgoing flywheel to a shadow of its former self. The plates are now smaller in diameter, though they have the same contact area, and the ring gear is a thin webbed hoop. Last, and most innovative of all design novelties, is BMW's Monolever — a single driveshaft/suspension strut which bounces on a single gas-filled spring damper. Three bolts from the 'empty' side of the wheel hold it to the drive hub.

BMW's have always had long travel suspension, but the Monolever, with its near 7in of movement, also lends additional torsional rigidity. A 30% improvement, according to the translator at BMW's international press conference, or 50% if we believe the press release. Whichever, it feels pretty supple on rutted surfaces. The trick suspension and slimline chassis make the new bike a very nimble tarmac harrier, with the low centre of gravity, as always allowing rapid change of direction, and an 8½in ground clearance allowing lots and lots of lean.

To all of this agile bendswinging eagerness is added a throttle response quite unlike other BMWs. The lightened flywheel and two-into-one exhaust system provide so much instant midrange punch that the old loping character of the Boxer motor is transformed into a sharp and responsive lunger. As a pure road machine, the R80G/S is a winner.

It's also a great poseur's bike, the G/S, because the improved low rev torque and snappy throttle response make for easy wheelies, and a bit of practice will enable a rider to pop them with just the right amount of cool indifference. The same brisk acceleration will haul the bike past the ton with hardly any effort, and endows it with substantial overtaking power. A claimed top speed of around 112mph makes demands on braking that BMW felt was best met by a front disc straddled by an Italian Brembo caliper and a pair of non-asbestos semi-metal brake pads. All these fancy pieces firmly establish the Beemer's roadgoing credentials, but what about its publicised role as an off road bike?

It's freely admitted by the boys at the Bavarian Motor Works that they consider the motorcycle market a pleasure industry. That might seem disturbing to all those determined day-to-day bikers who strike out to work every day come hell or high water (and I mean high water), but that's the trend in many modern industrial countries. They also freely admit that the G/S is not a serious dirtbike, not intended to be competitive, despite the experimental forerunner's success in the ISDT and Paris-Dakar events. Riding the beast confirmed it; it ain't an MX bike.

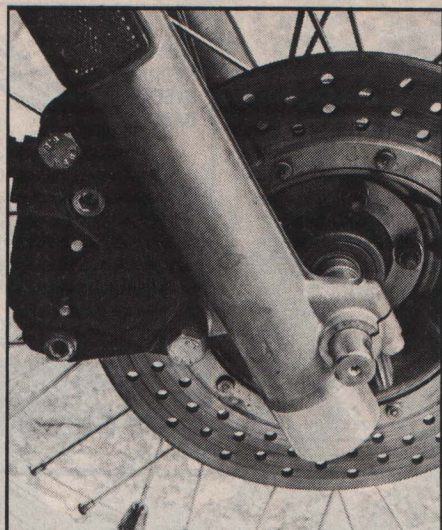
For one thing, the horizontal pots effectively impede that boot-out technique that quick MXers use for cornering stability. For another, the frame/driveshaft package doesn't like sliding. The back wheel spins and hops, jerking the back end around in short quick spurts, but no way will it hang out in a nice roostertail of controllable power. The bike's shod with newly developed Metzlers — tyres chosen as much for sure-footed asphalt grip as their potential on the dirt. Or maybe even more for roadgrip, because the new design has been licensed by the Germans for a speed of 180km/h, well over a ton, and quite a way up from the previous 130km/h limit. Also, while the BM's 400lb is just dandy for roadwork, it's a handful on the marbles.

Clearly then, the R80G/S is intended for the rider who normally sticks to the road, but who likes occasionally to follow a trail or to ride to remote locations. The bike will do this capably, as it handles rough surfaces well in a straightline yet still caters for a passenger, with adequate seating space and pillion foot-rests, and lighting, with a 5½in halogen H4 headlight. The models we rode also had electric starting (though the typical 'sideways' kickstart lever was also fitted) and electronic ignition, which is on all the 1981 BMs appearing at the Cologne Show.

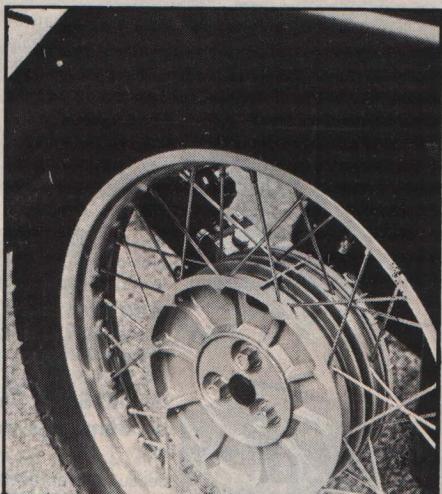
An unusual plastic intrument binnacle houses the headlight, ignition switch, idiot light display and speedo, but no tachometer. Instead, small dots indicate recommended maximum speeds in the gears. A gearlever mounted onto the frame tube operates a remote linkage to good effect, combining with the new clutch and driveshaft damper to ensure smooth, silent gear changes. Only sharp bursts of power or engine braking at low speeds will cause that familiar lifting and dropping driveshaft reaction — otherwise the bike is remarkably free of drivetrain feedback.

No changes to the R80 engine specification have been made, only a larger airfilter in a black plastic housing and a bashplate below the sump disturbs the otherwise unaltered BMW engine profile. It's by sticking to the simple format that BMW hopes to improve their market share in the eighties. That's the message that comes across strongly in the German company's reasoning.

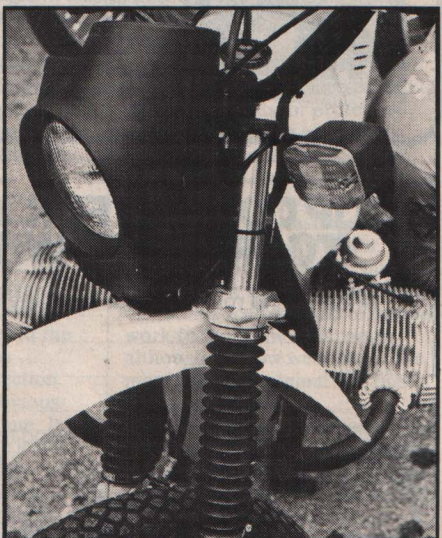
At around £2300, the R80G/S is going to wear a typically weighty price tag, but the company has made efforts to keep the price down. For example, the weight trimming exercise could have been carried on to expensive lengths, with space-age materials. (The competition enduro BMW is down around the 300lb mark.) Right now you're offered a sporty and responsive road cruiser which is light and high enough to cope with off road excursions, yet is still a fully equipped transport module. It's not for touring purists, or for dirtbike devotees either, but for us bifocal bikers BMW have produced a great all-rounder.



Above: An unusual sight on a dirtbike — a front disc. And unusual for BMW is the Brembo caliper.



Above: Hefty two-into-one exhaust silencer contrasts with the empty look of the Monolever hub.



Above: Instrument binnacle, high-mounted mudguard, and fork gaiters are all typical endurostyle.