





Antique Grace

By Ken Lee

Riding a 1936 BMW R12 proves nostalgia addicts wrong: new is new and old is old. But the R12 encounter also proves that old can still be fun.

● I CAN'T HELP IT. AS I LET OUT THE CLUTCH and pull away I'm grinning like a madman. Then I shift, and the laughter erupts; I cackle like a lunatic. But why should I? It's just an ancient BMW with four-on-the-floor. The catch? This Beemer has two wheels, not four.

At first, the prospect of riding a 1936 BMW R12 didn't particularly appeal to me. The bike is almost as old as Gordon Jennings; how can anything that old be fun? Granted: 45-year-old motorcycles aren't parked in everyone's driveway, but aside from the shifting arrangement the R12 doesn't seem to depart radically from today's BMWs. Bayerische Motoren Werke has built a solid reputation based on tradition. The first BMW motorcycle of consequence, the 1923 R32, was a horizontally opposed shaft-drive twin, and to this day BMW uses that same distinctive configuration. Since the tradition remains unchanged, I reasoned that the riding experience would likewise be similar; a BMW is a BMW, correct?

Well, yes and no, but mostly no. More important than configuration or origin, new is new and old is old, and the R12 feels ancient. It can't match modern machines in any kind of performance comparison—but, ironically, that's where the joy of riding the old Beemer lies. It's wondrous enough just that the bike exists and runs. I can make no demands of it. Instead, it's a test for me to ride the bike. I feel uncoordinated and disoriented, as if I'm learning to ride all over again.

I check out the controls: the clutch, throttle and brakes, all located in modern DOT-dictated locations, operate in the standard fashion. Although the "reversed" levers appear odd, they feel like their modern counterparts. All the controls fall readily under hand and foot except the shift lever; I find my left foot pawing the air reflexively and uselessly.

The hand shifter, located on the right side of the tank, features an automotive-type H-pattern, and shifting requires some mental and operational gymnastics: roll off the throttle, pull in the clutch lever, let go of the throttle, reach back to the stick and shift; grab the throttle again and roll it on while easing out the clutch.

The process is awkward; if I were chewing gum I'd be in serious trouble. I

feel uneasy taking my right hand off the throttle to fish around for the stick shift, and shifting seems to take forever. The procedure works well if I'm unhurried, but in traffic I feel as if my brain is going to melt down from neuron overload. Rushing shifts brings a teeth-gritting clash from the gearbox. I find myself double-clutching the Beemer the way I would an old pickup truck: it responds to this with clean shifts.

Once I reach the less-traveled backroads, the BMW is much easier to operate. I shift less often and can take my time to shift without fear of finding Porsche tire tracks up my back. After riding for a while, the shifting procedure becomes less confusing; I even start to shift without looking down every time.

Each corner I enter makes me painfully aware that this bike is an antique: there are no parts to be had should I toss it away. As I tiptoe around one turn I feel the rear end dip suddenly, as if it's breaking loose. I compensate instantly—and needlessly. False alarm. The spring-suspension seat has fooled my butt sensors. The solo saddle is perched atop two coil springs and a steel strap; as the bike leans into a turn the inside coil sags, giving the false impression that the rear end is walking around.

In 1936 the spring seat complemented what was a state-of-the-art telescopic fork. Up to that time BMW had used bottom-link forks; the telescopic unit offered a generous 3.5 inches of travel and incorporated hydraulic dampers in place of the then-standard friction dampers. However, by 1981 standards the suspension is woefully antiquated. The fork does little to cushion bumps; the rigid rear end does nothing. I can feel even the smallest lumps and seams—and I have new respect for the riders of yesteryear.

The engine, surprisingly, feels almost modern. It's torquey and smooth, and it pulls willingly from just off idle. Even by 1936 standards the R12 wasn't a road-burner; its 750cc engine pumped out a maximum of 18 horsepower at a low-revving 3400 rpm. Instead, the R12 fit more into the utilitarian mold, making up in reliability and broad powerband what it lacked in peak performance. The side-valve flathead engine ran a compression

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ratio of 5.2:1 so it could digest the poorest fuel available.

The single carburetor mounts centrally, and as a result the intake manifold is quite long. Cold starting, therefore, was sometimes a problem; the engine required careful coaxing for the first few minutes of running until the inlet tract warmed up enough to help the air and fuel mix. An optional heat riser system

was available back in 1936 to speed warm-up. A small pipe ducted exhaust gases from the header pipe to a baffled chamber in the manifold to heat the manifold and fuel mixture.

Our sample R12 belongs to Bob Brown, owner of Brown's Motor Works in Pomona, California. Brown is the consummate BMW enthusiast; not only does he sell and service new BMWs at his dealership, he offers a complete restoration service specializing in Earles-fork BMWs from the late 1960s. For relaxation, Brown works at restoring his own antique BMWs, which he hopes to display in a museum he is now planning.

Brown came upon the R12 in 1964

while he was working as a service representative for the Flanders Company. Earl Flanders had purchased a variety of used European bikes in 1958 from some enterprising importer and was willing to part with the R12. Brown launched into the restoration eagerly but not hastily; the project took about a year and a half. Working steadily he could have done it in about three months, but he approached it as a pastime, working in the evenings and when he found the time.

Since Brown had free use of all Flander's equipment, he could do a thorough restoration; he stripped the engine and chassis down to remanufacture them, replacing parts when possible, making them from scratch when necessary. Quality is a priority for Brown; he wanted the restoration to reflect that, and he found the R12 to be quality embodied. In the rebuilding process, Brown discovered that many engine parts, such as bearings, could be replaced with current BMW parts, a tribute to the company's solid and consistent engineering policy. The old connecting rods and pistons, still in good shape despite being 20-plus years old, went back in the engine. BMW bore sizes had changed in those decades, so (since Flanders was the West Coast NSU distributor) Brown chose some NSU rings for replacements.

Chassis pieces were harder to come by. The R12 needed a front fender, and none was to be found. Brown tapped the NSU supply again for a fender close to the BMW's design and reshaped it to match the original's dimensions. With just a set of blueprints to guide him, Brown manufactured the rack and taillight assembly from scratch. The exhaust pipes are also replicas that Brown made up for "runners." They do an inadequate job of muffling since they are straight pipes, but if they turn blue (they did) they can be replaced; the originals he keeps stored for show.

The only key items missing from Brown's R12 are the rubber knee pads that originally bolted to the frame outboard of the cradled tank. The left knee pad is solid rubber, but the right side encloses part of the shift stick. The pad is cut out to form an H-pattern shift gate to help locate the stick and facilitate shifting. I can take or leave the knee pads themselves, but my shifting would probably have been improved with the gate.

Out on the country road I shift into fourth and laugh again. Finally, I've grown accustomed to the bike's idiosyncracies and quirks. Even though the R12 can't match the performance of a modern 400cc bike, I'm willing to make concessions for its age. Old is still old, but new is not always better. Jennings staunchly maintains that old can still be fun, and I've always dismissed that claim as the wishful ramblings of an ex-racer. But at least as far as the R12 is concerned, I'll have to agree. ●

