THE BMW PHILOSOPHY

In 1981, in an article entitled The BMW Philosophy, R.P. examined the German firm's then-current claim to be "probably the best motorcycle in the world." Ten years on, updating his findings, and with experience of a K100RS, he returns to the theme.

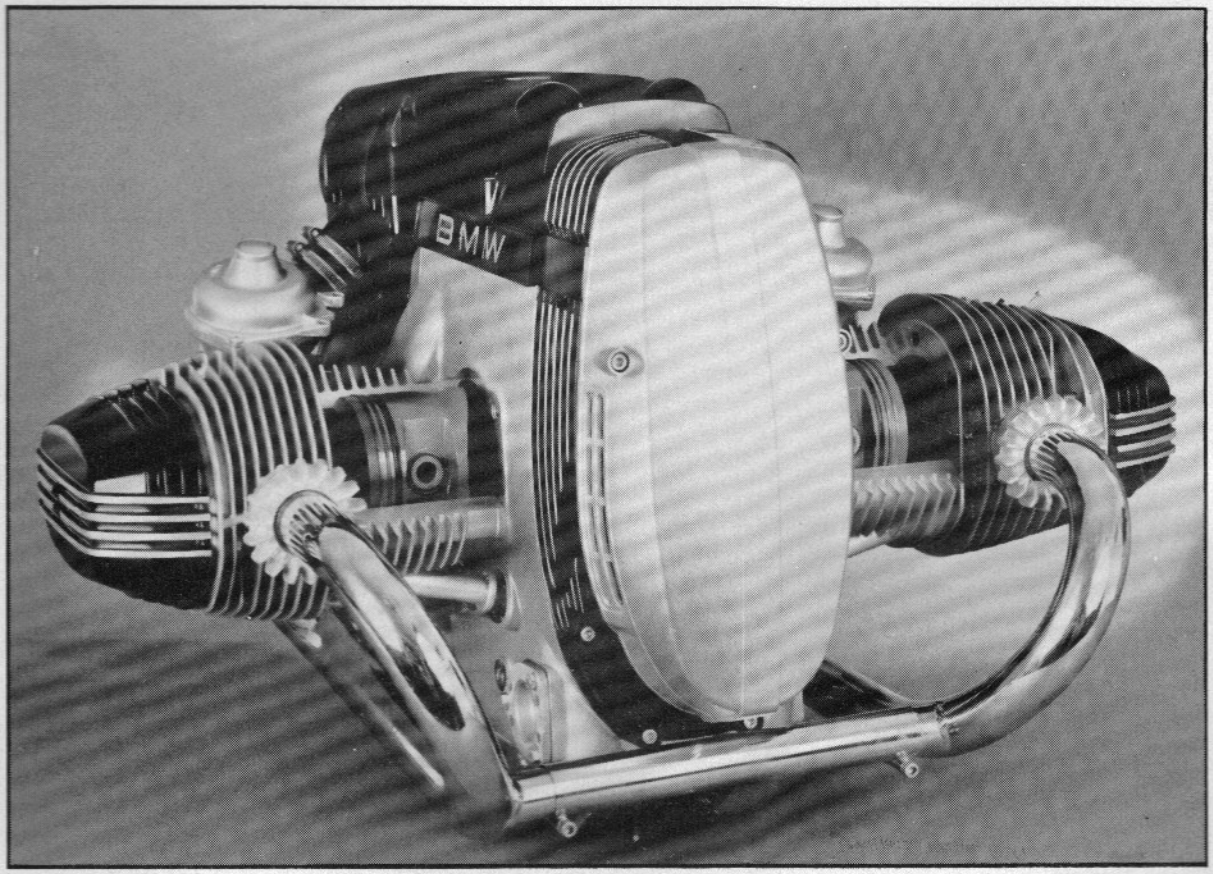
IN BMW terms, a generation is a motorcycling eternity. With the first generation of boxers now in its 67th year, the K series must be barely into its infancy! Such is the BMW philosophy. Not that the second generation was intended to extinguish the first — far from it. Whereas Volkswagen squashed the Beetle (except in Brazil), BMW did not count out the boxer. Could they have expected these machines in various forms, new and resurrected, to be selling strongly into the 90s, even obliging its makers to design a new flat-twin motor?

Over the years I have probably ridden more miles on R series BMWs than any other motorcycle type. BMWs always have embodied paradox and the flat twins were almost crudely simple, yet logical. Even in the early 1980s, their faults were obvious, yet forgivable. Their mirrors could double the width of vehicles behind at low engine speeds, but mid-range the BeeEmm gave smooth, solid progress, endowed with a certain integrity of handling that was woefully absent in much of the Japanese opposition of that time.

Yes, the formula seemed so right that even 10 years ago the flat-twin was still the bike to be riding, in my book at least. (The reference, for those with large attics, is *MCS*, April 1981). Then quite suddenly it all got overtaken. Performancewise, that had happened already but, coinciding with the coming of motorcross-type rising-rate rear suspension, the Japanese began to make roadbikes that handled. Even the R100 models became outgunned and outcornered by Japanese upstarts of half their capacity. It was a pity. I might otherwise have remained happy with the simple basics of the flat-twin to this day. As it was, the temptation of being able to extend riding ability further on modern suspensions got the better of me.

Munich, too, had seen the writing on the wall. By European standards, the K series was developed with some urgency for its launch in 1983.

Retrospectively, we can appreciate what a difficult task it must have been searching for the K formula — a motorcycle that had to be multi-cylinder, yet avoid being Japanese in sight or sound and, most difficult of all, not carry a stamped 'ride by date'. Looks that stay in fashion against constant model changes from almost everywhere else don't come easily. The overall brief for the Ks was to offer a BMW for flat-twin devotees to move up to, as well as attracting others away from the Universal Japanese Motorcycle.



"Ten years ago the simple basics of the flat-twin engine began to seem very dated."

As it transpires, fidelity to the old boxers has proved far stronger than BMW anticipated, but this is not to deny that the K series has done well in its own right, particularly the four cylinder machines. It has seen BMW safely through the motorcycle slump of the 80s, but long-term survival against constant progress from Japan poses another problem. Can the K series honestly expect to hold its own through the 90s, let alone for another 60 years, against the tide of progress from the East? The K100RS 16-valve came my way to answer this very question. Or rather, I went to collect it.

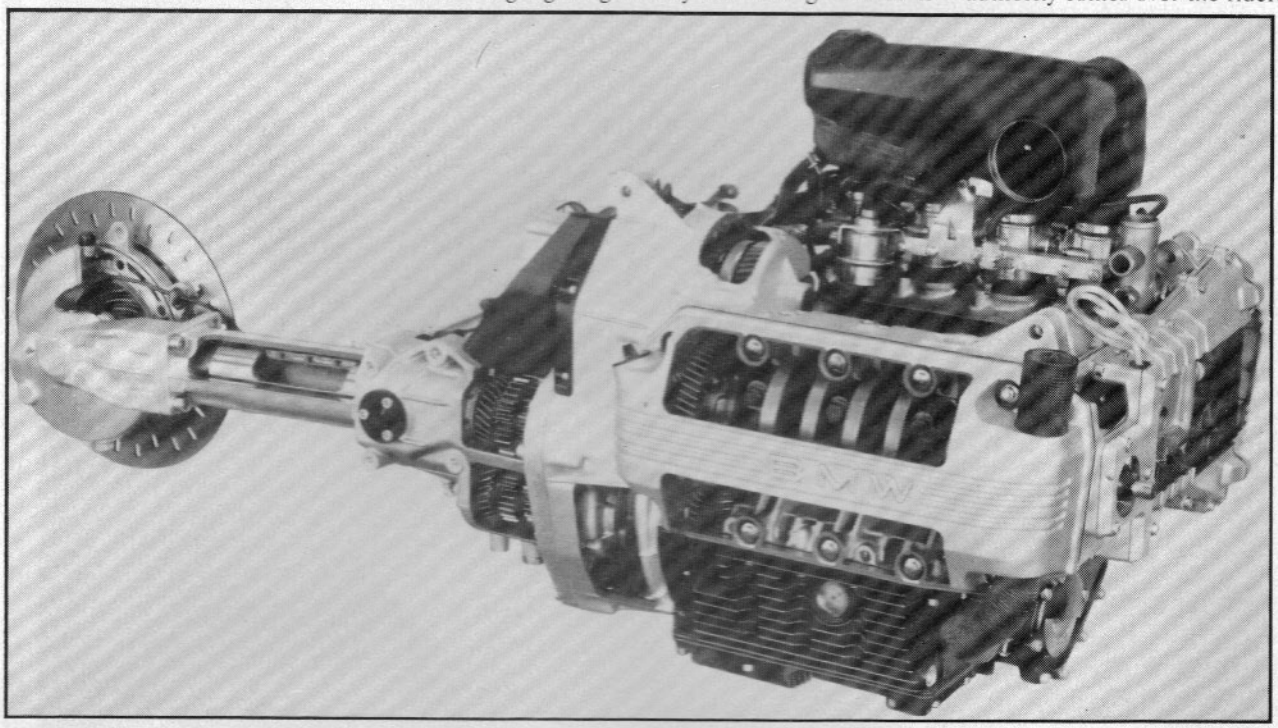
BMW's UK headquarters at Bracknell stands head and shoulders above any other motorcycle importer's, not least because of the classy cars on display alongside the motorcycles in that spotless glass showroom,

THE BMW PHILOSOPHY

plus the refined ladies at reception. Time to sneak 'a quick one for the road', and even the toilets are spotlessly white, and surely not intended for this purpose. However it's motorcycles that I am supposed to be testing.

Even the press handout describes the K100RS looks as classic, an admission that the K shape has been around for a while. Its 'designer style' appearance has always stood aside from fashion and because it's different (and a BMW) it still looks fresh, even though its nose protrudes unusally far and it is rare today, in faired bikes, to see an engine, let alone a rear spring.

The paradox begins at once. A 21st century electronic hiss with a plethora of warning lights give way to an engine that is neither as distant nor as silky smooth as the average Japanes offering. And those familiar whines in the gears have a traditional ring. Still, that typically BMW semi-sports riding position tells me that it's good to be back, even if the steering does seem light and indeterminate compared with my Japanese sports bike. Somehow, atop a BMW, a feeling of responsibility and even authority comes over the rider. That will be interpreted by aliens as smugness, but it's there. While the K100RS signals its faults early, it also established its long-distance credentials, for me, by dismissing over 200 non-stop miles with incredibly little rider fatigue.



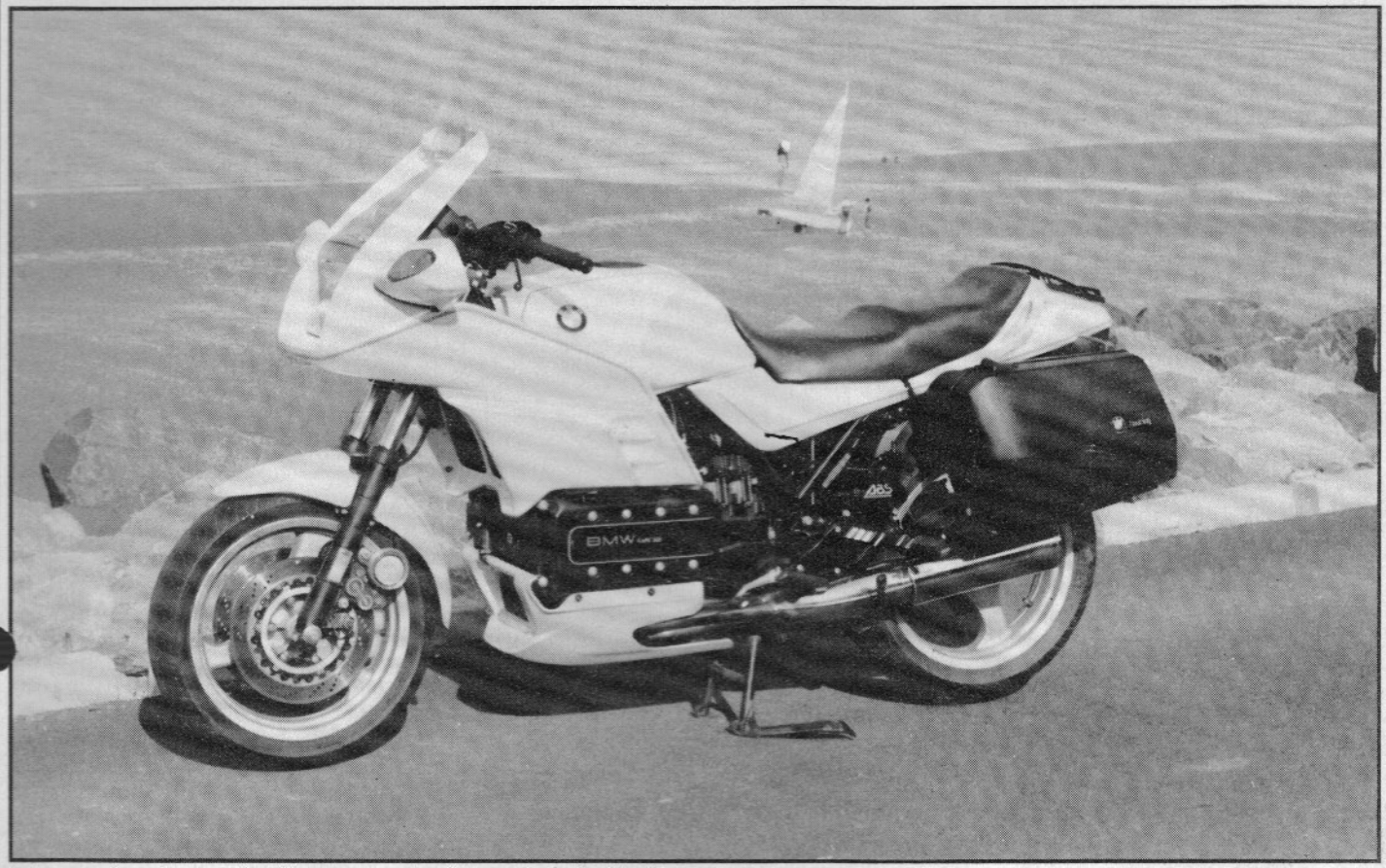
"Can the K-series honestly expect to hold its own through the 90s, against the tide of progress from the East?" This is the eight-valve K engine, developing 90bhp.



Press handouts describe K100RS looks as "classic" – an admission that the K shape has been around for a while.

Then there was further discovery on arrival at my place of work. The machine was received by the secretarial staff as something manifestly superior. Never mind if I can't catch race replicas, the BMW is evidently the one to be seen on. It makes a statement about its rider, as someone said. A telling reason why a lot of people buy BMW. Perhaps for them the rest of this report will be irrelevant.

One journalist recently revealed his own lack of discernment by pronouncing BMW finish 'as good as the Japanese'. Studying the bike closely, it does have a more substantial in-depth class than oriental machines, on which the gloss looks suddenly superficial. I'll bet the matt-black-finished frame contains less recycled Pils cans than metal Jap frames, and those frauleins with steady hands have been at it again with the blue-paint lining on the pearl-silver metallic version. The alternative Yucca-green doesn't sound quite so inviting, does it? All the engine and transmission externals are in matt-black too. Inevitably, there are controversial areas. I am always puzzled why the various side panels have such intentionally large gaps between them making the



It is rare, these days, to be able to see much of the engine of a faired motorcycle . . . .

bodywork look assembled in sections. The recent omission of the casing for the coils is also surprising. Maybe they run a bit cooler in the open. Lastly, the BMW penchant for well cooked exhausts continues on display, where the four pipes enter the stainless silencer, now sheathed in a rich chrome tube and shaped a lot less like a one-time East German two-stroke.

It is ironic that the cheaper three-cylinder models are still the smoothest of the K range, due to the balance weights on the output shaft. BMW could, if they wanted to, apply balance weights to the fours. It is not that the vibrations are bad enough to cause physical discomfort. It's just that they're there, in handlebars, footrests, and particularly the clutch lever, and on a BMW they shouldn't be. Still, the new engine from the K1 does give the K100RS a lift, and the difference is readily noticeable. The exhaust even develops a slight bark as the 3,000 rpm mark is passed. It's quite a bit louder, without giving offence, of course, but still very un-Japanese, partly because it sings a lower tune. To the ear, it has to be said, the 16-valve motor sounds much more like a traditional sports car than a motorcycle.

The rev-counter tells a similar story. Most Japanese engines, even some of the touring ones, whistle through 5,000 rpm without noticing and then on up into the powerband. The BMW, however, is working hard at this speed and even sounding relatively busy. Generally, the engine feels as though it is turning faster than it is. Gearing is slightly higher than on the eight-valve K models, and an indicated 5,000 rpm corresponds to an actual 81 mph. Tractability is particularly good. Aided maybe by its under-square cylinders, with a relatively long stroke, it will pull away from a fast walking pace (under 1,000 rpm) in third gear, making that curious gear chatter that K models always have. Frankly I couldn't detect any gains — or for that matter any losses — at low revs, compared with the standard K100 motor, but by mid-range the 16-valver is feeling a bit stronger. But having said that, the mid-range torque boasted as part of BMW's engine philosophy is not startlingly impressive for a 1-litre motorcycle of conservative (by Japanese standards) power output. This is not a machine that does everything in top

BMW and Sawbridgeworth – in a class alone

BMW are in a class of their own when it comes to overall performance, comfort and sheer build quality. At Sawbridgeworth we too are in a class of our own. When it comes to BMW's, we have the ultimate in low-cost finance for your new or used machine, with super part exchange deals on *any* make. Take a trip to Sawbridgeworth, the Number 1 BMW bike-only dealer and you'll see the superb facilities, after sales service and friendly poeple, that put us in a class of our own.

BMW. Through and through

Sawbridgeworth Motorcycles *in Hertford* BMW Centre
Chambers Street, Hertford SG14 1PL. Telephone 0992 583135

Sawbridgeworth



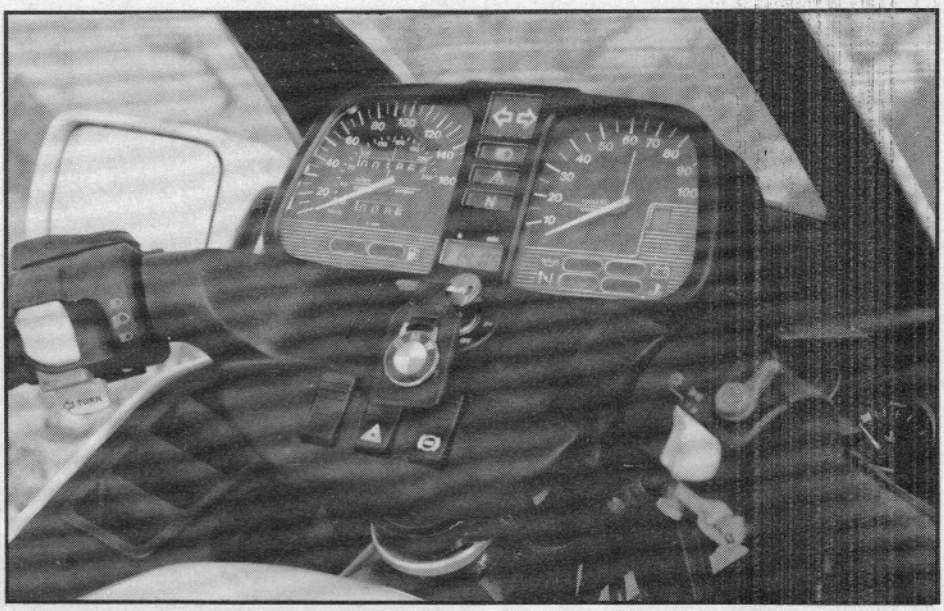
THE BMW PHILOSOPHY

gear, unless the rider is in no hurry. On the BMW, brisk overtaking from below 70 mph calls for a drop to fourth, or third if you're really going for it.

Then the 16-valve engine changes its mode. By the time it passes 6,000 rpm it is really motoring. Its peak torque at 6,750 rpm is actually a fraction greater than the Yamaha Genesis 1000 produces at 9,000 rpm. It becomes beautifully smooth, with a mellow rich hum every bit worthy of the blue and white circle, and fast enough to be genuinely exciting to ride. The rev-limiter intervenes promptly at 8,900 rpm. Ridden thus, the new engine is decisively quicker than the previous K1000RS and, I would say, has the edge over the Pan-European too. So here is an unfamiliar conclusion between a Honda and a BMW, that the BeeEmm wins at high revs but falls behind the Honda at low-and mid-engine speeds.

For a relatively heavy motojcycle, the K100RS finds town work very much to its liking. The extra poundage of the ABS is carried low down, but filling the 22-litre tank raises the centre of gravity higher than in a Pan-European or Gold Wing, with their less conventional tanks. The excellent flexibility I have mentioned, but the steering is sensitive and light except at very low speeds and the whole machine feels responsive and very manoeuvrable. Highly responsive too are the brakes, which cause the nose to dip sharply if applied insensitively, emphasising a relatively soft suspension.

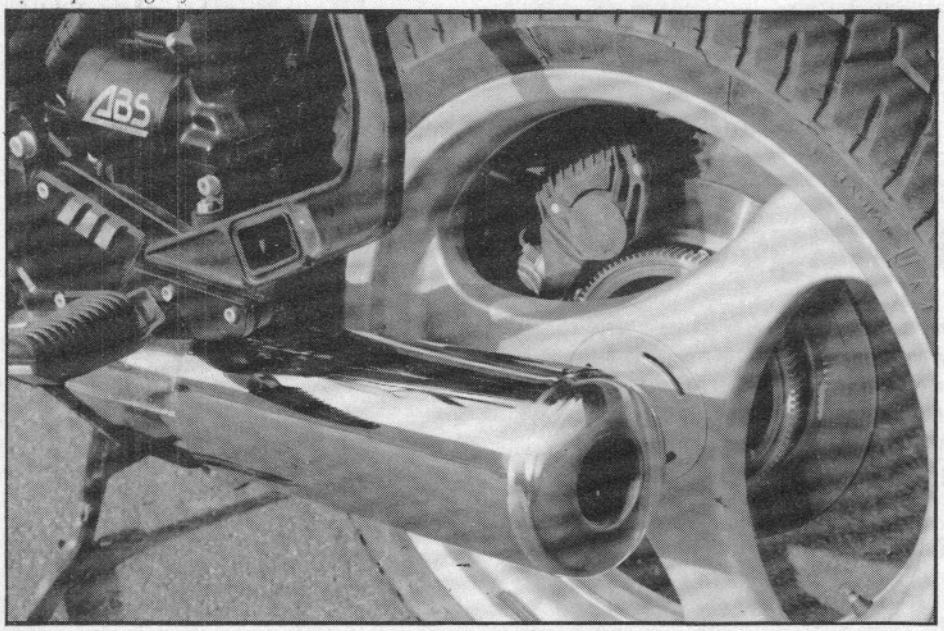
Of course the 16-valve K100RS shares not only the engine with the K1, but most of the running gear too. The suspension is still soft, but gone are those very long-travel, underdamped front forks. Ride quality remains orthodox BMW but consistently good. The rear suspension does not use rising-rate geometry. Small surface detail is well absorbed, whereas bigger bumps cause quite a bit of vertical reaction, although comfort remains good, partly due to a much improved seat. Talking of seats, the low seat option would have been relevant, but I do believe I am growing into this one. Getting cleverer on tiptoe is an art as well as an aspiration — are you reading this, Lorna?



Speedometer reads (optimistically) to 160 mph; rev-counter is red-lined from the 8,500 rpm mark.

On the face of it, the Paralever looks a simple invention to control vertical shaft reaction. No longer does a BMW get taller as the clutch takes up, although this was hardly noticeable with the K series, anyway. Vertical reaction when gear changing under hard acceleration seems less also, probably because of the new forks. The shaft rear end is generally well behaved, and at normal speeds only betrays its presence by its more sudden response to throttle on and off, compared with chain drive. The latest RS lays more rubber on the road than any previous BMW and its Michelin radials are well up to any task, with a penalty only of 'whitelining' noticeable at town speeds. So the running gear grafted in from the K1 has progressed the second generation of BMWs, and the advance over the boxer twins of 10 years ago, in terms of sophistication, is great indeed. However the famous twins embodied those fundamental basic ingredients of true motorcycling in a pure and simple form that the sophistication of the K has clouded. And in its day, the flat-twin did have a certain fidelity of handling, within its limitations of lean, and fine steering compared with many a Japanese competitor. How does the improved K100RS cut it against today's opposition?

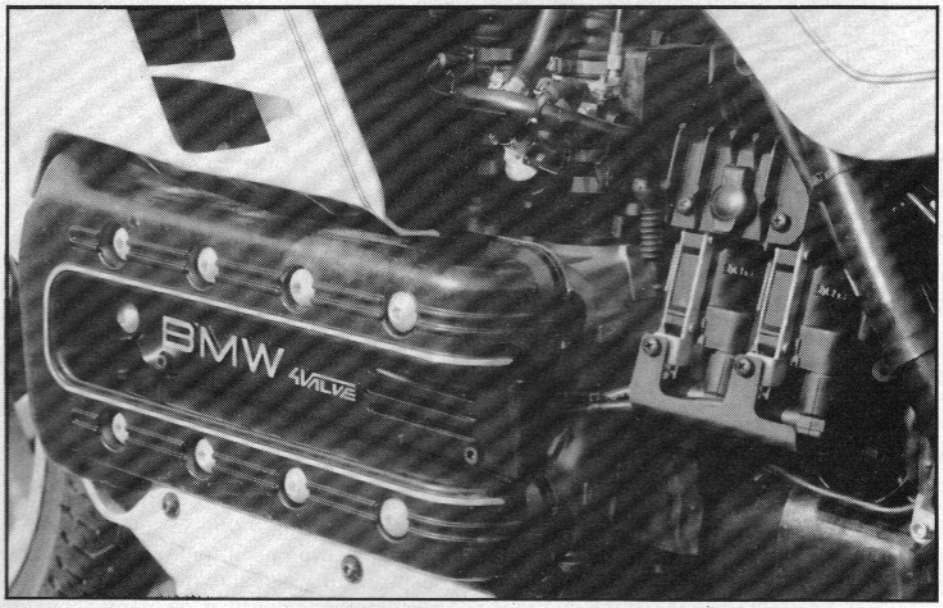
"Extra poundage of the ABS is carried low...."



Not brilliantly, it must be said, but how much this matters will depend on usage. Roadtesting, as sampled from the shelves of W.H. Smith, has become a matter of scraping the knee along tarmac, tracktesting frames, engines, tyres and brakes to dizzy limits, culminating frequently in a phonecall requesting the importers to come and fetch their machine, in modified condition, from where it landed. (Perhaps less frequently in future, now that many of the selfsame importers have ceased providing insurance cover with their press demonstrators!). BMWs are not about racetracks, and have suffered harshly in some publications against the racetrack yardstick.

However it is this very yardstick that has so accelerated Japanese frame development over the last decade, while BMW have been content to develop their one theme. Monolever rear suspension is neat engineering and makes rear-wheel removal easier, but through the twisties such innovations as rising-rate suspension systems with adjustable gas and oil damping, wrapped in ultra rigid 'lateral concept' frames, have carried the game into a different ballpark altogether.

The BMW handles easily up to sensible road speeds, much as its maker intended. The quick steering takes it readily into corners without needing to be set up for bends beforehand. It heels low on smooth roads without effort, almost to the edges of its treads, at which point, according to



The 16-valve engine produces peak torque at 6,750 rpm . . . beautifully smooth . . . rev-limiter cuts in at 8,900 rpm.

Contrast between this BMW and an FZR 1000 is . . . total

eyewitnesses, the panniers look perilously close to touching down. On the other hand, this is not the kind of bike that inspires its rider to climb off the inside through the bends, and keeping it controllably low is made more difficult by the sudden transmission response to throttle changes. There is still a lot of suspension movement of the conventional kind, and fast sweeepers over surfaces that provoke the suspension can make the machine feel uneasy, inducing a side to side motion visible to the rider at the top of the screen. This effect calls for maximum preload whenever carryng a passenger. Straight-line stability at speeds of which this BMW is capable is exemplary, even with the panniers attached, although the handbook advises against exceeding 80 mph thus laden. But really high-speed cornering, except on very smooth surfaces, increasingly shows up the soft damping. I suspect that the modified K75 rear spring strut may be less than adequate.

One area relevant to the way this BMW will be used is the braking department. Here no Japnese motorcycle that I have ridden can surpass it. The new Brembos have tremendous power and feel. The front brake is a little finger affair, but backed up by the reassurance of ABS (now fitted as standard) this seems appropriate, particularly bearing in mind the considerable weights that BMWs are asked to carry, and at autobahn speeds too.

It was perhaps the misfortune of the K100RS to coincide with an FZR1000 in the garage. The contrast is total. As one of my sons pointed out, the Yamaha is built to kill (I think he meant annihilate the opposition) while the BMW is made to please. So it's back to oranges and lemons. The one is intended to stretch the rider towards the art of performance, the other for going places. And I wonder how many of us have lost sight of the particular function? Quite obviously, the BMW does the latter highly efficiently and with some class over and above its rivals. However it would be interesting to see what improvement a rising-rate rear suspension would make, although BMW might find this impractical to combine with their longitudinal four-cylinder engine, without expanding the wheelbase embarrassingly.

'Presence makes the hearts grow fonder' is traditionally a part of BMW philosophy. Journalists regularly complain about the pain of having to return what is not theirs to the press fleets. Happily I do not have to return mine just yet. There will be time to see whether attachment grows with longer acquaintance, as it did with my boxer twins, also to appraise ABS on winter roads and give the K100RS a canter alongside both a K1 and Honda's Pan European. R.P.

"I am puzzled why there are such (intentionally) large gaps between the various side-panels." Brembos, with ABS, are impressively powerful.

