

Cold Comfort

New GS excels in rain and...snow?



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Photos by Kevin Wing and Jonathan Beck

With a death-grip on the handlebar I negotiated the winding mountain road, following the taillight of the bike ahead of me. I wasn't grasping the handgrips hard for fear of losing control over the slush that was parting beneath my tires (in fact, a light grip is what you need in reduced traction); I was squeezing hard to transfer as much heat from the heated grips to my hands as possible.

Snow accumulating on the outside of my visor and condensation on the inside reduced visibility to next to nil. It was like navigating while looking through a tissue. The road we were on followed cliff sides for much of its length and I assume the scenery in Yosemite National Park would have been spectacular had it not been for the low cloud cover that blanketed everything in a pale haze.

BMW chose central California for the North American press introduction of the 2010 R1200GS and R1200GS Adventure models. We were headquartered at Tenaya Lodge, a mountain resort in a town called Fish Camp, about 100km north of Fresno, and at this elevation the temperature was, well, seasonably cold.

New on both R1200GS models for 2010 is a revised Boxer engine, based on the twin-cam, radial-valve twin that was first seen in the HP2 Sport. However, unlike the HP2 Sport's single-plug heads, the GS engine uses twin sparkplugs for improved combustion. Bore and stroke are unchanged at 107 x 73mm, and the compression ratio remains at 12.0:1.

Internal changes include larger valves (from 36 to 39mm for the intakes and from 31 to 33mm for the exhausts), higher lift cams and reshaped piston crowns that match the radial combustion chambers. Externally, revised intake manifolds increase airflow, throttle bores have been increased from 47 to 50mm, and curiously, the throttle bodies are now painted black.

In the new GS models the 1,170cc engine peaks at a claimed 110hp at 7,750 rpm. That's down somewhat from the HP2 Sport's 133hp, but up five horsepower on last year's GS. Torque peaks at 88lb.ft at 6,000 rpm, which is three pound-feet more than last year's model. The power increase doesn't sound that big until you see the torque curve. The new engine produces more torque than its predecessor through-

out almost the entire rev range, but especially below 5,500 rpm. The engine also enjoys another useful 500 rpm tacked on to the redline, the rev limiter now kicking in at 8,500 rpm.

I began the day on a U.S.-spec R1200GS Adventure. Its taller, wider windscreen and additional wind deflectors provided better weather protection than the standard GS, which was entirely welcome as the bike's digital thermometer read just 37 degrees Fahrenheit.

If you've ridden a standard R1200GS you know it's a big bike. However, the Adventure's vertiginous seat height (890mm/35in.) combined with its topped-up 33-litre fuel tank (13 litres more than the GS) and a wide midsection make the bike feel absolutely colossal. It's one of the few machines I've ridden recently on which I couldn't get both feet on the ground — and I'm six feet tall.

Power delivery was sharp off the line, and strong, linear acceleration did well to hide the Adventure's claimed wet weight of 256kg (564lb). Throttle modulation was without flaw and it didn't lose its breath as the tachometer needle swung toward redline. The bike pulled top gear smoothly from about 2,000 rpm.

The engine even sounded more powerful, and this wasn't just an impression; an electronically controlled butterfly valve, visible just aft of the left-hand footpeg, is incorporated to provide a deeper and very satisfying exhaust drone.

My Adventure test bike was equipped with semi-integral ABS, and the Canadian equivalent of BMW's optional Equipment Package 2 (\$1,900), which includes a chromed exhaust, luggage mounts, trip computer, fog lights and electronic suspension adjustment (ESA). For me, the true value in this package is the ESA, which changes suspension settings to match riding conditions via a button located on the left-hand switch pod.

While the GS models' standard suspension is manually adjustable for front and rear preload and rear rebound, the optional ESA adjusts front and rear suspension for varying loads, with selectable rebound damping and preload settings for on- or off-road riding. A single button makes the system very easy to use, but the drawback is that you've got to scroll through all the settings to reach the desired level, and preload can only be adjusted with the engine running, most likely to save the battery. The system also lacks the possi-

**THUMBS UP**

- + STANDARD HEATED GRIPS
- + NOT INTIMIDATED BY VERY POOR WEATHER

**THUMBS DOWN**

- ADVENTURE MODEL IS PONDEROUS ON ROUGH DIRT, AND IT'S TOO TALL
- ABS IS NOT STANDARD



bility to make individual suspension adjustments like the new Ducati Multistrada 1200 does with its optional electronically adjustable suspension.

In anticipation of the early-morning dirt sections, I turned the Adventure's ABS off by pushing and holding the ABS button for three seconds, and set the ESA to off-road mode for moderate bumps — identified by a small mountain icon in the dash — and the damping was set to the softest of three settings.

Within a couple of miles of Tenaya Lodge we turned onto a moderately rough dirt road strewn with rainwater ruts, rocks, the occasional tree root and the usual obstacles one would expect on a GS-type off-road excursion. Managing the behemoth Adventure proved less challenging than I'd expected; only the occasional dip caused the suspension to bottom, which I remedied by setting the ESA for harder bumps — identified by a tall mountain icon in the dash — and crank-

ing up the damping to hard.

When the surface smoothed out, I reset the ESA to its softest off-road setting, which made negotiating the winding dirt road quite amusing — once I got accustomed to riding the Adventure accordingly. Use this machine to charge into corners and ricochet off berms and you'll be squeezing the fuel tank tight with your legs as the front end ploughs towards the outside. A more reserved approach towards off-roading will have you going faster than an all-out assault, and steering the bike with the throttle instead of the front wheel pays dividends in control — and fun.

To help the Adventure along in the tighter stuff, this year it gets a lower first gear than the GS (2.60:1 versus 2.38:1 for the GS); all other gear ratios and the final drive ratio are the same.

Leaving the forest, we got onto a smooth, winding paved road riddled with switchbacks, where the big Adventure handled it-

self commendably, especially since it was rolling on Metzeler MCE Karoo knobbies. Granted, the tires slowed steering response, grip was limited and feedback was vague on dry pavement, but the trade-off was very good off-road response, as well as very good wet grip.

At about the halfway point in our journey we stopped for lunch in a town called Coulterville. I wasn't halfway into my marinated chicken breast sandwich when the skies opened up and it began pouring rain. The temperature also began to drop.

After lunch I hopped aboard a standard GS (also shod with Metzeler Karoos for the launch) and immediately noticed it sat lower (851mm/33.5in.) and felt much lighter than 28kg less than the Adventure. The GS has 20mm less suspension travel than the Adventure, which drops seat height, and its smaller fuel tank and absence of crash bars reduce wet weight to 228kg (504lb). Unfortunately, it also has a smaller windscreen,



which didn't bode well for the conditions I was about to face. Redesigned adjustment knobs made raising the screen while riding a snap, allowing maximum benefit of its moderate wind protection.

After a while we turned onto a rain-soaked dirt road heading west towards Yosemite. The standard GS didn't benefit from ESA, and its ride was firmer than the Adventure's, but this dirt road was smoother than the morning's route and the svelte GS just railed along.

Meanwhile, the GS's digital thermometer gradually dropped from 47 degrees Fahrenheit in Coulterville, to the low 40s as we gained elevation, then to the high 30s. At 36 degrees the display began flashing and a snowflake icon appeared in the dash. This was the bike's way of telling me that we were approaching the freezing point, not that I wasn't entirely sure.

Thirty years of adventure

It's the 30th anniversary of the GS, and to commemorate the occasion BMW is releasing three Special Edition Anniversary models. Aesthetic touches include red and blue graphics on alpine white paint, highlighted with a bright red seat. Standard features will vary depending on the model and will include ABS, ESA, an on-board computer and saddlebag supports, among other items. Models will include the F800GS, the R1200GS and the R1200GS Adventure. Pricing is yet to be released.

Then the first snowflakes appeared, mixed in with the steady rain. Then there were more snowflakes than raindrops, and then there was no more rain, just snow. The digital dash on my bike was now flashing 31 degrees, just below freezing.

Slush began accumulating on the road, yet the remarkable thing was that while people in cars were pulling over to put chains over their tires, we soldiered on with relatively good traction. Where the cars floated on top of the slush, our narrow, knobby tires cut right through it, getting grip on the wet asphalt beneath.

Our luck ran out, however, after our last scheduled rest stop. We were about one hour from Tenaya Lodge when a park ranger stopped us in our tracks. The road ahead was closed due to a stuck bus and a car that slid off the road. The wait for the tow truck to arrive was estimated at about an hour, maybe more.

We turned around and rode by a nearby lodge where we saw several other BMW press bikes sitting idle in the parking lot. We joined our colleagues inside for drinks by the fire (some riders were quicker to find a solution to our predicament than others), capping what turned out to be quite an adventurous ride. We then boarded a tour bus back to our base camp.

Although it was uncomfortably cold and wet and slippery, I never felt I rode outside my comfort zone; my confidence never waned while riding the R1200GS (\$17,650) or the R1200GS Adventure (\$20,300), as these bikes seemed to thrive when conditions soured. They provided confidence-inspiring feedback and surefooted control

despite Mother Nature's attempts to derail them, as well as decent weather protection (no one I spoke to complained of cold feet, no doubt attributable to those horizontal cylinders).

The ideal GS for me would be the standard model equipped with the optional Equipment Package 2 (which includes the marvellous ESA) and the Adventure's larger windscreen and wind deflectors. The machine is lower and lighter than the Adventure (both bikes have a no-cost low seat option), and its smaller 20-litre fuel tank will still get you between gas stops almost anywhere in North America. And if you feel uncomfortable on the loose, slippery stuff, you can opt for BMW's Safety Package, which adds automatic stability control (ASC), semi-integral ABS and a tire pressure monitor for \$1,900.

Most riders would have shunned riding in the appalling weather, but as far as testing an adventure-touring bike goes the conditions could not have been more appropriate. Next time I'm riding a new GS and the skies turn menacingly dark, the winds pick up and temperature dips, I'm just going to roll on the throttle and lean into it. *IM*

2010 BMW R1200GS/ R1200GS ADVENTURE

SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE | GS: \$17,650; GSA: \$20,300

COLOURS | White, Red, Matte Grey Metallic, Black Metallic (GS); Matte Grey Metallic, Yellow Metallic (GSA)

ENGINE | four-stroke, air-cooled, DOHC, four-valves-per-cylinder, flat-twin

DISPLACEMENT | 1,170cc

BORE X STROKE | 101 x 73mm

COMPRESSION RATIO | 12.0:1

POWER | 110bhp@7,750rpm, claimed

TORQUE | 88lb.ft@6,000rpm, claimed

FUEL DELIVERY | EFI with 50mm throttle bodies

EXHAUST | 2-1 stainless with three-way catalytic converter and dual oxygen sensors, single high-mounted outlet

WEIGHT | 228kg/504lbs; 256kg/564 lbs (GSA) claimed, wet;

STARTING SYSTEM | Electric

TRANSMISSION | Six-speed, shaft final drive

FRAME | Aluminum main frame; tubular steel subframe

WHEELBASE | 1,506mm/59.3 in.;

1,511mm/59.5 in. (GSA)

RAKE/TRAIL | 25.7 degrees/101mm;

26.2 degrees/97mm (GSA)

SEAT HEIGHT | 851mm/33.5 in.; 890mm/35in. (GSA)

SUSPENSION (FRONT) | BMW Telelever with 41mm stanchion tubes and preload-adjustable shock absorber

SUSPENSION (REAR) | BMW Paralever with single shock adjustable for preload and rebound damping

TIRE (FRONT) STOCK | Bridgestone BW501;

Metzeler MCE Karoo (GSA) 110/80R19

TIRE (REAR) STOCK | Bridgestone BW502;

Metzeler MCE Karoo (GSA) 150/70R17

BRAKES (FRONT) | 2 x 305mm rotors,

four-piston calipers

BRAKE (REAR) | 265mm rotor, two-piston caliper

FUEL CAPACITY | 20 litres; 33 litres (GSA)