

BMW R100RS

Ring out the old, bring in the new. On the eve of the launch of the K100RS we re-appraise the last of the old R100RS line with a trans-Europe express run

by Neil Murray

Two days, two cylinders, two-up, five countries, three ferry crossings, one thousand miles . . .

When it comes to *serious* high speed touring, you'll invariably hear the names of several machines cropping up. Moto Guzzi, Gold Wing, XS Eleven . . . plus a few others. But invariably one name will recur, and even the most fanatical devotees of other well-known touring bikes will nod wisely, if reluctantly, into their beer, and agree. The BMW R100RS, seven years after its introduction, still sets some kind of standard by which other bikes have to be judged. When it came to picking a bike to carry myself plus lady across the Channel (by boat, you fool) into Belgium, and then through Holland, Germany, Denmark and to our destination, Sweden, I made the choice that countless others, lucky enough to be able to afford the BM's asking price, had made before me.

The BMW is probably still the finest *fast* tourer you can buy, (with the likely exception of the K100RS tested elsewhere in this issue).

Let's just consider that claim for a moment. What should a touring bike offer besides the requirements natural to any bike of adequate power and handling?

I'll tell you. You want comfort: the ability to ride all day at balls-out speeds without getting terminal bum, neck, or back ache. For that you need either a superb riding position or a full fairing. The BMW has both. You need a large fuel tank, for nothing breaks the rhythm of a fast ride more than the constant necessity for refuelling stops. The BMW has a five gallon tank, though as I'll explain later, it's sometimes not enough. You want torque to give you the ability to haul top gear all day. Cog-swapping every time a hill or headwind or slow truck appears quickly becomes a pain. And you want shaft drive to avoid the messy business of fiddling with chains and adjusters.

Some people say that you can measure a

machine's worth by the amount it changes from year to year. You could park the 1983 RS next to an original 1976 model, and bar the colour schemes, the two bikes would be as near identical as dammit. You have to look closely to note the wealth of detail changes as BMW have sought to improve what was already a pretty impressive product. For those interested, modern BMWs now have considerably lighter flywheels making for snappier engine response, an oil cooler in the fairing, electronic ignition, a far better gearchange, slightly different switchgear, Brembo brakes, and . . . and . . . well, that's about it, actually.

It's the fairing more than anything else that makes the BMW such a mile-eater. In some other areas it shines, in some it falls distinctly short, but in the area of weather protection it excels. There are very few bikes on which you can cover high mileages (500 miles plus) and yet at the end of the day still be capable of walking and sitting. The Moto Guzzi Spada is one. The BMW R100RS is another. *Aficionados* of the Aspencade tell me that this bike should appear in the list, but even the most devoted Aspencade man I've met admitted that he rarely ran that particular tart's-boudoir-on-wheels above 85 per.

The bike isn't particularly adept at town work. It's better than the Guzzi Spada, but that's mainly due to the lighter steering. But at low speeds the clatter of the engine is amplified by the fairing, and unless you're moving at over 30mph, waves of heat are also trapped by the fairing and your feet and legs get roasted. The low bars make tight turns a bit of a strain, but the width of the fairing and panniers don't intrude when traffic-splitting. If the mirrors will go through the gap, the rest of the bike will follow.

In town the RS also gave me my first jolt, when it ran onto reserve after a mere 145 miles, which equated to 35mpg. I shrugged and put it down to too much right wrist at the traffic light GPs. I consoled myself with the thought that Continental top-gear cruising would produce a more realistic

figure. Well, it did and it didn't. We rode out of Zeebrugge, hit the autoroute, and I wound the speedo needle up to an indicated 100mph and settled down behind the fairing.

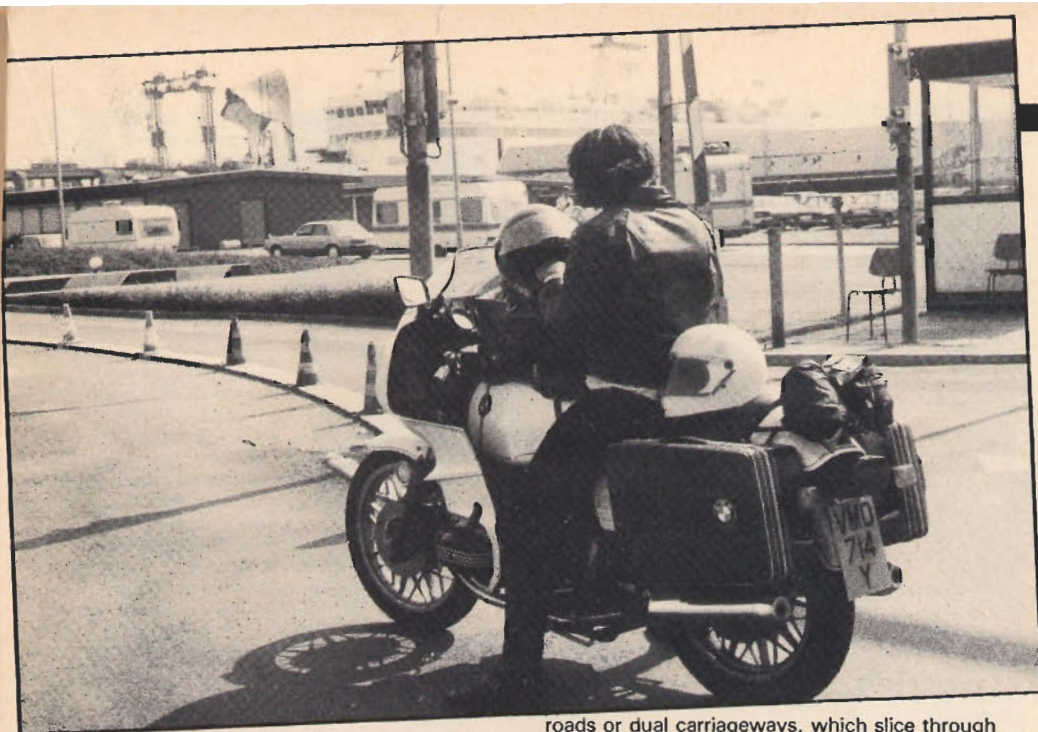
The feeling of serenity behind an RS fairing is uncanny. You can hear the roar of the wind past your helmet, but the pocket of still air that cocoons the rider engenders total calm. If you stick your hand outside the fairing it feels as though you've dipped it into the torrent of a fast flowing river, so utter is the isolation. My only grumble concerned the screen which directed the airstream, plus every beetle, bug, or fly, straight into the visor of my helmet, occasionally buffeting it violently. I learnt how to sit so that my head was out of the turbulence, but still, every fuel stop took longer than it should have done as I wiped the crust of dead meat from my helmet.

And the first fuel stop came after the bike ran on to reserve at 126 miles. Good God, just 30mpg. That meant that the range of the RS, at the speeds it was so patently designed to travel, was going to be about that of the average UJM. But we had ground to cover, and plenty of cash, so I merely winced, paid up and carried on at the ton.

The RS is one of those bikes that aren't boring on sustained motorway thrashes. We ripped through Belgium and Holland and settled down on the German Autobahns, heading for Bremen, Hamburg, and eventually Puttgarden, a small port that's only 45 minutes sailing time from Denmark. I soon found you can't stay in the fast lane for more than ten seconds. I'd be daydreaming in the fast lane at a steady ton-ten, used to English motorways where practically nothing moves at such velocities, and then I'd be jarred awake by angry headlamps flashing in my mirror, and a big Merc, Porsche, or on one memorable occasion, a *Renault 5* would come steaming past.

While hunkered down behind the screen, you can read what oil should be in the engine and what the valve clearances ought to be. It's all on





one of the many tacky (*sic*) stickers that adorn the RS. I thought the Japs had this area sewn up, but the BMW beats even the previous classic, which is Kawasaki's warning "Do not incinerate the fork legs". There's a sticker on the tank reminding you to wear your *kopf helm*, and another on the side panel telling you that the *1st hilfe kit* is *unter der sitzbank*. There's the oil and tappet sticker on the right hand side of the fairing inner, and under the seat is another sticker giving the tyre pressures. Best of all, there's a sticker telling you where to find it, in other words, a sticker telling you where to find a sticker . . .

Northern Germany is beautiful. Lush pastures, cornfields, and deep woods. We stopped in a small *gasthaus* just north of Bremen for the night, and passers-by clustered round the RS as though they'd never seen one before. The village was spotless — that's what really struck me: there wasn't even a fag end on the ground, and everything could have come out of a tourist brochure. It makes one wonder why the Germans, with such a beautiful country of their own, should have found it necessary to go grabbing other people's real estate. A sombre village war memorial testified to their last two attempts, and on an utterly still evening I sat reading off the names, smoke from my cigar hanging in the air like incense. The place was full of ghosts. We had to move on.

If Germany was lovely, Denmark was just *rich*, with the most spectacular farming land I've seen, and an air of quiet opulence about the whole country. The RS was running like a train, not even needing any oil, as we hammered between tall cornfields, up through Copenhagen and into Helsingor, from which a twenty minute ferry crossing sees you into Helsingborg and Sweden.

I've got mixed feelings about the RS's handling. The high speed stability was very impressive, at least, it was once we'd eliminated a 100mph-plus weave by raising the tyre pressures. At highly illegal speeds in motorway sweepers or main road bends it didn't weave or wallow, but just tracked where you wanted it to. But when you really were *in extremis*, then it let you down. You know the scene, you go into the corner too fast, or it tightens up, or there's a pothole in the middle of the line you've just chosen . . . if you shut off the throttle then the back end twitches badly, and it doesn't feel at all happy. And you *can't* simply lean it over a bit more, like you can with a Moto Guzzi, because it runs out of ground clearance. The stands ground on the left, and the brake pedal on the right. This came as a severe shock to me, remembering as I did the quite considerable ground clearance of the 65LS. Furthermore, the RS doesn't have the LS's relatively (for BMW) firm suspension, and on bumpy bends the problem is even worse. I hate to say it, but a scratcher the RS is not.

Sweden's an odd place. It's a large country, but with only 8.5 million Swedes to populate it, so vast tracts are relatively uninhabited. There are few motorways, and most roads are wide main

roads or dual carriageways, which slice through the pine forests. Deadly dull, Swedish main roads, nothing but boredom and road signs telling you to beware of elks.

Elks?

Yes, seriously. The number one cause of road accidents in Sweden is collision with elks, those huge moose-like creatures. Elks are very dim, and periodically wander out of the forests and into the road. Once slap in the middle they pause, and presumably think elk thoughts until something hits them. If it's a car, it's generally written off, as elks are *big*, and if it's a bike, it's curtains for the rider. They used to line the roads with special posts which reflected headlight beams into the forests, to frighten the beasts away. But the elks weren't that easily deterred, and now they have to line every road in elk country (and that's most of Sweden) with chain link fencing.

And the roads are also boring because the Swedes are so innately law-abiding. If there's a 90kph limit, they'll stolidly sit at 90kph, no matter that the road may be arrow-straight, wide enough for a jumbo jet, and deserted to boot. Mind you, another good reason for this is because of the Swedish fuzz. If you're caught doing more than 30kph over the limit then you automatically lose your licence, which seems hard. Lesser speeding offences involve on-the-spot fines. But with so few fuzz around, we reckoned it safe to blast, and so didn't slacken the pace at all.

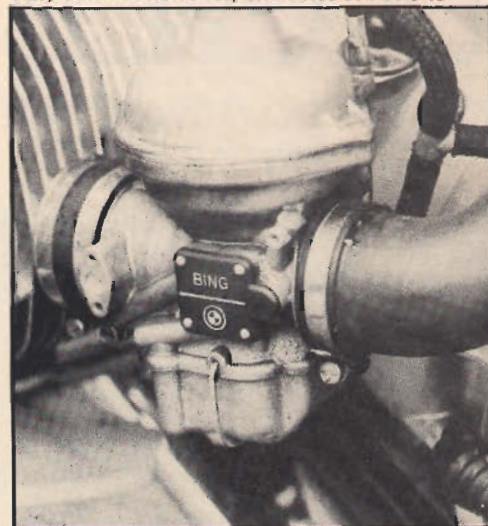
We didn't see a lot of Beemers in Sweden. A few 125s (mostly LCs), and more than a few 400s, but mostly Swedes go for heavy metal, it seems, and that means big Jap roadburners, generally tricked up with fairings and other caff racer goodies. Bikes are more expensive over there — *Bike Sweden* recently ran a feature on how to buy your bike from the British discount dealers like Coburn and Hughes, as savings are there to be made — and if they can afford a bike, they can usually find the readies for something large.

The riding season is short: for six months of the year bikes are simply stored, waiting for the summer months. Unless you're an ice racer, I suppose. Insurance companies recognise this fact, and the most common form of policy covers you for the months of May to October, with basic theft and fire cover only for the remainder. And it's expensive. Rein Tammik of Maseck Fairings vouchsafed that his unlimited capacity insurance, at age 30 plus, set him back £400 for his six months. One reason is that the Swedes being the egalitarian and caring people they are, if you fall off your bike, you can claim for loss of earnings and damages from your insurance company, and this bumps up the premiums no end. At least, that's what he told me; seems hard to believe. Because the bikes are cosseted and used less than in other countries they last longer, and you see loads of immaculate early Honda and Kawasaki fours. This can't help the Japs' sales operation: annual sales are a mere 20,000 bikes, with Honda selling about a third of that. And because of the small market, the model ranges are much smaller as well.

Sweden is a Mecca for Italian bikers. They were *everywhere*. Perhaps they feel the urge to visit the frozen North, but the more likely explanation is that the lusty Latins are attracted to the Nordic women like bees to a jampot. You can't blame them: you get bug-eyed gazing at endless blonde, blue-eyed goddesses. Believe it or not, a serious Swedish sociological problem is the lack of *men*. There simply aren't enough to go around, apparently. So go north, young man . . .

Hard charging around Swedish main roads was frequently curtailed by the armies of caravans (mostly German) that infested the roads. You'd hurtle round a corner and there'd be a Caravan Kenneth or Trailer Terry dawdling along right in front of you. Haul on the anchors fast . . . Beemers these days sport Brembo brakes, probably the most significant piece of Axis co-operation since 1940, but why, if they were buying Italian brakes, didn't they buy the Guzzi-Benelli linked braking system as well? It makes just that tiny bit of difference. The BM brakes excellently, but a Guzzi does it superbly. Unofficially, I can tell you that linked brakes are in the pipeline, but don't expect them for a year or so.

I handed the RS back to BMW with mixed feelings. In two weeks and 3000 miles I conceived an enormous respect for the bike. Plus a certain measure of liking. But it didn't grab me in the gut the way the 65LS did. Somehow, the boxer RS lacks soul: it's so efficient it's clinical. The Guzzi Spada, probably its nearest rival in layout, market, and conception oozes character, but the RS doesn't. At least, not to me. But, hell: this is the bike that carried me and wife and luggage over 650 road miles in a day's run, and if that sounds less than it should have been, then let me tell you that included the time taken for two ferry crossings, from Germany to Denmark, and Denmark to Sweden. And half the mileage was done on main roads, not motorways. At the end of the day, I got off the bike a bit stiff-legged, it's true, but with no aches, and I was still able to



enjoy a few beers and a good meal without feeling the desire to curl up and die. And that's what the RS is all about: if I had to make such a journey again, I'd take an RS if it was humanly possible, *if*, if time was of the essence. If time wasn't so important, then there are several bikes that I think I'd *enjoy* riding more, and the Guzzi Spada is one.

So what, in the end, do you get for your four grand? You get the essential simplicity of design that is the real beauty of any BMW, you get the best finish there is, bar the Hesketh, you get a *complete* motorcycle: no need to change tyres, shocks, or even add a fairing. You can practically strip the engine with the excellent toolkit provided, and there's even a puncture kit and tyre pump as well. As far as I know, the only people who recognise the roadside puncture besides BMW are the East Germans and the Czechs. And you get class, and if that's worth £4000 to you, fine. I'm grateful for the chance to have ridden one so far, but it's just too single-minded for me. For the long-distance freak, though, who really does require the ultimate in high-speed mile-eating, it's still one of the best.