

# Motorcycle

## CONSUMER NEWS

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**W**HAT IS ADVENTURE? For some riders, an adventurous trip might only be down a local gravel road. But for others, two-wheeled adventures are the opportunities to push their bodies and machines to the very limits. The idea of taking adventure-touring bikes far over the horizon and into unexplored territory is an irresistible urge for this second type of rider.

### SPECIAL REPORT

by Bruce Steever



We at Motorcycle Consumer News aim to explore the limits of the motorcycles we test as well. But certain tests are beyond our reach. When we test a new motorcycle, it eventually must go back to its manufacturer. When we test an adventure-touring machine like the BMW GS or Triumph Tiger, we take it to the dirt... but do our best to make sure it comes back in one piece. But what if we didn't? What if we could outfit the latest crop of adventure-touring machines with all the accessories required to survive hard off-road riding, and then take them on the toughest trails we could find—until parts, bikes and even riders started to fail? And what if we kept going further still?

Thanks to RawHyde Adventures and the World of Adventure, MCN has been able to do exactly that. In our January 2014 issue, we reported on RawHyde's rider training at its camp in Castaic, CA. With that education behind us, it was time to head out into the real world

as part of RawHyde's advanced field training, the Expedition CV, a hard-core adventure ride through the Mojave Desert and into Death Valley National Park, over 1,000 miles of every sort of dirt road you might imagine, from sandy washes to rocky hill climbs to boulder-strewn descents—with only a few highway sections to connect the various off-

road trails.

While RawHyde is first and foremost an official BMW training center, founder Jim Hyde has gathered together nearly every brand and model of adventure machine under the World of Adventure banner, plus a coalition of leading aftermarket brands and companies in the adventure-touring market, to create the ultimate product and service resource for adventure riders. Companies include Touratech, Klim, ALT Rider, Baja Designs, **Black Dog Cycle Works**, Giant Loop, Happy Trails, Jesse Luggage, Wolfman bags, and Heidenau and Sava tires to name a few. Together with his "WoADV" partners, Hyde equipped each bike with the parts needed to survive and hopefully thrive in the harsh world of hard-core adventure riding.

With a collection of fully accessorized machines to ride, our small group of press riders joined in with the regular *RawHyde* students to experience a proper adventure ride while testing adventure machines in the toughest conditions possible. Not only did this give us the opportunity to share with our readers the adventure of a lifetime, it presented the opportunity to test, head-to-head, the full range of adventure bikes in conditions that neither the OEMs' press intros nor our standard testing regimens could ever duplicate.

### The Bikes

As RawHyde is an official BMW training center, several BMWs were equipped for press riders, including a new water-cooled R1200GS, a final model oilhead R1200GS and an F800GS. Flying the British flag were a pair of Triumphs, a Tiger 800 XC and a Tiger Explorer XC. From Japan, we had a Super Ténéré, and from Austria, KTM's new 1190 Adventure. Each machine rode on spoked wheels, either stock, fitted as a factory option or from the World of Adventure aftermarket. While cast wheels *probably* wouldn't have stopped any of the





Every day on the CV ride presented new challenges to overcome and epic natural beauty. The thrill of successfully navigating the extreme conditions and the joy of sharing each long day with new friends makes this trip worthy of any rider's bucket list. The white GPS track recorded all 1059.9 miles, ranging from mile-high passes to 277' below sea level.



machines during our trip, the additional durability and repair-ability of spoked rims was certainly appreciated, especially once we entered Death Valley and had to literally hammer out the wheel of an R1200GS.

Each bike also was treated to a set of proper dirt tires (with the exception of the KTM, more on that later), with the various bikes mounting Heidenau, Continental and Sava tires. Tires are always a controversial topic, and adventure riding creates an extreme set of demands to further complicate matters. An adventure tire needs to be capable of handling 100 hp (or more) at speeds of 100 mph (or more!) while still providing decent road feel, a challenge for any tire. At the same time, it needs to be capable of finding traction in sand, rocks, boulders and mud when riding off road. While tire companies do their best to make heavily reinforced tires capable of meeting both sets of demands, they also need to run far below typical street pressures to work best in the dirt. These low pressures add excessive carcass flex once back on the road, which not only generates significant heat and wear but makes the tires more vulnerable to punctures.

And puncture we did! Over and over again. By the time the trip was over, several bikes were running tubes inside their tubeless tires, as patches and plugs failed to hold under the abuse. One of the group's Super Ténérés limped home on its second tube after puncturing



the sidewall of its rear tire, then ripping the first tube's valve stem apart under heavy acceleration on the return highway trip. The ideal solution is to carry a compact compressor or two with the group to air up and down as required, but if you don't have one, or don't feel like slowly airing up 20 or more bikes in a large ride like ours, compromise is the name of the game. RawHyde recommends running pressures as close to 20 psi as you feel comfortable with on the road, which should allow enough flexibility to find grip in the dirt. But as previously mentioned, these low pressures don't handle sharp road debris very well, so always be prepared to handle flats in the field.

On to the machines themselves!



## BMW R1200GS Oilhead

Before the rest of the OEMs joined the adventure-touring segment, BMW dominated the niche that it had essentially created with the original R80GS. Revised in 2010, the last oilhead GS packed 95 hp in a 543.5 lb. package that earned fans around the world for its combination of performance, refinement and ability on both dirt and tarmac. Rather than review each machine

in its entirety, however, this article will examine how each heavily-accessorized motorcycle performed during the Expedition CV ride, including how its aftermarket parts served in the real world.



A classic in its own time, the oilhead R1200GS is still capable but definitely shows its age compared to more modern competition. With the cylinder heads in the breeze, we learned crash bars are a must-have for any R-GS





For a conventional review of the last oilhead R1200GS, look back at our December 2011 issue.

Our oilhead GS was equipped with BMW's optional spoked rims mounting Heidenau K60 Scout tires. Crash protection was provided by a combination of ALT Rider crash bars and a **Black Dog Cycle Works** skid plate, with Touratech hand guards, headlight

guard, master cylinder guards and intake/ fuel injector protectors. Jesse Luggage provided the aluminum side cases and a pair of Wolfman soft bags provided additional storage. Finally, a set of Baja Designs Squadron LED lights burned a hole in the night. Riders who haven't taken these machines into serious off-road situations often scoff at the concept of bolting another 20–30 lbs. of accessories onto what is already a heavy bike for the dirt, but each of these parts is critical. I personally dropped the oilhead GS during a short climb up a rocky, shale-covered canyon road. Without the ALT Rider bars protecting the left cylinder head (and the Jesse cases protecting the tail section), the full force of the drop would have likely slammed the valve cover off the head, requiring field repair to remount the cover and gasket. Instead, the bike fell over without incident; I picked it up, backed down the hill, and tried again. And even if you never bottom out a big adventure bike with a rough landing, the constant pinging of rocks bouncing off the skid plate becomes quite reassuring. Thus kitted out, the oilhead proved plenty

durable over the course of the trip. The tough Heidenau tires never failed, although we did have to air them back up after repeated rock hits reduced air pressure down to single digits. And when the main (low) beam burned out, the auxiliary LEDs more than made up for the lost candlepower.

From the saddle, the machine continued to earn its jack-of-all-trades reputation, with excellent low-speed balance in the dirt and mile-devouring highway cruising. But the venerable platform also showed its age. Suspension performance was lackluster for a bike with less than 5,000 miles on the clocks, and as we've noted in our reviews, the rear end lacks control over stutter bumps and washboard surfaces. The older, heavy Paralever suspension design simply doesn't keep up with the rapid suspension inputs, reducing traction and confidence. Despite this, front end feedback remained very good, which helped immensely when navigating loose surfaces like sand and pea gravel. Engine power and driveability remain commendable both on- and off-road, but the dry clutch makes starting off in awkward situations (such as in the middle of a hill climb) more difficult than it needs to be. Highway passing power was also sub-par compared to the more modern machines. Brake performance was good both on and off road thanks to an easy-to-use ABS off switch. Finally, while the older GS was plenty comfortable on the road, standing on the pegs found several annoyances, with the lower edge of the saddle catching the top cuff of riding boots, along with the side-stand fouling the rider's left heel. In summary, the final oil-cooled GS was a capable companion, but several rough areas proved that the competition has caught up to the original adventure-tourer.



## BMW R1200GS Wethead

Of course, BMW knew that the writing was on the wall for the old oilhead, leading the German firm to release the all-new water-cooled R1200GS in 2013. As we reported in our August 2013 issue, the new GS significantly raised the bar for the adventure-touring class. Now packing 115 hp in the same 543.5 lbs. as the previous model, the "wasserboxer" combines more power and torque with improved suspension and chassis dynamics, better brakes and advanced new electronics to create a machine that offers radically improved road performance without losing any of its famed dirt ability.

Our 2014 R1200GS came prepared with a full compliment of Touratech crash bars, hand guards, headlight guard, radiator guards and Clearwater LED auxiliary lights. Happy Trails supplied the skid plate and deep but narrow aluminum cases, while Woody's Wheel

Works laced up a new set of wheels in the previous GS' sizes mounting Continental TKC80 tires with a pair of Galfer's Wave rotors up front. The new GS also



The new water-boxer earns a place at the head of the adventure-touring class thanks to confidence-inspiring handling and electronics. Of course, now you have to worry about protecting the radiators as well as the cylinder heads.



The stripped F800GS was light and nimble but failed to earn fans compared to some of the other machines. Blame its understated performance on the engine's less manageable delivery and feel.

included the optional BMW plug to unlock Enduro Pro mode for the challenging off-road conditions.

During the entire trip, I don't remember seeing the new GS on its side once, which testifies to the new bike's controllability and driveability. The slip-and-assist clutch that gave us fits during aggressive street riding works wonders in the dirt, thanks to its super-light pull at the lever, but some riders did complain that the new machine is too easy to stall thanks to the faster revving engine. Suspension performance, especially from the rear, is radically better than the previous model, visibly working better over rough surfaces. The Dynamic ESA system made it easy to adjust for varying conditions and riders as well. The riding modes all performed exceptionally well, with the ABS still offering a safety net in the dirt, and thanks to the accessory plug, the bike remembered previous ABS and TC settings after the key was turned off, a useful time saver. With the bars tilted forward, the ergonomics were the best of all the bikes tested for my 6'1" frame, which, when combined with the bike's sweet E-gas ride-by-wire driveability and riding modes, helped make this the most confidence-building bike of the 1200cc class. The GS may command a premium price, but it works amazingly well.



## BMW F800GS

While the R1200 is BMW's best-known GS, the F800GS promises several advantages, including a 21" front wheel, lighter weight and lower cost. For our initial review, look back to August 2011. Pushing 489 lbs. with 74 hp, the F800 should be significantly more manageable in tight, technical riding and the taller front tire should track through soft surfaces with greater confidence. Interestingly, while the middleweight GS was very capable, nearly everyone preferred the new 1200 over the smaller machine.

The press F800GS was set up to maintain its lightweight advantages, with a compact skid plate and

engine bars by ALT Rider. Wolfman supplied the complete luggage set, saving additional weight compared to hard panniers, and Woody's Wheels supplied new Excel rims. The accessorized F800GS was the most nimble machine we tested in the dirt, and the 21" front tire made sand and gravel riding a breeze compared to the heavier machines with their 19" front wheels. Suspension performance and driveability were both great on the dirt, but on the highway, the front tire feedback was very vague and the engine was coarse at higher speeds. What made the F800GS a challenge was its relatively quick-spinning powerplant that could easily break traction with a clumsy throttle input. And larger riders also struggled with the compact ergonomics and lower bar position. While the 800 was perfectly adept throughout the trip, it wasn't the best 800cc machine we had to choose from, and as good as the new R1200GS performed, the smaller bike tended to get lost in the shuffle.



## KTM 1190 Adventure

KTM has always been a dirt-ready brand, and the older 990cc Adventure model was widely regarded as the best dirt mount of the adventure-touring class. But as our full review in this issue goes to show, KTM's new 1190 Adventure is an entirely new package, with class-leading power, refinement and technology. Of course, it's one thing to say a bike is great under controlled conditions, another to see how the machine would perform in Death Valley.

Since the KTM was so new, it wasn't able to receive more extensive upgrades like other models tested here. KTM's accessory crash bars joined a **Black Dog Cycle Works** skid plate to protect the bike during falls, while a Wolfman tank bag and KTM's factory touring luggage



Despite the lack of accessories, riders battled over the KTM's keys. Refined and fast, the 1190 was usually a blur on the horizon, but we wanted more front end feel. The R-model is the better dirt choice.

provided storage. A set of **Black Dog's** hefty platform footpegs added comfort and control and the firm's radiator protector kept stray rocks at bay. Finally, while fitting a



front TKC80 was easy, sourcing a dirt-worthy tire for the large 170-profile rear proved impossible in the limited time frame. Luckily, the KTM's TC was able to find enough dirt traction despite running what was essentially a street rear tire.

Despite the limited modifications, the KTM proved to be one of the most popular press machines thanks to its class-topping power and excellent electronic aids. In enduro mode, wheel rear slides were safe, controllable (and a lot of fun) and the ABS proved nearly unbeatable even for the more experienced dirt veterans. On the road, the massively powerful engine and stiff frame ensured that the rest of the group quickly faded in the mirrors. The electronic suspension gave each rider an ideal setup, and the bike was vastly more comfortable than the old 990. But despite the many superlatives that can be lavished on the KTM, I ran into several small but significant issues when riding the machine in the dirt. Thanks to the 1190's street-focused fork geometry and low, narrow handlebar bend, soft terrain became very tricky, as the front tire felt prone to washing out, while the less-aggressive BMW GS always provided greater confidence. That being said, the KTM boasted better suspension performance than any of the Beemers. For KTM buyers looking to see more dirt action, the R-model 1190 Adventure, with its 21" front wheel and resulting change in geometry, would be a much better partner off-road.



## Triumph Tiger Explorer XC

Flying the 1200cc flag for Britain is the Tiger Explorer XC. When we initially reviewed this machine back in August 2012, we were impressed by its smooth and powerful engine, decent road manners and good driveline. But at the same time, it was top-heavy and the suspension left much to be desired. Those are not the characteristics you want in the dirt, and the big Tiger was



Basically a Trophy 1200 touring bike without the fairings, the big Tiger is an excellent road bike but the least capable in the dirt. Even ridden carefully, the big triple suffered some ignominious drops.

quickly relegated to last pick when it came time to swap bikes during the CV ride.

Of course, the 1200cc Tiger did manage to survive

the entire trip, with many thanks going to the Happy Trails crash bars and OEM aluminum skid plate. Happy Trails also equipped the bike with its aluminum panniers and TKC80s were fitted to the standard spoked wheels. A Giant Loop tank bag and Rigid LED lights rounded out the package.

The problem we found with the Explorer was, although it has all the right parts of the formula for adventure riding, the details never come together effectively. Its 114 hp engine is plenty strong, but was often too powerful for available traction in the dirt. The adjustable traction control wasn't able to cope with loose surfaces or dirty hill climbs, requiring the rider to go through the menu to disable it at every start. And not only is it a massive 589 lbs. wet before accessories are added, the weight is carried high, making the machine far too easy to drop in challenging terrain. The final black mark was that the suspension was simply not capable of controlling the bike's mass, feeling as if it was pulled from the much lighter Tiger 800 series without a single change. I was far from the fastest press rider in the dirt, but even at my pace, the Explorer was the only machine I regularly bottomed out. By the end of the trip, not only was the right hand guard gone, but the windscreen as well. If you are looking for a great road companion, the Tiger might still fit the bill, as it is essentially a stripped version of the Trophy 1200 touring bike. But there are many reasons why a naked touring bike is not a good match for desert riding.



## Tiger 800 XC

If the big Tiger was a let-down, the 800XC more than makes up for it. Reviewed back in August 2011, the middleweight adventure bike combines a punchy, revvy 80 hp triple with a manageable 503 lb. wet weight and a dirt-ready 21" front wheel. Although it's a more



The Tiger 800XC was awesome in the dirt while still offering good road performance. The ergos were a bit tight for larger riders, and the engine vibes needed sorting, but the 800cc triple was the bike we'd pick for our next adventure ride.

simplistic machine than some of the 1200cc technobikes tested here, that more elemental response also makes the 800 a joy to ride.

Our Tiger 800 was outfitted

similar to the 1200cc sibling, with Happy Trails crash bars and a Triumph skid plate, Baja Designs LED lights, a Wolfman tank bag and Jesse aluminum hard cases. TKC80s were mounted to the stock spoked wheels and like most of the machines here, the stock handlebars were tilted up for better ergonomics while standing.

Everyone who spent time aboard the smaller Tiger raved about its controllability and reliable handling on both asphalt and dirt. I specifically claimed the XC when we tackled a long stretch of sandy pea gravel that had the larger machines squirming while the Tiger easily surfed across the loose surface. Fuel injection and power delivery are skewed towards road use, and in the dirt, the engine response can be a bit too aggressive. The ABS worked well on asphalt and was easy to disable.

The Tiger only presented three challenges. One, its slightly compact size makes it feel cramped for larger riders standing on the pegs. Two, engine vibration quickly numbed the rider's hands, especially on the throttle tube side, but we think this could be easily fixed. Finally, since riders felt so confident on the easy-to-ride 800XC, they took more chances—and the poor Tiger took some heavy hits as a result. But despite coming home with a huge dent in the oil filter and a pair of panniers that will probably never be straight again, the Tiger 800 was a hit. It combined a good dirt-worthy chassis with an engine powerful enough to make easy work of highway miles—exactly what an adventure bike is supposed to be.



## Yamaha Super Ténéré

Last but not least was Yamaha's 1200cc parallel twin. On paper, the "Super Ten" fails to shine, producing a mere 91 hp to push its 587 lb. bulk. But looking past the spec sheets, the Ténéré starts to make sense. Its large, lazily tuned 270° parallel twin revs freely on asphalt yet finds excellent traction off road. Dirt-tuned ABS and traction control help the rider make the most of the shaft-driven power. High-quality suspension works well everywhere, and the overbuilt frame and smart component packaging ensure that the bike is very resistant to damage that might disable lesser machines.

Our ALT Rider Super Ténéré featured a range of components from the Seattle, WA-based company, including crash bars, a skid plate and various guards for the engine, drive shaft boots and exhaust pipes. A set

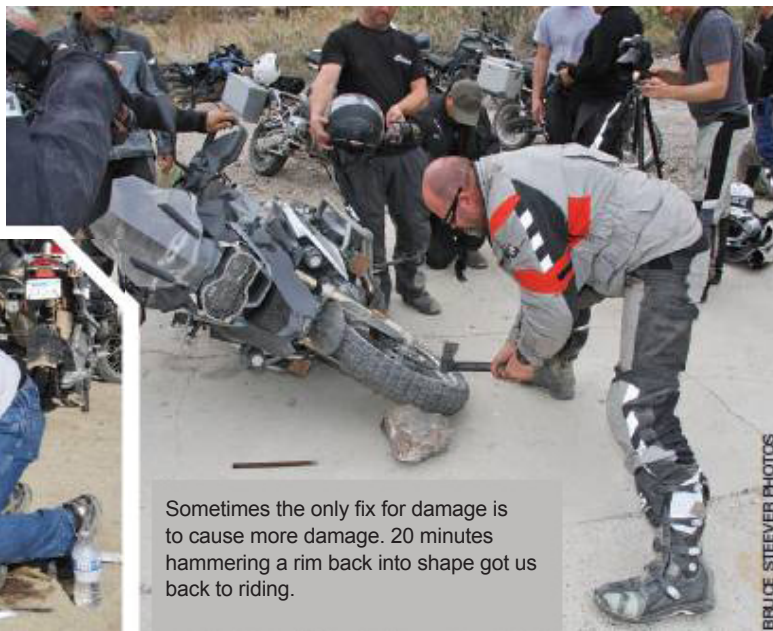
Last but not least was the Super Ten. Despite being one of the heavier bikes in the class, the Yamaha pushed through every obstacle like a tank. Good ergonomics, tractable power and smart component packaging make the Ténéré a rider-friendly mount.



of Jesse hard cases, Clearwater LED lights, a Giant Loop tank bag and Sava tires finished the preparation.

When discussing the Super Ten, the conversation usually focuses on the machine's significant weight, but once underway, the mass quickly disappears. In fact, most of the press quickly came to fight over the keys for the big Yamaha thanks to its controllable power delivery and bulldog-like ability to keep going forward over all obstacles. At one point, I found myself wedged on top of several head-sized boulders, with the rear wheel stuck in the air. Without another rider nearby to help, I set about rocking the bike side-to-side until the skid plate, using 850 lbs. of bike and rider, managed to pry a rock free. Once the rock moved, and the rear tire came back to earth, I simply restarted, fed in clutch and continued on. The rest of the machine is equally as capable, with great ergonomics, great brakes for the dirt and smooth power delivery everywhere. Of course, that weight is there to bite you if you forget about it, but just dust yourself off, because the Yamaha will keep on going after you pick it up.

It's challenging to put to words all the various experiences a full week of adventure riding leaves you



Sometimes the only fix for damage is to cause more damage. 20 minutes hammering a rim back into shape got us back to riding.

BRUCE STEEVER PHOTOS



with, but despite some cold nights and plenty of sore muscles, you are left with a fire burning to plan the next off-road journey as soon as you get home. That's the point of these big do-everything adventure machines, and on a trip like this, their capabilities were proven under fire.

Bikes came back with battle scars, but they all came back. Standouts included the Ténéré, Tiger 800XC and the new R1200GS, with the middleweight triple earning our vote for the best all-around adventure machine. Properly prepared, we doubt there are many places it can't go.

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