



KTM vs. BMW

In past columns I have noted how KTM has passed BMW in U.S. sales. I have also referred to the fact that some motorcycle publications have rated the KTM 950 Adventure over the BMW R1200GS. When Peter Egan came down for last year's Riding Into History, he told me that his KTM Adventure was his all-time favorite bike to ride. Are the days of the GS being the category king over? Or at least are they numbered?

Recently, through a set of strange circumstances, I had the opportunity to take a new KTM 950 Adventure on an 11-day extended test ride through all types of terrain. Here was my chance to see if the KTM was indeed the superior bike.

My first observation was that the KTM seemed rather tall, even for someone like me who has a considerable inseam. Others in our touring group who were a bit smaller of stature thought it was not a bike they could ride, although they easily piloted their R12GSs. Still, the height of the bike was something I could easily cope with, so it wasn't much of a concern.

Immediately upon trying out the bike in the hotel parking lot, a bigger concern reared its head. I attempted a sharp U-turn as I commonly do on my GS, and very nearly dropped the bike in my first 100 feet of riding. It seems that the KTM's handlebars don't turn nearly as much as the BMW's, so unexpectedly hitting the steering stop caused me to momentarily lose balance. This deficiency was to plague me throughout the tour, as we ended up having to make a number of tight turns.

Perhaps the biggest problem I faced on the KTM, however, was the seat. I found it amazingly uncomfortable, and I'm not usually one to complain about stock seats. I'm sure that I've ridden well over 100 different motorcycles over the years, and I can only remember one or two with worse seats. I thought that I would get used to it over the miles. I was wrong. Fortunately the bike is easy to ride while standing on the pegs.

On the positive side, the motorcycle is extremely well balanced, and handles mountain roads with ease. It's V-twin makes plenty of power, but you have to keep the revs up. Running it up through the gears to 200 kph is lots of fun, and is rather quickly accomplished. I was surprised, however, at the inability of the bike to run at moderate speeds in sixth or even fifth gear. Here it acted like a big single, bucking and sputtering until a downshift was performed. Not good form for touring, and very different from a GS.

I must also note that I was shocked at the first gas stop. The KTM guzzled 40% more fuel than the F650 Dakar I had been riding, and 15% more than the R12GSs that were being ridden two up! Worse still, it was drinking premium fuel. The bike had fewer than 1000 miles on it, so fuel economy may improve. Still...

My near disaster with the KTM, however, wasn't exactly the fault of the bike itself. At one point, while riding in a light rain, I was forced to make an emergency stop. I grabbed a handful of brake (a footful as well) and both wheels locked up, briefly sending the bike into a two-wheel drift. Fortunately, I regained control in time to avert a nasty crash into one of my riding companions. Once again, my belief in ABS was renewed. Unfortunately, the KTM was not so equipped.

Other problems I encountered were an exhaust system that burned two holes in my new riding pants and frozen hands from the lack of heated grips. Once I was forced to stop in the back of a group of riders in the fog, only to discover that the bike had no hazard lights. Little things do make a big difference.

All in all, I'd say that the GS can rest easy. The KTM is a blast to ride fast, and it handles the dirt pretty well. As a sport touring option, however, the GS whips it convincingly. Long live the king!

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