

## THE R90S: The BMW That Invented Sport-Touring

In 1974, it was that rarest of things, a fast, glamorous, comfortable, reliable, two-up European café racer with good luggage.

By Peter Egan, Marc Urbano September 23, 2015



Memory is an unreliable tape recorder, but I think the first time I ever heard the term “sport-touring” was right after the **BMW R90S** came out in 1974. It was also the first time I heard the words, “I may have to buy a BMW motorcycle some day,” come out of my own mouth.

At that point, I’d ridden only one BMW in my life, and that was a late ’60s R50/2 with an Earles fork, offered for sale through the classifieds in our local newspaper. Although I saw myself as more of a Triumph/Honda scrambler guy, I was intrigued by the traditional European craftsmanship of BMW’s singles and boxer twins, which had a high-quality enameled look to them, as though they might be industrially related to the Leica camera or the Heidelberg printing press.

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Well, I took the R50/2 for a test ride and found it surprisingly clunky and slow, a 500cc bike that seemed sluggish and awkward compared with my Honda CB350. When I returned it to the owner’s driveway, I didn’t quite know what to say. It was clearly either a counterculture protest against glitz or a solid motorcycle for a globe-trotting rider who needed to cross the Gobi Desert without breaking down every few days, but “sporty” was not a word that came to mind. The BMW certainly had Old World charm, but its performance didn’t get my heart pounding. Except when I tried to use the brakes. To be fair, the more sporting R69S and subsequent R75/5 both took a healthy step toward making BMWs more appealing to the youth culture in all of us, but they were still a bit staid when matched against the exotic yet inexpensive Japanese super-bikes that swamped the market by the early ’70s. Even BMW itself, which was principally a car company, was wondering if it should sell off the motorcycle division or shut it down.



Clearly, it was time to call in the Marines.

Or at least one of them, in the person of an American named Bob Lutz, a former Marine fighter pilot and newly arrived executive VP of sales at BMW. Lutz, a motorcyclist and Honda CB750 owner, was bothered by the same conservatism that kept so many of us out

of BMW showrooms. He decided the company should build a 900cc flagship that could compete with the likes of his Honda 750 four, the mighty **Kawasaki Z1**, Norton Commando, **Triumph/BSA 750 triples**, **Ducati 750SS**, Guzzi V-7 Sport, etc. He decreed that it have superbike performance but must also look good. To that end, he hired an industrial stylist named Hans Muth—surely one of the most propitious choices in motorcycle history. Muth—to put it simply—produced a masterpiece.



A café fairing makes high-speed touring considerably more serene and easy on the arms and back.

He not only penned beautiful shapes for the tank, fairing, seat, tailpiece, and pipes, but he came up with a two-tone paint scheme that misted silver into black (“Silver Smoke”), giving the bike a look that was both startlingly modern and yet primeval, in some moody Teutonic sense. Quite stunning.

Under that lovely styling, mechanical details (overseen by engineer Hans-Gunther von der Marwitz) included twin front discs, aluminum-alloy wheels, Dell’Orto pumper carbs, and a five-speed transmission. The boxer twin was punched out to 898cc and rated at 75 bhp at 7,200 rpm. *Cycle World’s* 1974 test bike did the quarter-mile in 13.05 seconds at 103 mph and recorded a top speed of 123 mph. *Cycle* magazine reported that its test bike actually pulled away from a 900cc Z1 Kawasaki in highway roll-on contests at any speed, in any gear.



Well then. I ran right down to our local BMW/Norton/Suzuki dealership (where I was about to order a new Norton Commando) to look at the bike and quickly realized that BMW had finally produced a motorcycle I wanted. I looked at the R90S from every angle and immediately decided it was a classic for the ages. Still, the Celtic side of my Irish/German heritage won out, and I bought the Norton instead.



**A tidy analog fighter-plane cockpit includes a battery-draining clock (often disconnected) and narrow but comfortable handlebars, often borrowed—like those on the 400F Honda—for other café-racer projects.**

There was more at work here than genetics, of course. There was price. I got the Norton, nicely discounted, for around \$2,400 while the R90S sold for a then-astounding \$3,430. In mid-'70s currency, a \$3,430 motorcycle sounded to me about like a \$30,000 motorcycle sounds now. Prohibitively expensive. You had to really, really want one. But several of my friends, who were young and underpaid like me, scraped the down payment together, took out loans, and bought them. They just had to. BMW and Hans Muth had given them no choice.

And one of the ways my fellow cash-strapped twentysomethings—who were mostly married—could justify the purchase was the sheer versatility of the R90S. It was not just a brilliant sport bike but a genuine sport-tourer—perhaps the first of this breed. You could go places on it. Also, it had nicely integrated factory hard bags and a comfortable dual seat, so the cosigner of your joint bank loan could go with you. So you could almost justify the R90S's high price by regarding it as an early example of the One Bike Solution—except for

riding off-road, of course. It was a potent sport bike, a great tourer, and an instantly collectable classic, all in one package.



**A hinged seat provides a handy tail compartment storage for billfold, sunglasses, and other items too bulky for the author's formerly svelte Hein Gericke street leathers.**

When we lived in California during the 1980s, I used to take my silver 1977 Ducati 900SS on Sunday-morning rides over the sinuous Ortega Highway to Lake Elsinore. My friend John Jaeger often came with me on his Silver Smoke 1976 R90S. We soon discovered that these bikes were almost a perfect match in roll-on performance and top speed, with only a slight handling and braking edge going to the Ducati. Both these bikes (in highly modified form) were Daytona Superbike winners, after all, taking back-to-back victories in 1976 (last model year for the R90S) and 1977. But the big difference between our streetbikes came at the end of the summer when John clicked the Krauser saddlebags onto his R90S and took a trip across the continental US. This was an option I didn't contemplate with the Duc. You might say the BMW's secret was—and still is—a delicate balance, right on the hyphen between “sport” and “touring.” The bike has slightly rearset pegs and a low handlebar, but it puts you in an all-day-comfortable forward lean with decent leg room and not too much weight on your wrists. The wide, nearly flat seat is well padded, and the café-racer fairing actually keeps a surprising amount of wind—and wind noise—away from your helmet and upper body.

***“It's also a bike that doesn't mind sitting perfectly still...I would put the R90S in a very small group of the best-looking bikes ever built.***



But it isn't just comfort that invites long-distance travel. The R90S, like most BMW boxer twins, has a well-earned reputation for reliability along with a smooth and reassuring engine cadence that whispers into your helmet, "I can do this forever." And then it does. The bike picks up speed and holds it with a kind of freight-train momentum, the pushrod valve train clicking away and the two big cylinders thrumming quietly over the muted intake honk. There's just enough rocking mechanical shudder at idle to remind you you're on a machine but not so much that your license plate falls off.

The 1976 R90S photographed in this article is the second one I've owned, a very original, 43,000-mile bike that runs as if it just came out of the showroom. It carves nicely on our winding back roads with a kind of elegant composure (the bike's, not mine), and it's one of the few older classic bikes I've owned that I would gladly jump on and ride from here in Wisconsin to our California offices without a second thought. It's by no means a modern sport-tourer in terms of braking, suspension, compliance, or chassis stiffness (time has marched on), and yet none of this seems to intrude on your enjoyment or serenity when riding. Accidentally ranging much farther from home than planned is a common hazard. It's a bike that just wants to keep going.



It's also a bike that doesn't mind sitting perfectly still. As in your workshop, being pondered at the end of the day—or all winter. Everyone has personal favorites, but I would put the R90S in a very small group of the best-looking bikes ever built.

A friend of mine found this particular R90S for sale in the San Francisco Bay area. He knew I'd been on the hunt for another one for a long time and called up last summer. "I found your bike," he said. The financial timing—as usual—was awkward, but a few choice email

photos had me withdrawing yet another chunk of my retirement savings from the bank. Like those guys I knew in the '70s, I had to have it. BMW and Hans Muth gave me no choice.



Photo #1 - BMW R90S action.- *Marc Urbano*



Photo #2 - BMW R90S action. - Marc Urbano



Photo #3 - BMW R90S action.- Marc Urbano





Photo #4 - BMW R90S static.- *Marc Urbano*



Photo #5 - BMW R90S static.- Marc Urbano





Photo #6 - BMW R90S static.- Marc Urbano





Photo #7 - A café fairing makes high-speed touring considerably more serene and easy on the arms and back.- *Marc Urbano*



Photo #8 - A tidy analog fighter-plane cockpit includes a battery-draining clock (often disconnected) and narrow but comfortable handlebars, often borrowed?like those on the 400F Honda?for other café-racer projects.- *Marc Urbano*





Photo #9 - A hinged seat provides a handy tail compartment storage for billfold, sunglasses, and other items too bulky for the author's formerly svelte Hein Gericke street leathers.- *Marc Urbano*



Photo #10 - Dell'Orto pumper carbs give the R90S immediate, Ducati-like throttle response.

Marc Urbano



Photo #11 - Engine close-up. - Marc Urbano