

BMW R1200GS ON A DIET

Less 20kg. Plus Öhlins and carbon fibre

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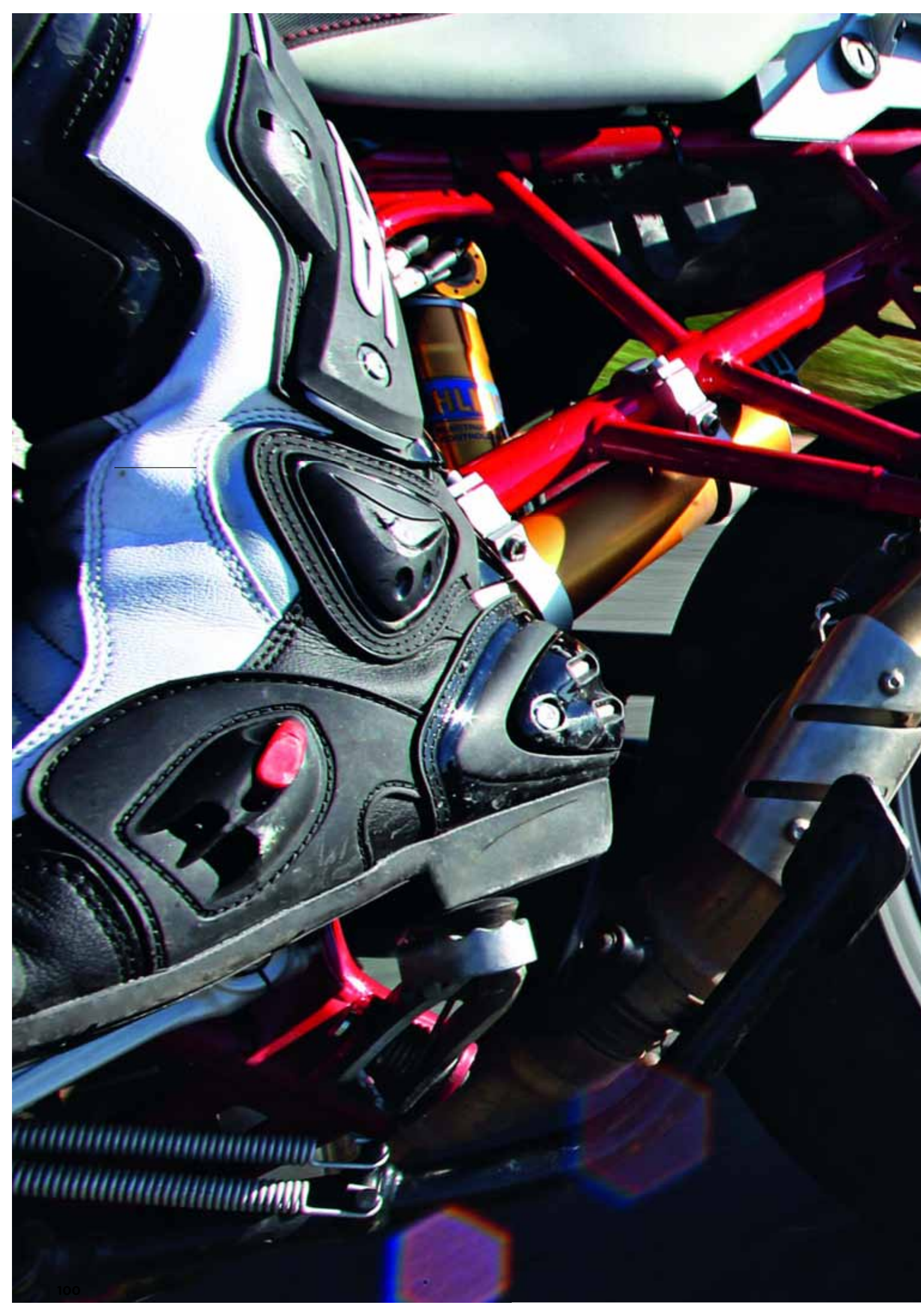
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Adventure. Sport?

Armed with six grand's worth of wheels and suspension upgrades Martin Fitz-Gibbons brings out the sporty side of his R1200GS Rallye

Photography Chippy Wood & Martin Fitz-Gibbons

Martin Fitz-Gibbons
BMW R1200GS Rallye



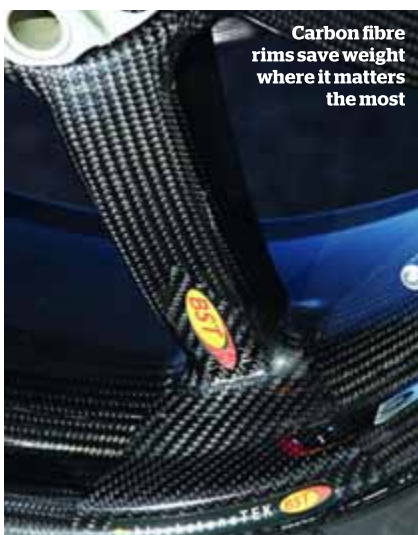
Price new £13,555
 Mileage 2731

Why I chose it To learn what it's like to live with Britain's most popular new bike, now in its last year with the air-cooled motor



WITH AN ALMOST infinite choice of aftermarket parts, there isn't much that BMW's R1200GS can't be transformed into. Tin boxes and taller screens turn it into a top two-up trans-continental tourer. Knobbly tyres and bash-guards have it happily battling across the deepest rivers and driest deserts worldwide. While heated surfaces and bolt-on floodlights deflect the deepest, darkest and murkiest of British winters. It's a complete all-rounder, ready to be turned into anything you want. It's two-wheeled Play-Doh.

Only I want mine with even more Play. We have all seen countless GSs built to ride all the way round the world, but BM's adventure bike has a fun, agile, sporty side that's often completely overlooked. But it's definitely there, and I want to build on that sportiness. In fact, I want to take it as far as I can, without compromising the bike's all-round intentions. And there are lots of bolt-on specialists that can help



Carbon fibre rims save weight where it matters the most



Damping varies with road speed



You have been warned: BMW's message to modders. Ignore it at your peril... apparently

So let's start big. The first dramatic change comes from a set of 17in BST carbon fibre wheels. They're unfeasibly light, saving kilos in a critical area. The theory goes that they'll take less power to spin faster, need less braking force to slow down, give the suspension less work and fight back with lower gyroscopic force when changing direction. It all sounds absolutely ideal for what I'm after

The wider rims (3.5in front, 6in rear) open up a range of stickier tyres, too. Dunlop Sportsmarts are a well-proven sports tyre, not only because of their incredible raw grip but also because they're stable, confident in the wet and durable too, which all helps retain the GS's multi-skilled character. Tyre sizes are matched to the wheels, with a 120/70 front and a massive 190/55 rear

Mark Brunt at Mobile Bike Tyres (www.mobile-bike-tyres.co.uk) eases the Dunlops onto the luscious carbon rims and swaps the bike's standard brake discs over. The

front wheel fits in place without an issue, but the rear presents a few issues. The spoked wheel's 53mm mounting bolts are too long; this BST rim needs the shorter 40mm bolts from a cast wheel, which means a trip to our local BMW dealer. After that it turns out that while the huge rear tyre clears the shaft drive, it catches on both the exhaust can and centrestand.

The latter is solved by removing it – well, Kawasaki's Versys 1000 doesn't have a centrestand, and the GS at least has shaft-drive – while the former is swapped for a slimmer, lighter but still legal Remus Hexacone titanium end-can. While I'm removing bits, off too comes the pillion seat and grab handles. I've never used them, I like the look of the GSs at Simon Pavey's Off-Road Skills school, which are run without them, and it's only a two-second job to click the seat back.

Time for a gentle test ride. Having both feet flat on the floor with the seat on the high setting shows the first difference swapping from a 19in-diameter front wheel to this 17in rim has dropped the front end by, well, about an inch. This radical geometry change, along with the wheel's own reduced inertia, makes the steering miles faster than standard. It now reacts with an irrepressible enthusiasm to even the mildest inputs. Some of the easy, gentle neutral original behaviour has been lost in favour of this far more frantic, involving



Russell Walton of Mick Gardner Racing installs one of the new Mechatronic dampers

THE BIKE

BMW R1200GS Rallye +
Dynamic package
£13,555

SMARTER DAMPING

Öhlins Mechatronics
electronic suspension
www.mickgardnerracing.com
£2745

LIGHTER AND LOUDER

Remus Hexacone titanium
exhaust. www.performanceparts-ltd.com £435

ADDED LIGHTNESS

BST carbon fibre wheels.
www.bikehps.com
£2848.33

STICKIER RUBBER

Dunlop Sportsmart tyres
(120/70 ZR17 and 190/55
ZR17) www.dunlop.eu
£259

TOTAL COST

£19,842.33

response, but that's sorta what I was after. There's no doubt it's sportier..

But I haven't finished. The final mod is to sportify the suspension too. Öhlins offer a smart electronic system for the GS called Mechatronics. It's similar to what comes on Ducati's Panigale S and Multistrada 1200 S but it is designed as a straight replacement for the GS's optional ESA units. The shocks used at both ends (no forks here) are Öhlins' top-of-the-range twin-tube TTX items – like the shock you'd get on, say, a Triumph 675R, or Speed Triple R – but can be adjusted at the push of a button.

It takes the guys at Mick Gardner Racing in Barnsley (www.mickgardnerracing.com, 01226 240099) a few hours to remove the original parts, mount the new Öhlins units and piggyback the wiring harness and ECU. It integrates with the GS's standard dash and ESA button, so from onboard it looks no different, with the same damping modes – Comfort, Normal and Sport – and the same choice of load settings – solo, luggage, pillion, off-road and so on.

The difference isn't quite as night-and-day dramatic as the change to carbon

'Out on the road it still feels like a GS, but there's a new-found hint of a mad glint in its wonky eyes

wheels, but the Öhlins does give a definite improvement in the quality of the ride. The standard suspension is really impressive, but the aftermarket Öhlins has a gloriously controlled, reeellaaxxed way of flowing through lumps and bumps, particularly on the change from compression to extension. An added feature is that the damping when it is set to Comfort mode, is now dependent on how fast you are going. So at low speed the suspension is at its gentlest and plushest, but when you get to 50mph the system firms up to suit the pace. And over 75mph it stiffens the damping again. How neat is that? I'll lay a whole fiver that BMW introduce something similar on a system next year

Bike's digital scales show I've shaved 10kg off the GS's all-up 242kg wet weight, which isn't bad going. The changes have also shifted the weight distribution from slightly rear-heavy (49.6/50.4) to slightly front-biased (50.7/49.3). On paper I've certainly made it sportier, yet none of the changes have affected its ability to do long distance; I have not made it any less comfortable, and the standard panniers still bolt on if I want. I can still ride to work in an open-face lid, while the heated grips, ABS and traction control are all still present and correct. It's still a convenient all-rounder, only now with a strict road focus and a stronger sporty side.

Out on the road it still feels like a GS, but there's a newfound hint of a mad glint in its wonky eyes. At steady speeds it simply steers with a milder touch, but begin wrestling it about and it now feels ready for a fight. Could be with you or the road; it's not bothered either way. Give the wide bars a big wrench and it falls into corners like it's been hit by a truck. And the transition from leaning left to right is so hilariously fast your brain can't believe it's happened.

Those sticky-out
cylinder heads were
just asking for it



Crucially, it also feels like something special, something unique, something rare and purposeful and premium, without being overtly shouty, arrogant or garish. It's my kind of GS special.

To celebrate, I trundle north for 90 wet minutes to Cadwell Park, for one of *Bike's* Reclaim Our Tracks road-bike-only trackdays. Clearly the GS isn't a track bike, which is perfect as these events are for everything but track bikes. They're a chance for any kind of regular road bike to be ridden as fast as you like in a controlled environment. A perfect testbed for what might well be Britain's sportiest R1200GS.

By mid-morning the track's miraculously dry. I tailor the GS for the job, which involves putting the Öhlins in 'Sports mode (more damping; more rear preload) dropping the pressure in the Sportsmarts and knocking the baffle out of the Remus can (still a track-friendly 95dB). Switch the ABS and traction control off (push one button three times) and we're all set.

My GS proves an absolute riot. It swallows up clear runs through the narrow blind flick-flack of Hall Bends with a ravenous glee, stops on its mix of sharp brakes and anti-dive Telelever, and fires sweetly from second through sixth gear on a wave of easy, gutsy, low-rev torque. With its baffle out, the Remus sounds gorgeous –



Final, conclusive
proof of six
grand well spent

'Surely a truly sporty Boxer can be leant over far enough to touch the heads down, right?'

deeper, like a microphone above a boiling vat of tar, but not in the slightest bit rude. That baffle's never ever going back in. And despite having dropped the front end by an inch, ground clearance only proves a slight issue on a couple of right-handers, with the footpeg and rear brake lever gently grazing the ground.

The GS's prominent, sticky-out cylinder heads leave Cadwell perfectly unmarked.

their resolutely intact finish silently teasing and taunting. Surely a truly sporty Boxer can be leant over far enough to touch the heads down, right? I've seen scrapes on the covers of an R1200S and an HP2 Sport, and I still want absolute proof that my creation is sufficiently sporty.

So I head to a disused roundabout one lazy summer afternoon. It's warm, it's dry it's the perfect location. And it's a damn sight harder than I ever thought it'd be. Fourth gear, steady throttle, round and round, round and round, gently does it..

Eventually my right toe touches. Pulling my foot tight into the frame frees the peg to chink. But the heads are still merrily floating through clean air and plentiful space. The only option is to suck in a deep breath and put my trust in the Dunlops. I take my foot off the peg, let it fold up on itself, and just go further. With a bac supermoto impression, I push the bike down and hang off the wrong side, foot out in impossible hope of saving a 230kg slide.

Then it happens. Above the *skirch* of a flapping peg comes a deeper, disconcerting *thunk* and the terrifying wobble of a front tyre that's momentarily moved. I stop to look, and it's there: my bike's badge of honour. Proof that I've made a genuinely sporty R1200GS. It's a pity the wheels and suspension are only on loan **Bike**