

GS Adventures

in Arizona



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#139270

All photos by Jonathan Beck
unless otherwise noted

*The author puts the
2008 1200GS Adventure
through its paces off road.*

While the “any ride is a good ride” axiom holds true for the most part, in the world of motorcycles there exists a range of descriptors for rides from “*epic*” to “*probably could have done without that one*” (this end of the spectrum usually involves hospital bills). April’s launch of the 2008 GS and GS Adventure models in Arizona landed squarely at the former end of the scale. Weaving through the picturesque hills surrounding Scottsdale were nearly 500 miles of roads and trails, strung together with the intent of putting BMW’s new line of enduro machines to the test. To be sure, there are some new twists for the GS line, so there was a lot to test.

Since its inception in 1980, the BMW GS line has been a mainstay of the adventure touring market—heck, these bikes arguably *created* the adventure-touring market. Other models have come and gone, each having various strong points that made them unique. The GS (“Gelande/Strasse,” German for “off-road/on-road”) line of bikes has doggedly retained its place at the forefront of this market through nearly three decades of evolution. The 2008 models show no signs of relinquishing this position to any contenders.

On day one of this event, I tested the GS 1200 standard model. Hands-down, this is a great choice for those requiring a “sub-nosebleed” seat height. The seat is nearly two inches lower on this bike than the Adventure model. At 33.5 inches, it probably wouldn’t be considered low, but most riders will find it easy to get at least a toe planted on both sides of the bike at stops, and dabs come quick and easy should you depart the pavement and the going gets rough.

Even before getting on the bike, several of the changes were evident. The 2008 version sports more of an “enduro” look. Immediately noticeable departures from the previous models are the metal tank covers, LED taillights, and new color schemes. Once you hop on and thumb the starter, the more significant differences surface.

Out on the highway, many refinements

that “GSers” have grown accustomed to were present. If a little morning chill sets in, then flip the heated grip switch. If wind buffeting is not quite what you’d like, then adjust the windscreen to your liking. The feel of this bike is noticeably different from previous years with the redesign of the seat and handlebar. The handlebar can also be mounted in two different positions by reversing the bar clamps. While the benefit of these ergonomic changes will vary depending on the rider, the

bike has not lost that characteristic “GS” feel. The most noticeable change was the power delivery of the 1200. The engine power has been increased by 5% along with useable RPM range. The gearbox has been altered with lower gear ratios and changes to the bearings to allow for smoother shifting. Translation: this thing feels fast and nimble. One really needs to pay careful attention to see what new benefit is coming from the motor versus the transmission, but in the end it’s the overall effect that’s apparent. This bike is just plain responsive.

The Electronic Suspension Adjustment (ESA) was perhaps the most significant addition to the 2008 GS line. This technology first appeared as an option on K bikes back in 2004, so it has been field tested for several years now. The GS adds a new twist to the technology by adapting it to the enduro realm. With 15 possible suspension modes available through the Enduro ESA system, it can seem a little confusing at first, but can easily be learned and adjusted on the trail. The entire system is controlled by thumbing a single button and interpreted by graphic icons on the display. Symbols represent various settings for preload and rebound adjustments. No longer do you think in terms of “so many clicks of rebound” and “x number of turns for preload.” Riding two up? Click through to the “two helmet” icon. Are you riding on mellow/typical terrain? Click through



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to the “small mountain” icon. What about when the going gets rough? Click to the “big mountain” icon.

If these settings are changed while at a stop the rider can actually feel the ground clearance of the bike change by nearly an inch as the suspension raises or lowers itself. While the system may be lacking the detailed adjustments the more refined dirt rider would be accustomed to (the computer now takes over your suspension adjustment), it is arguably the case that these bikes are simply not intended for *that* kind of riding—it's a GS, not an HP2.

Given the nature of the suspension adjustments on the previous models (few clicks of preload up front requiring the adjustment tool and a few turns of the knob in back) the new system was quite welcome. Instead of pulling out the tool or stopping to turn a knob, the rider simply presses the button while in transit. Isn't technology grand?

The first part of the morning ride was a relatively long stretch of highway that varied from straight to mildly twisty. Our leader for the day was not shy about keeping up the pace through the corners—neither was anyone else for that matter. The unusually wet weather throughout the Southwest over the past few months had left the hills in this area blanketed in a colorful tapestry of wildflowers. So there we were, some 15 or so like-minded riders winding through the kaleidoscopic hills with a chorus of Boxer engines serenading us the whole way. Thoughts of ESA, ABS, and whatever other acronyms I was sitting atop were simply absorbed and erased by the tapestry that nature had laid out for our group to ride through and absorb. To my thinking, that's the sign of a well-designed system. If it improves the handling of the bike and you can forget it's working, your focus is free to absorb the experience of the ride.

By mid-morning we crossed a bridge, took a right and left the pavement. This was the time to stop and deactivate the ABS (a procedure familiar to post-2002

GS owners). As the ESA system can be adjusted on the fly I opted to leave it in the same setting I had on the road at first to get some sort of baseline for comparison. This first stretch of road was so smooth and fast that it really didn't require any adjustments to the suspension and changes were not overly apparent. The stock tires on the 1200 seemed more than adequate for the terrain as well with a good feel on the pavement and predictable response on the graded dirt roads.

After another stint of highway riding following lunch, a small contingent of riders opted to peel off for an impromptu photo session in an off highway vehicle area that was passed along the way. This is where I got my first taste of the GS Adventure model. Switching with another rider once we reached the dirt, I climbed aboard the big beast.

As a current 1150 GS Adventure owner, the initial impression of hopping on the 2008 Adventure model was, oddly enough, this thing is *big!* The older 1150 GSA is a big machine to be sure, but the new one has a bigger *look* to it from the



seated position. That's as far as the comparison goes. Thumbing the starter and popping the clutch, the rider is immediately greeted with a vastly improved throttle response and the sheer increase in power is visceral—this thing wants to go! Current 1200 owners have experienced this to some degree in the reduced weight and new motor of the 1200s, but the 2008 bikes have blazed new ground by incorporating the HP2 sport gearbox, lowering the gear ratio and increasing power and redline threshold to the 8,000 rpm-realm.

All this translates to a bike that has a larger, more aggressive look than its predecessors yet feels more agile. The new seat also has two settings for height. While the "high" setting of the seat may be a bit excessive for many riders at just over 36 inches, I found it more comfortable in this position as it made for an easier transition between sitting and standing while off-

Bottom center: Brian Rathjen, publisher of Backroads magazine, never goes anywhere without his cute little stuffed ... camel.

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road. If you've got dreams of racing the Dakar (wherever that will be), you had better get used to tall seats!

Day two would be spent entirely on the big GS Adventure. This motorcycle truly comes from the "might makes right" school of design. Already considered by many to be the biggest, gnarliest-looking motorcycle in its class, BMW went for even more aggressive styling and *increased* the seat height! The new engine and transmission modifications, combined with the weight shaved off the older 1150 models, equals a power-to-weight ratio that renders the bike more maneuverable

on the trail. My initial impression was that this bike is more "flickable" than the older models, but that's perhaps a strange choice of words for a 500-plus pound motorcycle.

The suspension was as surefooted as ever, and the sheer increase in horsepower seemed to invite one to over-ride the bike when the terrain got ugly. It's possibly to go very, very fast off-road on these machines, but not necessarily wise to do so for all but the most experienced riders. Simply switching the ESA to the "big mountain" icon does not turn this machine into an HP2. This is truly a "go





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anywhere” machine, but not necessarily a “race anywhere” machine. In short, don’t try to rail whoops or jump big gaps and you’ll have a much more enjoyable experience.

The first sight on the morning of day two was a beautiful collection of adventure machines standing at attention, ready to take on the many miles of Arizona terrain ahead ... a beautiful sight. It was almost difficult to go to breakfast. The first part of the ride was all pavement, but quite enjoyable in that our group had skirted any sort of traffic snarl from the starting point. In short order, traded the suburb traffic signal jungle for blue skies shining down on country roads. Those country roads soon expired as the black-top yielded to dirt byways that wound their way through what seemed to be seldom-traveled towns hidden in among the hills. It was in this terrain that the GS seemed at home.

The higher seat begged the rider to get up on the pegs as the stock knobby tires bit into the unpaved earth, pushing man

and machine forward toward nothing in particular—this was adventure. The Mill Restaurant in Crown King was not normally open for business, but our group had arranged ahead of time to enjoy lunch in this unique location. While the restaurant itself was something to see, the larger experience was perhaps in the ride getting there—twisty back roads under the dramatic lighting of a sky threatening a downpour, but never delivering one.

Toward the end of the ride, another rider and I peeled off to film some video, take some photos and generally push the limits of the bike a bit. Climbing some relatively steep and loose inclines, traversing what appeared to be some discarded land

in a long-forgotten quarry and climbing a Jeep road composed of deep sand and rock stair steps provided an adequate arena to find the core competency of the 2008 GS bikes. My conclusion was that this addition to the GS line has not departed from its roots and fundamentally become any more of less of an off-road or on-road worthy bike; rather it has taken a proven design and improved on the *interface*. An improved motor, transmission and the addition of the ESA suspension control all serve to further highlight the qualities the GS series has developed over the years. Previous GS riders will appreciate the refinements; newcomers to adventure touring will never want to look back. ●

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PHOTO BY KEVIN WING



Jonathan takes the R1200GS down the highway for some testing on pavement.

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