

BMW R90/6

**RODE  
TEST**  
**4247**  
miles

and the R75/6

**RODE  
TEST**  
**4135**  
miles

# BEASTIES; BIG AND BIGGER

BY BOB AND PATTI CARPENTER



*On the trip to Mexico, Patti drank three vodka sours. One was clear with a maraschino cherry, one had a murky green tint to it and one was pink. Which proves two things: Mexican bartenders have absolutely no idea what a vodka sour is...but they are inventive! I only mention it because I remember the third one best – the pink one.*

*We were in San Blas – a small jungle town located about five hundred light-years from reality – sitting at a table in Torino's Restaurant. During the course of the day we had watched a man wash a pig, dodged three suicidal iguanas, ridden in a decrepit boat up a narrow channel through a mangrove swamp and hiked up a hill to an abandoned fort. We had just finished a dinner consisting of native dishes (the like of which have never been seen by anyone who works at Taco Bell) and were busy digesting same after having paid our respects to the alligators out back. The vodka sour, as you may have guessed, was being used as an aid to digestion. I was using a bottle of a substance called Tres Equis for the same purpose.*

*Facing us in a line remarkably reminiscent of a Pancho Villa firing squad stood a band of desperados armed with various musical instruments which they were trying to beat to death with their hands. They were accompanying this feat with enthusiastic karate yells of various pitches and intensities. The collective name of these dissimilar vocalizations of pain was something called "Malaguena Santa Rosa", which eventually became something else called "La Golondrina" without any discernible alteration of the decibel rating.*

*"Hey!" I shouted at her over the din.*

*"Hey!" she hollered back.*

*"What are we doing here?" I yelled.*

*"What?"*

*"I said: 'What. Are. We. Doing. Here?'"*

*She took a sip of the strange pink concoction in the old fashioned Coca Cola glass and grinned. "What else?" she yelled at me. "We're testing Bee Em Double-yous!"*

*All of which says a lot of things – most of which we won't go into. But if nothing else it should serve to introduce the dual report on the BMW R90/6 and the BMW R75/6 which follows. Let's get on with it. Ladies first.*

**PATTI:** There are two things I think you should know in advance. First: Bob has been trying to get me on a BMW for two years now. Second: I haven't been in what you would call a great hurry to go along with the idea. It's not that I don't like BMWs; I just have never had any burning desire to try one on. On the other hand, offer me a trip to Mexico and I'll ride anything...almost.

So my part of the report will be from the viewpoint of a new (and slightly skeptical) BMW rider, trying to discover what all the fuss has been about in our household ever since he brought home his own "Blue Beastie".

**BOB:** I'll make no apologies for my regard for the Bee Em. It's ugly and it has as many faults as anything else around. But I believe that for my personal use factors it's the best bike currently available for solo touring. That's an opinion – nothing more.

My part of the report therefore will be concerned with the changes (good and bad) which have been wrought in the pursuit of slash-sixness.

**PATTI:** Frankly I wasn't awestruck when I was introduced to the BMW I was to ride to Mexico. I've seen blue BMWs before – there's one in the garage just like it. All I know is that three times out of four I manage to stall a new machine when I first

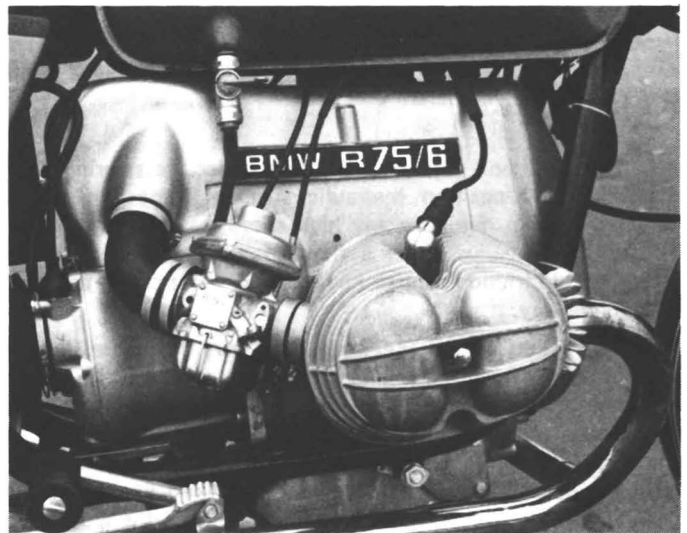
September, 1974

get on it. This time wasn't an exception. I couldn't get out of Butler and Smith's Compton, California parking lot without getting a helping hand on the shifting technique. It was very embarrassing.

Once on the freeway home though, things became familiar very quickly. Gear shifting and clutch action were easily mastered, although the operation seemed quite a bit harsher than I'm used to. The instruments were as good as anything on the market and the bike obviously had plenty of oomph. We sailed along home without any problems.

As part of the pre-ride speech making he felt necessary to get me into a receptive mood, Bob made a considerable fuss over the cylinders sticking out to the side. He kept saying things like: "You'll get used to them...they aren't as cumbersome as they look...just twist your foot like this and slip it in underneath the cylinder and..." As it turned out he needn't have bothered. The cylinder position was quite acceptable. I failed to see any problem. Both brake and shift lever were easy to reach in a riding position.

The only difficulty noticed was that the inside of my knee would bump the carburetors whenever the bike was stopped and my feet were down. In Mazatlan (long after I had developed a beautiful bruise) BMW-riding friend Skip Hetrick showed me how to tilt the carbs inward slightly. Presto, no more bruise. (All I want to know is how come the BMW wizard in the family didn't know about this one?) Anyhow, for those of you who are concerned, the opposing cylinders aren't any real problem at all as far as foot position is concerned.



**BOB:** The foot position is improved on the slash six models; however the only measurable alteration is the straightened, shortened shift and brake levers. As to the business about tilting the carbs I refuse to answer on the grounds that it may tend to incriminate me.

Appearance-wise the 900/6 looks exactly the same as the 750/6. Actually there is more difference between the R90/6 and the sport model, the R90/S, than there is between the 750 and the 900. Weight, exterior dimensions, wheelbase, saddle height, electrics, brakes, carburetors, crank, fuel tank capacity, compression ratio, transmission and chassis and nearly everything else are identical. The only items of difference are the final drive ratio (the 90/6 is 3.09:1; the 75/6 reads out at 3.20:1) and the bore dimension (90 mm in the 900; 82 mm in the 750). Everything else is strictly carbon copy as far as the drawing board

is concerned. There is a considerable performance difference, of course. The 900 develops a claimed 67.5 horses while the 750 "only" puts out 57.0.

So the big changes are in the overall 1974 model itself. In point of fact the slash six is quite a bit different from the slash model it supercedes. There is a new instrument package which features something the BMW owners have been screaming about ever since it was discontinued some years ago. A resettable trip-meter. The old plug-in ignition key monstrosity has finally been replaced with a real key which fits a real keyhole housed in the mounting bolt of the headlight nacelle. The headlight is a quartz halogen gem, replacing the infamous "yellow glow" of years past.



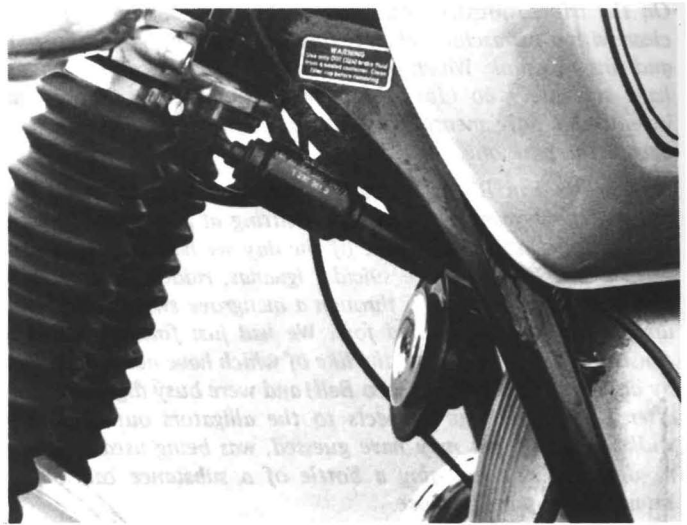
*Completely redesigned instrument panel features warning lights and a resettable trip-meter.*

The five-speed box is new — and just under the steering head there's a three-position hydraulic steering damper which is designed to help minimize any high speed instability problems. The damper is adjusted by a three-position, click-stop handle where the old friction damper knob used to be. It can be adjusted while underway.

First impression of the 900's ride was very favorable. It was obvious right from mile one that there was enough power available for two bikes. At legal freeway speeds of 55 mph on the way home the 90/6 was literally just doggin' along. But the engine pulled the caterpillar pace with ease in fifth gear, never missing a lick. Quiet, smooth, stable — just like I like it. On the basis of the ride home I would have bought one on the spot.

So we went to Mexico and we "got to know" the BMWs. As far as the bikes themselves were concerned, it was quite an ordeal. The bumpy, cobblestone roads and the terrible gas provided the two machines with some of the toughest Rode Test conditions that could be encountered without deliberately trying to torture a pair of bikes. Both Bee Ems met the challenge with all the *chutzpah* the marque is noted for.

**PATTI:** What he means to say is that we went to Mexico *after* the R75 and I played football in the ice plant. We were all packed up and ready to leave. The BMW was parked in the regular launching spot next to the curb — but a little closer than usual. Close enough so that I had to climb on from the off-side. I no more than swung my leg over when that *blankety blank* kickstand popped up, caught in the sole of my boot and over we went into the flowers. The worst part was *he* didn't even help. He just stood there swearing at me and laughing.



*The new hydraulic steering damper may help correct high speed instabilities but is ineffectual at cancelling low-speed resonant problems when the BMW is loaded for touring.*

**BOB:** I did *not* swear at her. My exact words were: "That's a hell of a way to start a trip!" In view of the circumstances I thought that was pretty mild. Four thousand miles ahead of us and she jumps into the bushes and pulls the bike in after her. One inch from the curb, yet! I christened her bike "Inch-worm" on the spot. She's just mad because I laughed. I still think it's funny.

**PATTI:** I refuse to honor that with any further comment. But the incident did convince me that the automatic sidestand is really a skeleton in the BMW closet. It is impossible. It flips up automatically whenever you remove the weight of the bike. When I asked why anyone would do that, I was told that it would prevent anyone from forgetting to put the kickstand up, then catching it on a left turn, thereby dumping everything. My answer to that is "Hummph!" I'd be willing to bet that more bikes and riders have hit the ground because of the automatic stand than have ever gone down in a left corner because of a non-automatic one.

First of all the only way you can get the stand down is to catch it with the tip of your toe, lean to the right so that the machine is balanced by your right leg, then swing the stand out until your left leg is completely extended. By this time you're hopelessly out of balance — but you have to stay that way because if you pull your foot back the darn stand will snap back up. So you bite your lip and just let everything topple over to the left. Once the stand is down and the bike is parked, the slightest movement of the bike will pop the stand up, especially if the ground you're parked on is a bit uneven. Touring riders have a saying: "Never park on the left side of a BMW." Many BMW riders fix the spring so that it won't permit the stand to flip up. I think they're on the right track.

As a new BMW rider I tried not to let anything I'd heard influence me when it came time to criticize the 750/6. The one exception was the seating arrangements. Bob has been crabbing about the seat since the day he bought his bike. Now I know why. It's the most uncomfortable thing I've ever had to ride on. I'm not sure why — it just is. The shape doesn't seem too bad, but when you

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*The ruins at Ixtlan del Rio are rumored to be under continuing restoration by Indians in the vicinity who cling to the old beliefs and work on the walls at night.*

sit on it for any length of time it sort of sags down at the edges and leaves you riding on the spine of the saddle. The foam in the middle is too soft also; you sink through after a bit and end up riding on the metal support underneath. When I told other BMW riders that the seat was uncomfortable, they would just laugh — like I'd discovered a family secret or something.

But the uncomfortable saddle and the silly kickstand were only minor complaints compared to the difficulty I had maneuvering the machine at anything under cruising speed. I'll confess. I simply could not ride, steer, push, shove or control the BMW efficiently at slow speed or when it was parked. I'll also admit that most of this was my own lack of skill. Bob has never complained — and I've watched some excellent low-speed riding during field meets at a few BMW rallies. Nevertheless I have never ridden anything that was quite so ungainly for me to operate. Unfortunately I have to report that this failure to communicate got worse and worse as time went on, and finally I reached a point of mental funk that I don't even want to talk about.

My ego was given a boost later, however, when I noticed that my insecure foot-paddling and shakey handlebar fiddling wasn't so rare after all. Several honest riders, especially those who are somewhat short in the leg department, have mentioned similar problems, especially when the bike is loaded for traveling. Let's put it this way. I won't say that the low-speed handling qualities of the BMW are bad — that wouldn't be quite true. But the bike certainly does not breed confidence in any degree.

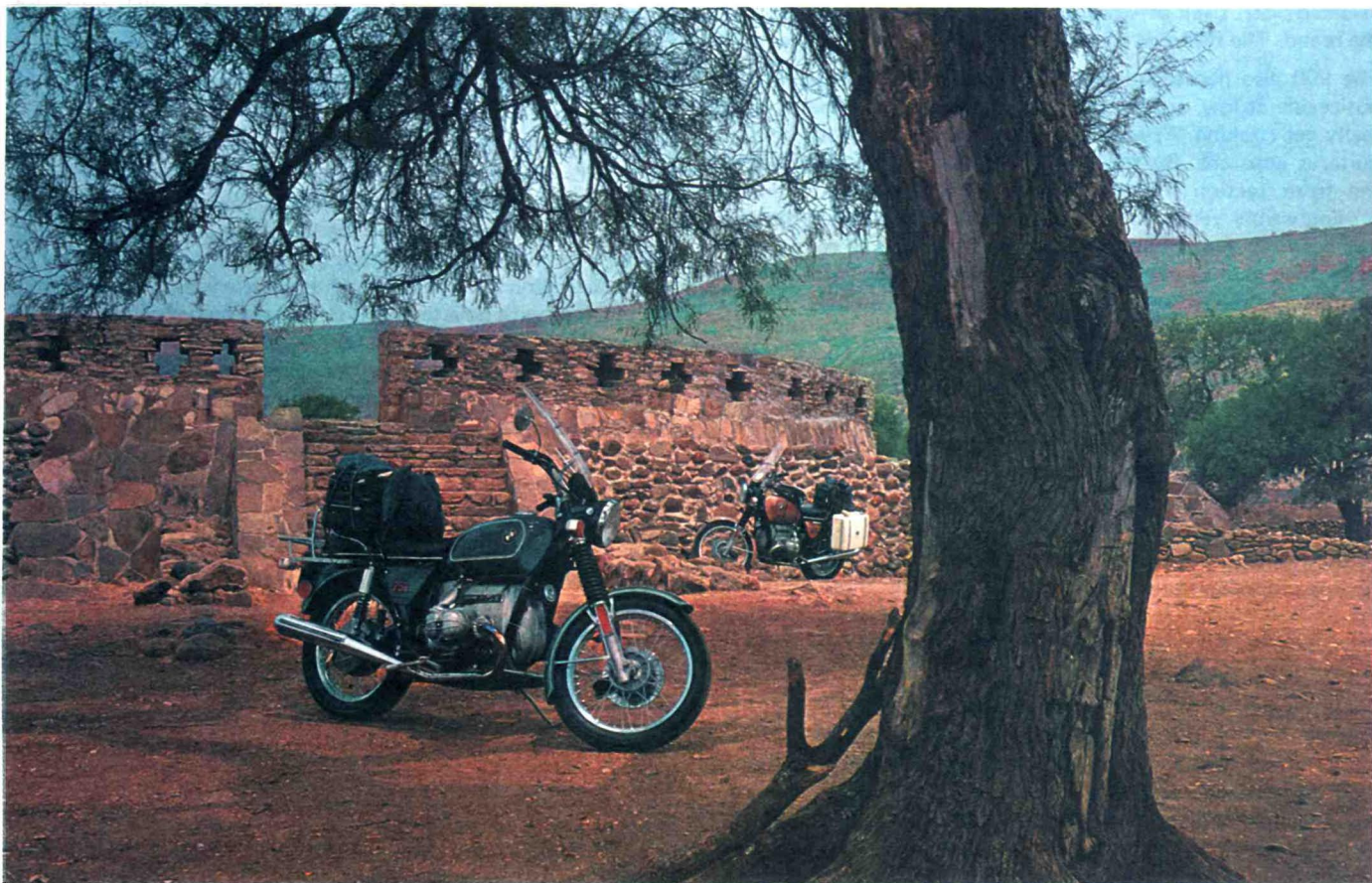
**BOB:** While I disagree in principle with Patti's hassle at slower operating speeds. I must admit the BMW is definitely very sensitive to certain loading conditions. To start with the fore/aft weight distribution is just perfect for stripped down, solo riding — hunched over Euro-style and running sans accessories. Let's face it, that's what it was designed to do best. But with a full

touring kit and some weighty baggage hanging out behind the rear axle (the only place you can hang it on the BMW) some disproportionate front-end wibbles will show up.

It is when riders dress the BMW for touring that the sports heritage of the machine becomes most pronounced. Both the slash-five and slash-six models are very susceptible to low speed (35 to 45 mph) resonant oscillation when loaded. In practice it should present no problem as long as the operator keeps his hands on the wheel. Most serious touring types, particularly the two-uppers, recognize the compromise factor here and have found joy by adding a reasonably heavy fairing on the front, thereby partially re-distributing the load. The damper, by the way, didn't seem to have any effect on this phenomenon which was shared equally by the 750 and the 900.

While the slash-six models definitely represent a significant improvement over their earlier brothers, the 90/6 revealed a partially related trio of unexpected idiosyncracies which were very disappointing to a self-confessed lover of the marque. It used oil, it vibrated and it ran extremely hot throughout the test. None of these items can be chalked up to bad gas or tropical heat since the R75/6 running right along beside it didn't use a drop of oil, ran consistently smoother and cooler than its bigger brother.

There were three BMW 900s on the Mexico tour. All three of them consumed oil — somewhere between one-third and one-half quart per thousand miles. Although this doesn't represent anything that any of the mechanics we talked to later seemed concerned about as far as potential difficulties are concerned (the last BMW that had this performance-oriented habit was the R69/S), it does constitute a nuisance factor that doesn't mesh with the asking price of the machine.





*Patti (on opposite side of R75/6) demonstrates the return function of the sidestand.*



*The disc brake features a low-profile caliper housing and out-of-sight, out-of-mind hydraulic reservoir.*

The vibration level of the 90/6 came as a bit of a surprise. I was perfectly happy with things until I jumped on the 750 one afternoon in Guadalajara. It was a shocker. The 750 was quite a bit smoother. Thereafter I jumped back and forth several times just for comparison's sake and the situation repeated itself every time. We've tried it on other machines since with the same results. In Mazatlan the 900 and the 750 were tuned at the same time by the same tuner. When he pronounced things "just right", we placed objects (empty beer cans if you must know) on the seats. In front of God and everybody the 750's can just sit there while the throttle was opened. The can on the 900 promptly "walked" off. Lack of vibration has been a traditional feature of the brand. The R90/6 is a break with tradition in this respect.

The 900 also had a bad case of heat rash. This was particularly noticeable at low, around-town speeds when the cylinders would really get cooking. At road speeds in optimum air flow, it wasn't quite as apparent. By the time the bike was returned however, the front section of the mufflers were beginning to discolor turning visibly yellow-brown. Apparently the needles in the carbs had been set one notch leaner, perhaps in hopes of coaxing a bit more mpg out of the machine. In combination with the hot weather and the wretched gas it wasn't too swell an idea.

**PATTI:** I got a glimmer of what makes the BMW owners feel so darn superior once the bike and I found some open road under us. At touring speeds the bike is very solid feeling, very secure. There were no problems with rain grooves or unevenly surfaced roads (including some scary cobblestone goat paths and a short stretch over Baja's old dirt road). To tell the truth, as long as I kept up a head of steam the BMW handled the rough dirt roads, detours and cobblestones as well as anything could. On the curving mountain roads it was even better. Under these conditions the BMW is an absolute pleasure to ride. I certainly don't pretend to be a racer, but at reasonable pace the bike felt very, very good in the turns.

The driveshaft is worth every bit of praise the BMW owners have been showering on it all these years. It's hard to imagine just how much messing around you do with a chain until all of a sudden there isn't one to mess with. No rattling chain noise, no messy oiling sessions, no spatters on the back of your luggage or coating on the rear wheel. I must admit that of all the good things there are about the BMW, this one is my favorite.

Unlike the 900 the 750 ran acceptably smooth throughout the whole trip. I don't believe it's quite as vibrationless as some other bikes I've ridden, but it does run along with a slightly rumble sort of smoothness which isn't at all like the high rpm buzzing I'm used to. It certainly is not bothersome, and no noticeable fatigue results. What little vibration you can feel is very easy to live with.

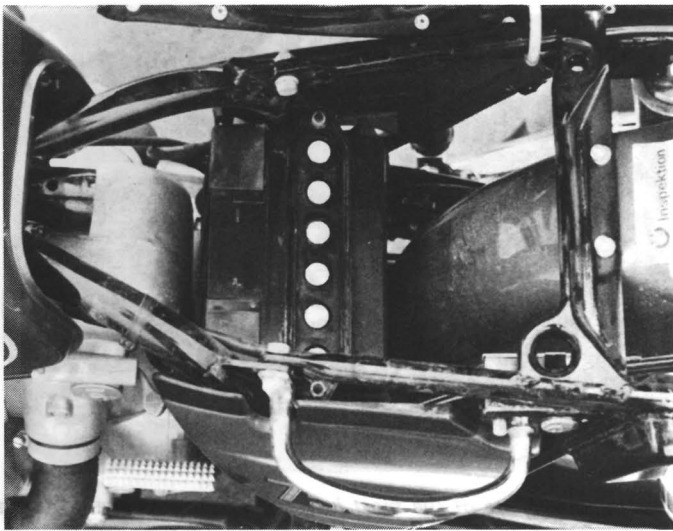
The bike is wonderfully quiet and this is another of my favorite things. Except for some clicking valve noise which developed after a thousand miles or so (everybody says this is typical), the bike was a pleasure not-to-have-to listen to. As a final note, the switches are shaped unusually — sort of like vacuum cleaner levers — but they are as handy as anything from Japan. My thumbs learned quickly and didn't have any trouble pushing things around at all.

**BOB:** I knew she'd like the handling qualities of the beastie. On the Devil's Backbone (a horizontal roller-coaster down Mexico way) I unscrewed my head and played road racer for a couple hours. The process filed down the kickstand and the brake pedal, filled my head with unwarranted grandeur and got me tattled on to the tour director. It was worth it. In stock configuration right out the door with no alterations to suspension or frame, the BMW will hold its own with just about anything on the road — excepting the new breed of production cafe-customs perhaps. If you really get strange the suspension starts golly-woggling just like any other out-the-door street machine. But anybody who intends to ride *any* machine that hard should seriously consider some suspension modifications. For most touring applications the BMW's handling is superior.

The most interesting aspects of the new slash-sixes are the new model changes. Best of all is the work that has been done in the electrics. In addition to the fine quartz halogen headlight which brings the BMW lighting up to snuff, the new models feature enough wattage to drive the darn thing. The alternator has been upped to 280 watt capacity and the new, larger battery is a full 25 amp-hour box. The combination should be more than adequate to drive extra lights. It's nice to know that an additional stop-light won't poop the battery in a few months.

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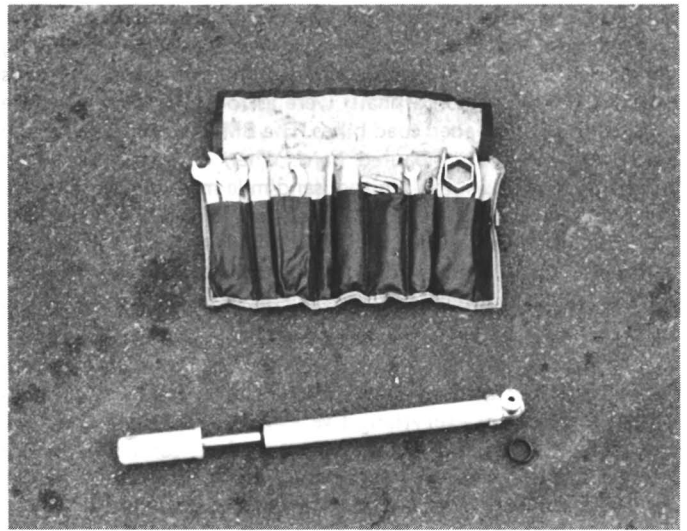
*"Peas in a pod"; "The Bobsey Twins" — no matter how you say it, all BMW slash sixes look alike.*



*The big, healthy 25 amp-hour battery is a welcome change.*

There are some other nice new things: The separate instrument package catches BMW up to the state of the art and the trip-meter is nice to have back. The heavy duty alternator and the points have been given the benefit of extra cooling by the simple expedient of cutting some louvers in the front cover. The exhaust system has been redesigned in a conservative sort of way that look more attractive than the humpbacked mufflers of yore.

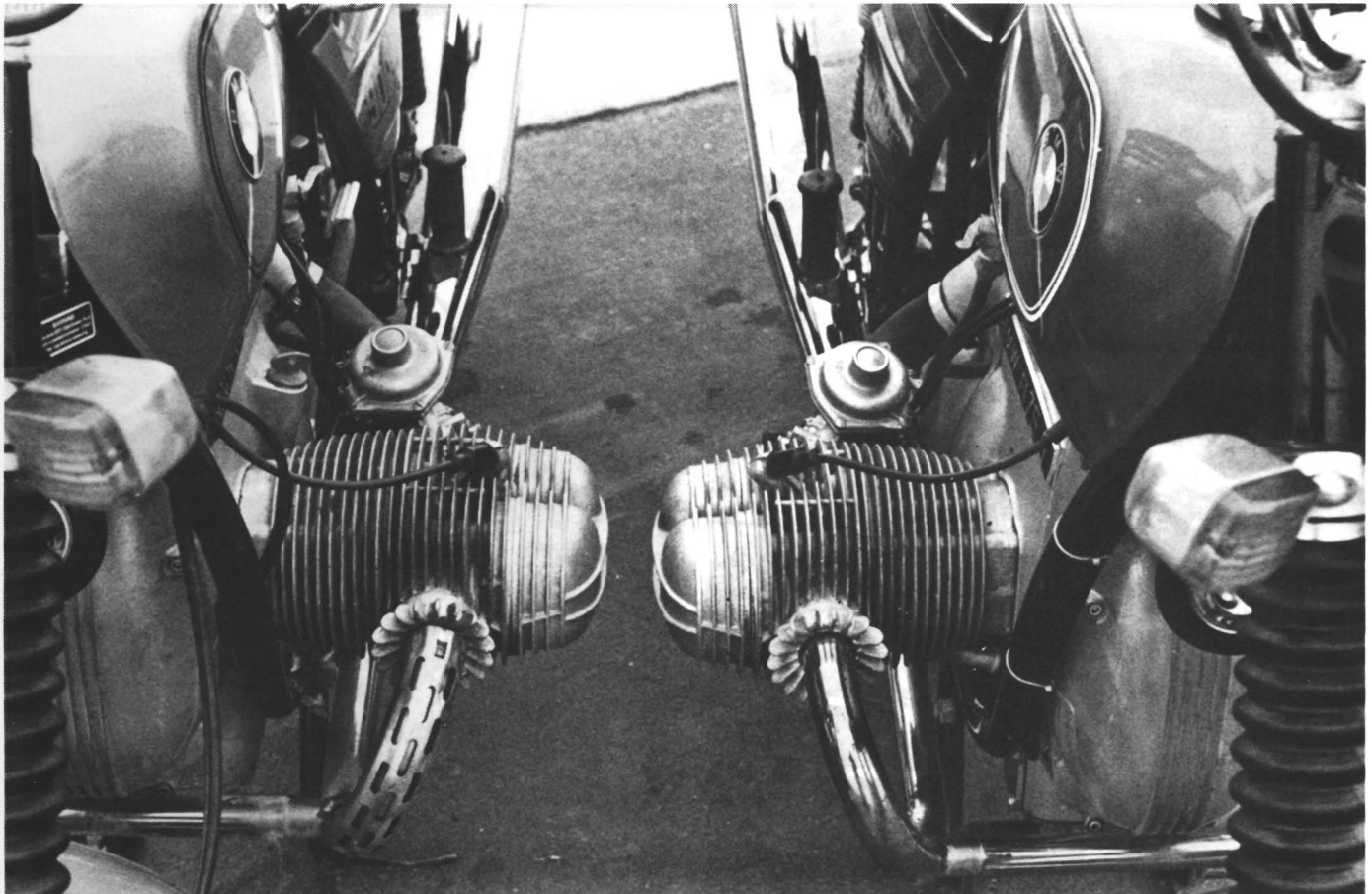
The brakes are now contemporary — drum rear, disc front. The discs are so much of an improvement that they almost go without



*The BMW comes with the most complete and useful tool kit of any motorcycle on the market. The same cannot be said of the very fragile tire pump. Don't depend on it to do the job out in the wilderness.*

talking about. The hydraulic reservoir is hidden under the tank. In all, a welcome improvement. Although there were initially some factory-type problems with the five-speed box, they have apparently been corrected. Both bikes shifted fairly easily with slightly less clunk than last year.

For the most part, however, the BMW's good points are the same as they always have been. Patti has already mentioned the shaft



drive and the quiet, smooth running engine — but it wouldn't do to forget the well-deserved reputation for reliability. The riding conditions in Mexico (particularly on the numerous side-tours we took off the beaten asphalt) were as rough as anything we've ever tackled with loaded road bikes. The BMWs took everything in stride and never even panted hard. When it was returned, the R90/6 was well over the ten thousand mile mark and showing no signs of engine stress. Most BMW owners harbor the firm belief that, all things considered, the BMW yields to no other bike on the road in terms of longevity. I'm one of them.

**PATTI:** The best way I can sum up is simply to say that although the BMW and I didn't always agree with one another about who was doing what, I *did* get some insight into BMW owner enthusiasm. The smooth quiet ride, the drive shaft and the reliability features are everything I've ever been lectured about by my husband, or heard about from friends. I can't say it's my all-time favorite machine — that wouldn't be truthful. But I *can* say that I think I understand why owners like it so much.

One thing is for sure. Even though the new BMWs carry a pretty high price tag (name something that doesn't), it is a quality purchase. Not only for services rendered, but when it comes time to trade it in or re-sell it. With the economy the way it is these days that *has* to mean something.

**BOB:** There is no question that the slash-six BMWs represent a considerable improvement over the slash-five models. In their



*Guanajuato is one of the most interesting towns in the northern states of Mexico.*

usual stolid manner, the BMW people have changed a number of items which needed changing in order to "stay up". As a consequence the BMW/6 for 1974 remains among the top street machines being utilized for touring purposes.

Recent years have seen a dramatic closing of the gap in the touring market. For the mid-displacement tourers, the BMW is no longer the only game in town...and the competition is getting tougher all the time. Nevertheless from a personal viewpoint (minor disgruntlements notwithstanding) in this year of our Lord Nineteen and Seventy-four, the "Blue Beastie" is still the first machine I would pull out of the rack if it came to a long distance, long-term reliability showdown.

[RR]

