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BMW's Very Special K

Early Ks were shunned by boxer purists like Amish with iPods. Only later were they accepted as exceptional, utterly reliable machines

by Ed Milich

When the BMW K75 and K100 made their U.S. debut for the 1985 model year, BMW motorcycle loyalists hailed the bikes as a sign of the apocalypse.

Unlike their pushrod, 2-valve, air-cooled boxer twins, BMW's K-bikes, (aka "Flying Bricks") featured 3- or 4-cylinder, DOHC, water-cooled motors. The machine still utilized the automotive-style dry clutch and shaft final drive found in boxers. Fit, function, and finish also remained impeccably Bavarian.

But BMW seemed to abandon building "motorcycles for the proletariat" for a more "corporate" image. Where the boxer's design seemed to encourage owner tune-ups, adjustments, and overhauls, the K-bikes were almost unapproachable.

The K75/K100 owner's manual even glossed over such details as ignition adjustment and FI system tuning, indicating that the owner should (gasp) take the machine to a BMW dealer for service. Early Ks were immediately shunned by boxer purists like Amish with iPods. Only later did they learn that the bikes were utterly reliable.

Longevity through virtue of overbuilding

Perfect K-bike owner:
Still has his first Swiss Army knife

Rating (★★★★★ is best):
Fun to ride: ★★★
Ease of maintenance: ★★★★
Appreciation potential: ★★★
Attention getter: ★★

Years produced: 1982–90 (K100), 1985–96 (K75)
Number produced: 13,000 (K100), 18,500 (K75) world production
Original list price:$5,990 (K100), $4,700 (K75)
SCM Valuation: $500–$4,000
Tune-up cost: Under $100 DIY
Engine: 987 cc 4-cyl (K100), 740 cc 3-cyl (K75)
Transmission: 5-speed
Weight: 526 lb fueled (K100), 500 lb fueled (K75)
Frame #: Right side, beneath coolant reservoir
Engine #: Right side, aft of oil inspection window
Colors: Metallic colors of red, blue, black, gray, silver
Clubs:BMW Motorcycle Owners of America, BMW Rider's Association
More: www.bmbikes.co.uk, www.bmwmoa.org , www.bmwra.org
SCM Investment Grade: C

The K75 and K100 engines featured a long-stroke, water-cooled engine (67-mm bore x 70-mm stroke), modified hemispherical combustion chamber with two valves per cylinder, and dual overhead chain-driven cams. K100s were 987 cc (90 hp, 63 ft-lb claimed), while the smaller K75s were 740 cc (75 hp, 50 ft-lb claimed). The K75s also featured a rotating counterbalancer, which made them preferred to the "buzzy" K100s.

Valve actuation is a bucket and shim arrangement, and valve clearances are extremely stable. After a break-in service, K-bike valves went tens of thousand of miles before any adjustment. Cylinder bores were Nikasil-coated aluminum for tight clearances and long life. A dry clutch connected the engine to the 5-speed transmission.

The machine, like previous BMWs, achieved its unsurpassed longevity though overbuilding. The K100, while porky at 526 lb fueled (500 lb for the fueled K75), handled well. Both the K100 and K75 also had abundant torque.

The Ks featured forward-thinking components, including a monoshock single-sided aluminum swingarm, steel frame with a fully stressed engine member, aluminum tank, stainless exhaust system, and open-loop fuel injection. Later K's were among the first to use antilock brakes. The K-bike side stand self-retracted as the clutch lever was pulled in.

K-bike locking plastic hard bags could accommodate a helmet and a week's clothes and were easily removable. With the combination of mild sporting posture, low maintenance, excellent luggage, and several front windscreen options, Ks were among the best sport tourers of their time. The same K100 engine powered "naked," RS, and RT variants of the bike.

K engines surpass life of boxers

The RS had a low sport fairing that created an effective pocket of still air around the rider, while the K100RT featured a large touring fairing.

The K100RT later evolved into the K100LT designation (colloquially known as "Light Truck"), with an all-encompassing fairing, integral radio, and other comforts. K75s came in a "naked" variant, a café-faired K75C, and also the desirable sporting K75S.

The K-bike's engine is bulletproof, tougher than even the legendary boxers. I've seen Ks with 200,000–300,000 miles. The only real maintenance is tires, oil, and other fluids. BMW motorcycle salvage yards have multiple K100 and K75 motors—because no one needs them.

If there's one weak link to the early Ks, it is the splined transmission input shaft. The shallow splines can wear through, necessitating a transmission teardown. As with the boxers, the bike should be partially disassembled every 20,000–30,000 miles, the tranny pulled back, and the splines lightly greased.

One other feature that the K's engine designers failed to consider is legendary; once a K engine is parked on its side stand, oil pools in the combustion chambers. This results in a significant smoke cloud the next time the bike is started....

So well-engineered they were boring

Other issues were to be annoying. The rear master cylinder reservoirs cracked. Both the dashboard speedometer and its electronic pickup occasionally fail. The center stand was also known to fail, inevitably causing a tip-over. The worst criticism of the K-bikes, though, was shared with many well-engineered Nipponese 4-cylinder bikes: They were so well-engineered they were boring.

Eventually, the K100 was expanded to 1,100 cc and gained the 4-valve heads that debuted on the flagship BMW K1. The K75 engine remained largely unchanged through its production. Ks eventually reached 1,200 cc, and the K motor still powers the K1200LT.

Early K100s and K75s typically range in price from $500–$4,000, with K75s and especially K75Ss commanding high prices. A brief inspection of a K, its service history, and spline lube details can judge a bike purchase. A relatively low-mile (under 30,000) K100 recently sold on eBay for $4,300.

The BMW K100 and K75 are now approaching 25 years of age. Legions still abound, much like the boxers. Perhaps the legacy of BMW's K-bikes is not so different after all. ♦