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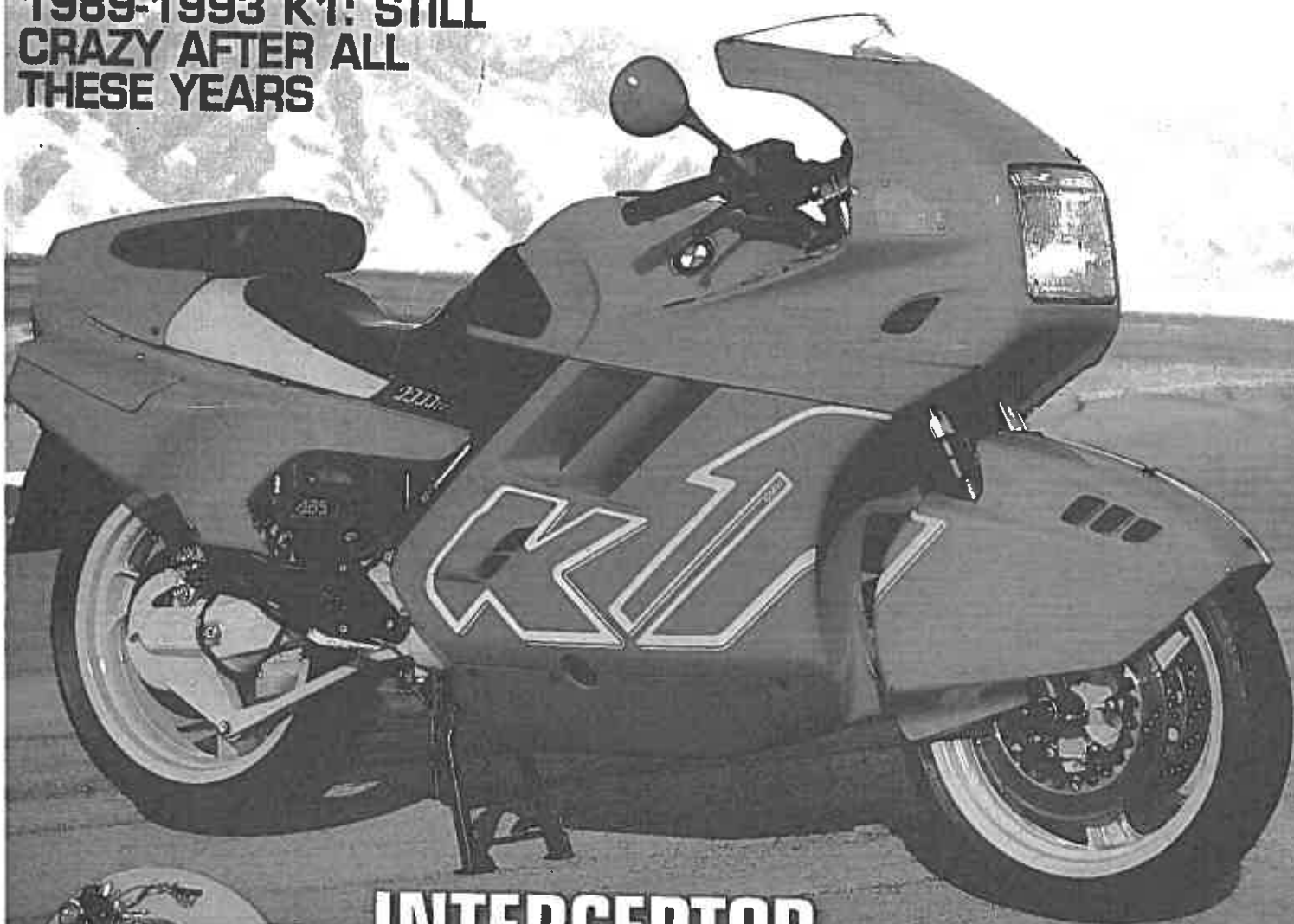
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CLASSICS

March/April 2016

BMW'S FIRST SUPERBIKE

1989-1993 K1: STILL
CRAZY AFTER ALL
THESE YEARS



INTERCEPTOR

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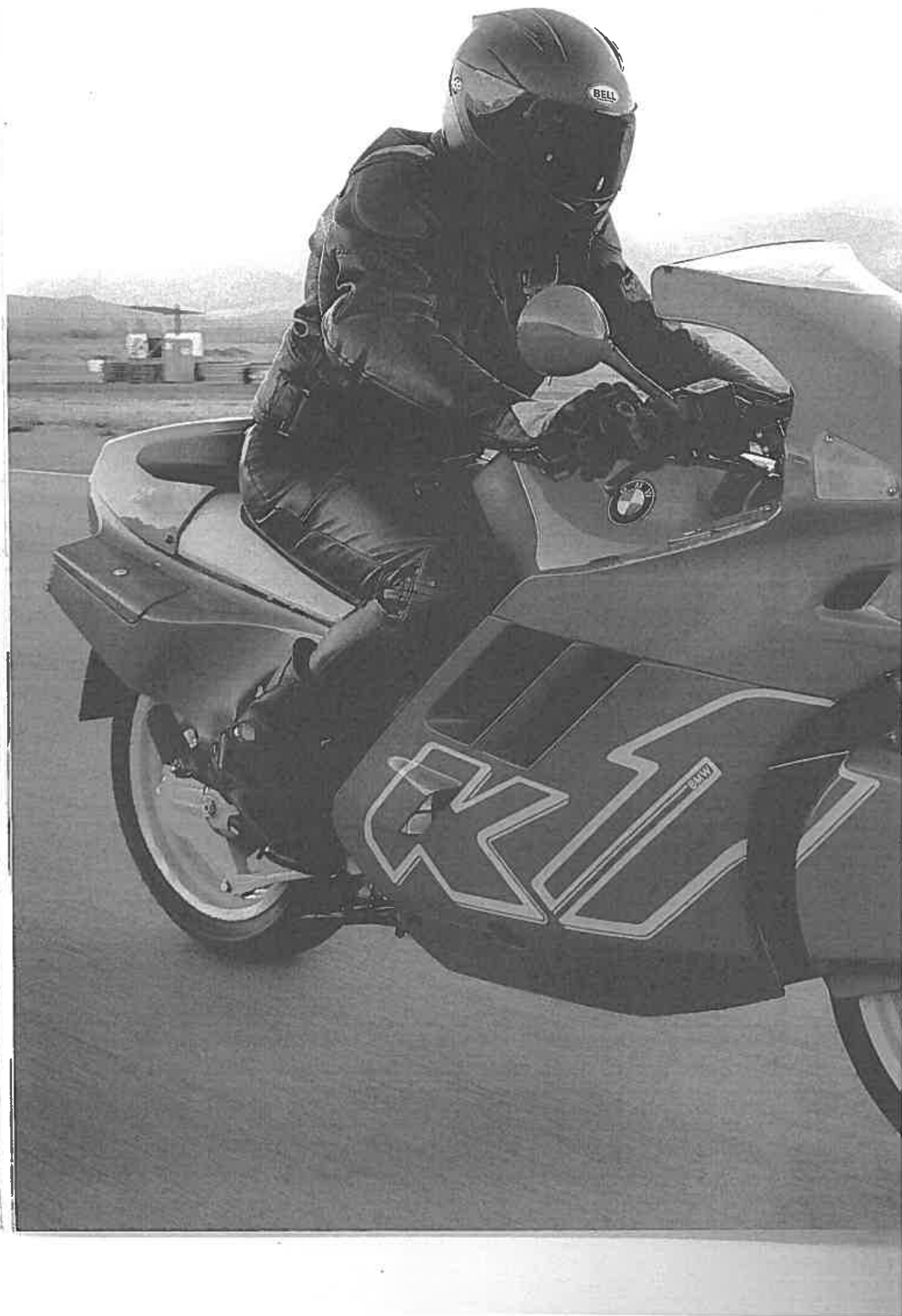
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BAHN BURNER

1990 BMW K1

Story by Greg Williams

Photos by Stephen Clark

At the end of the 1980s, the high-horsepower superbike category belonged to the Japanese motorcycle makers. But Germany's BMW was about to unleash — in the words of Monty Python — something completely different.

Based on BMW's 4-cylinder K100, a touring-oriented model first introduced in 1984, the new for 1989 K1 was a sporting performance machine without a hint of touring pretensions. According to motorcycle historian Ian Falloon in *The Complete Book of BMW Motorcycles*, in the late 1980s BMW took a look at the available Japanese superbikes with their firecracker performance and taut handling. Tops in horsepower and agility, all of these Japanese rockets featured chain final drive.

"BMW decided the time was ripe for a shaft drive Superbike," Falloon writes, "one considerably more performance focused than the K100. When it was first displayed at the Cologne Show at the end of 1988, the K1 shattered the perception of BMW producing only conservatively styled touring and sport touring motorcycles." Of the resulting K1 fitting into the established superbike category, a March 1990 *Cycle* report said BMW had gone its own way, just as BMW always had.

A lifelong rider

Rick Pellegrino of Salt Lake City, Utah, is a serious motorcycle enthusiast and the owner of the 1990 BMW K1 gracing these pages. Like BMW, Rick is just as likely to go his own way, too. Owner of several different machines, Rick likes to ride his 1964 Harley-Davidson Panhead on Saturday and then his 2004 Ducati ST4S on Sunday. "I won't be able to tell you which one I enjoyed more," Rick says. At the start of our conversation, the Ducati was idling in the driveway.

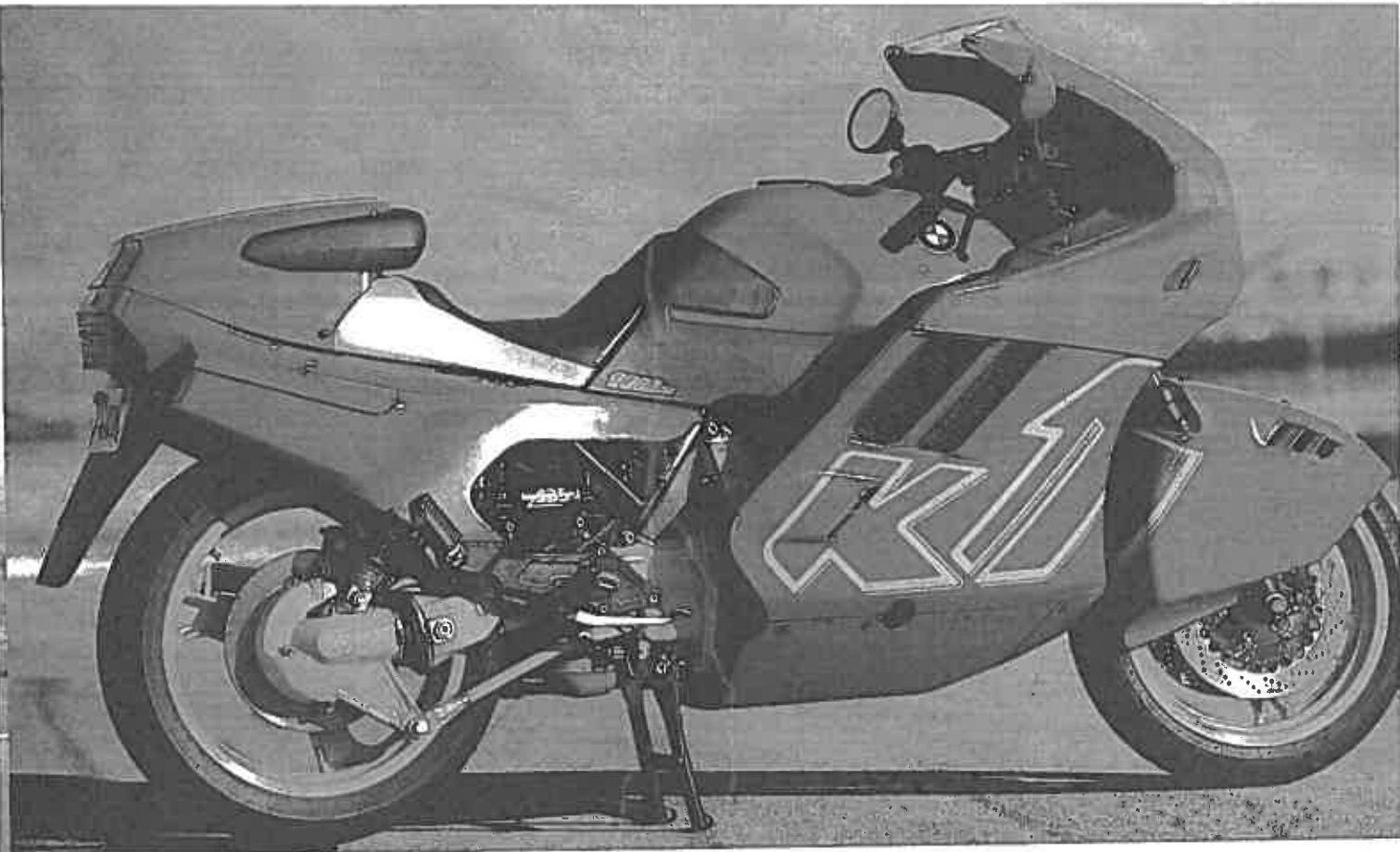
Rick shut it off, rolled it onto his lift, and dropped the oil while he told me his story.

Rick grew up on Long Island, New York. No one in his family was interested in motorcycles, but they weren't strangers to gasoline and spark plugs, either. His grandfather was a DeSoto dealer, and his father had a Chrysler Plymouth dealership. Rick was already aware of motorcycles when the television series *Then Came Bronson* first aired in 1969. Rick was 15.

"After that, all I wanted was a Harley-Davidson Sportster," Rick explains. Starting with something smaller seemed wiser, though, and he was saving money to buy a Heathkit Boonie Bike. Rick didn't have to spend his money, however, because one afternoon his dad came home early and asked him to go out to the car and carry in some files he'd left in the trunk. Instead of paper, he discovered a used mini-bike. Rick rode that little bike everywhere, piling on the miles until he broke the front end off the machine.

In his junior year in high school Rick bought a 1971 Triumph Tiger — and a service manual; both saw serious use as he piled 27,000 miles onto the Tiger. He then sold the Triumph and bought a Honda CB750F, riding it coast to coast during a 12-week tour. From that point forward, Rick's never been without a motorcycle.

In the late 1980s, Rick and his wife, Christina, moved west to Salt Lake City. Shortly after they arrived, he flew back east and bought a friend's 1985 BMW



K100RT. He rode it home to Utah, where, at a Harley-Davidson dealership of all places, he met his soon-to-be mentor, Jerry Holcombe. Jerry persuaded Rick to join the local BMW group, and also inspired him to collect motorcycles.

A new direction

It's noteworthy that Rick's first BMW was a K100, as the K1 was developed from that platform. Introduced for 1984, the K-series was a radical departure for BMW. Until then, BMWs were identified by their flat-twin, horizontally opposed, air-cooled "boxer" engine with pushrod-operated valves. The new K-series featured a 4-cylinder, fuel-injected engine with liquid-cooling and dual overhead camshafts with two valves per cylinder. Laid on its side, the engine's crank is on the right hand side of the machine and the cylinder head on the left. The engine is a stressed member bolted underneath a tubular steel frame with a single shock rear swingarm pivoting on the gearbox housing. With BMW's lineage tied so closely to flat twins, why didn't the company move in the direction of developing a flat four? It's likely because Honda was already there with the liquid-cooled flat four they introduced in the Gold Wing starting in 1975.

BMW initially offered two K-bike

models, the base K100 and the slightly more sporting K100RS. The touring-oriented K100RT soon joined them, and the 3-cylinder K75 was added for 1986, two years after introduction of the K100. Fast forward to 1988, and BMW

launches the K1. According to Falloon, stylist Karl-Heinz Abe created a sports machine called "Racer" for the Time Motion exhibition of 1984. "This model inspired the prototype K1," Falloon writes, "but underneath the dramatic styling was a significantly developed K100. BMW not only wanted the K1 to stand out, but the company hoped its performance would be class leading."

The K1's 4-cylinder engine was considerably upgraded from that of the K100, notably with a revised cylinder head that now had four valves — 26.5mm intake and 23mm exhaust — per cylinder. The twin cams operated directly on bucket tappets, eliminating the need for adjustment shims, and compression was raised from 10.2:1 to 11:1. The crankshaft and connecting rods were lighter, there was a taller fifth gear, and fuel injection and ignition control were combined into one unit with the Bosch Motronic system. Claimed horsepower output, with emissions controls for the U.S. market, was 95.

At the time of K1 production, BMW adhered to a 100-horsepower cap on engine output for motorcycles in Germany, and because it made less power than most other superbikes, the K1 had to be as aerodynamic as possible for it to have any advantage against the competition. A seven-piece fairing,



Engine: 987cc liquid-cooled DOHC inline four, 67mm x 70mm bore and stroke, 11:1 compression ratio, 95hp @ 8,500rpm

Top speed: 143mph (period test)

Fueling: Bosch Motronic fuel injection

Transmission: 5-speed, shaft final drive

Electrics: 12v, electronic ignition

Frame/wheelbase: Tubular steel space frame w/ engine as stressed member/61.6in (1,565mm)

Suspension: Marzocchi 41.7mm front fork, single-shock Paralever swingarm rear

Brakes: Dual 12in (305mm) floating discs front, single 11.2in (285mm) disc rear w/ABS

Tires: 120/70 x 17in front, 160/60 x 18in rear

Weight (wet): 612lb (278kg)

Seat height: 30.7in (780mm)

Fuel capacity/MPG: 5.2gal (20ltr)/45-50mpg

Owner Rick Pellegrino on his K1 at Miller Motorsports Park in Utah. The K1 may not be a track weapon, but it's an extremely capable high-speed touring bike, poised and confident on the road and easily capable of triple-digit speeds.

a two-piece valanced front fender and a tiny, covered passenger seat helped make the K1 the slipperiest, most wind-cheating motorcycle available at the time. All of the bodywork covered an improved chassis with revised geometry and larger diameter downtubes, top tubes and rear frame loop. Front suspension was provided by Marzocchi 42mm forks, and the rear featured BMW's Paralever system, which was first seen on the dual-purpose R100GS. Overall, the machine is long, measuring in with a 61.6-inch wheelbase.

The brakes are Brembo twin discs up front and a single out back. BMW added its anti-lock braking system, first



available as an option on the K100 in 1988, as standard to the K1. Available in lurid red or subdued blue, the cast three-spoke wheels and other accents were yellow. Initial reaction to the K1 was positive, but the model never achieved significant sales. Produced from 1988 to 1993, only 6,921 examples left the factory.

Trading hands

One of those K1s was sold to two Laotian brothers living in Utah. They both had good-paying jobs, and decided to pool their money and buy the ultimate motorcycle — a 1990 BMW K1.

"They'd never ridden anything larger than a 150cc scooter, and they were both quite short in the inseam," Rick says. "According to eyewitnesses, when they picked up the BMW, brand new, they dropped it before even leaving the parking lot. This turned out to be a regular occurrence, but never with any forward velocity. They'd stop, and drop it."

As a result, the bodywork was removed and repainted several times, but after covering only 2,660 miles the K1 was parked in the back of a garage belonging to one of the brothers. The bodywork was taken off it, the tires went flat, and the fuel went stale. It sat there for 20 years.

Meanwhile, one of the brothers had a stroke, and he decided it was time for the K1 to find a new home. He contacted the local BMW dealership, Harrison Eurosports in Sandy, Utah, hoping the dealership might be interested in buying the bike. It wasn't. However, during a meeting of the local BMW club, Harrison salesman Ren Charlesworth announced its availability. No one even went to look at it, and Rick wasn't at the meeting so he never heard about it until Ren mentioned it again at a British bike club meeting.

"I got the number and went



Top to bottom: The K1 bristles with unique touches including fairing-mounted switches and gauges; the rear seat cowl comes off for two-up riding; single-shock Paralever controls driveshaft effect; front wheel cowl improves aerodynamics.

and looked," Rick recalls. "It had a half-inch of dust on it, and I couldn't even get the tank open to look inside. I knew it would take a bunch of effort and money to get back on the road, and told him what I'd be willing to pay."

It wasn't enough, but later, just as Rick was about to leave the country for a two-week trip to Ireland, he got a call. Sweeten the deal, he was told, and it would be his. Rick phoned a friend and asked him to grab the cash, pay the brother, and pick up and drop off the K1. "When I got home I set to work cleaning the BMW and it was like a brand new motorcycle," Rick says. "Except for the painted bodywork, including the red mirrors, which should be black, it was completely original."

Rick took the tank off to clean it and the internal fuel pump, but didn't immediately get back to the project. That's when he called in BMW mechanic Tom Sill to help put it right. They got the tank and pump together, added fresh fuel, a bottle of injector cleaner and a battery. The BMW fired, smoked for a minute, and settled into an idle. The front brake master cylinder was replaced, and new tires went on the rims.

Next, it was time for the bodywork. Rick's painter told him there were about three different shades of red on the panels. But he wasn't chasing perfection, and Rick decided it looked good from 3 feet away, so he left the paint alone. That left applying the distinctive yellow K1 decals. Rick didn't feel qualified to install them, and as they cost \$90 a side he thought it wise to get professional help.

"I took them to my painter, and he said he didn't have anybody who could do it any better than I could," Rick says. "But he suggested taking it over to Woody at Driftwood Auto in Salt Lake City. I left them with Woody, and when I came back he said it had taken

"Riding the K1 at high speed on a deserted desert highway is an experience to be relished."

three hours to do the job. I was expecting a huge bill, then he said, 'Sorry son, I'll have to charge you \$75.' I gave him \$100; in my opinion, if you don't have the K1 decals, you don't have a K1."

In 2014, two years after buying the K1, Rick had it back on the road, and has since added 2,000 miles over two summers of riding. "I am a firm believer in comparing the performance of a machine based on a wonderfully foggy historical lens," Rick says of the K1 experience. "If I had had an opportunity

to ride a new K1 in 1990, no doubt my impression of it would be different than when I compare it to, say, my KTM 990 Superduke. That said, riding the K1 at high speed on a deserted desert highway is an experience to be relished. Rare, silent, solid and historic, it is a wonderful window into BMW's sporting past, especially if we acknowledge the recent success that BMW has had with their 1000RR superbike."

Lastly, Rick explains, riding the K1 is an exercise in talking to people. An

accurate number of U.S. imports is unknown — perhaps 600 to 650 made their way here. According to Rick, not many people can recall ever actually seeing one in motion.

"Riders, former riders and non-riders invariably express either the 'I've never seen one of these in person' sentiment or exclaim, 'What the heck is THAT?' I think the engineers of the K1 would be pleased that 25-plus years hence they are still garnering that kind of attention and praise." **MC**

The K1's radical styling didn't translate to high sales, but more than a quarter-century later it still looks cutting edge.

