

## **BMW NA 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years**

### **Chapter 22: “A BMW Motorcycle built for America: The R 1200 C”**

Written by: Jackie Jouret

In the mid-1990s, Harley-Davidson’s laid-back V-twins were among the most popular motorcycles in America, inspiring countless imitators from Japanese and Italian manufacturers. Even sport-oriented Ducati got into the cruiser act, after which it was only a matter of time before BMW did the same.

“The cruiser segment was doing so well, and it kept growing, especially in the U.S.,” said Phil Capossela, Vice-President of BMW of North America’s motorcycle division since August 1991. “We asked if BMW could do something that would be competitive, and BMW Motorrad was open to it.”

Rather than build a Harley clone, BMW created a cruiser with a distinctly Bavarian twist. Where other cruisers were defined by their V-twin engines, BMW featured Munich’s traditional boxer twin, here surrounded by an innovative design created under the leadership of American native David Robb.



As BMW’s first designer to work exclusively on the motorcycle side, Robb had been tasked by BMW Group Design Chief Chris Bangle with modernizing BMW’s two-wheelers. As part of that process, Robb wanted to liberate the company’s designers to explore new niches beyond the familiar touring and GS categories.

“The talent was there,” Robb said. “In the past, that talent wasn’t always

given the opportunity to push the boundaries.”



The cruiser project would allow BMW designers to do exactly that. It began at Designworks/USA in Southern California, where Richard Kong sketched a bike that was refined for production by BMW Design’s Dietmar Finger. Finger, in turn, supervised the creation of a

styling model by Stefano Ardagna and Saverio Spadone at Studio Torino in Italy.

Where an automobile cloaks its mechanical elements in a sheet-metal skin, a motorcycle often leaves those elements exposed, emphasizing its raw functionality. BMW’s cruiser made the most of that design opportunity, using a bespoke frame with a cast aluminum front section that was as much sculpture as structure. An all-new Telelever front suspension employed the rakish geometry typical of a cruiser, here executed in bright aluminum. “We said, ‘Let’s not hide the function of the Telelever,’ and it became a work of art,” Robb said.

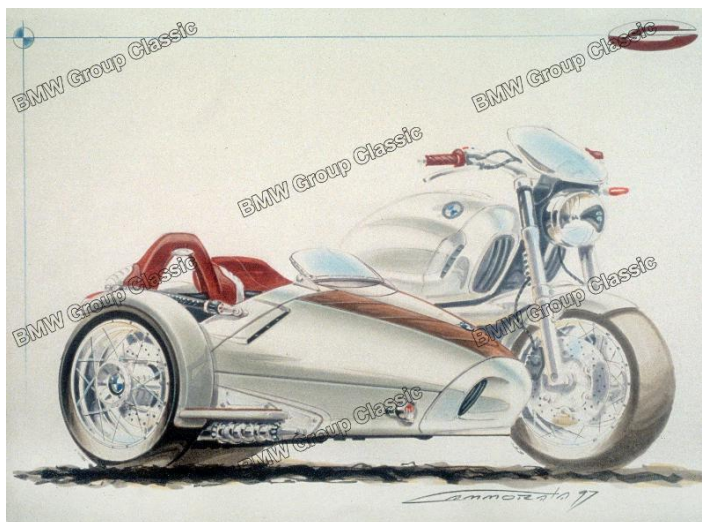
The then-current Paralever rear suspension wouldn’t work, so the designers reverted to the older Monolever design, lengthened by more than three inches and with a reinforced tube to contain the driveshaft. The single-sided Monolever set the cruiser even further apart from its competition, giving its left side a minimal appearance in which the rear shock was clearly visible along with the suspension linkage.



That was a nice retro touch, as were the swept-back handlebars, polished valve covers, stubby exhaust pipes, spoked wheels, a deeply valanced rear fender, solo saddle with passenger pad, chrome headlight, and gauges mounted on the triple clamps. Following the Harley model, BMW offered a wide range of customization options that increased the bike's versatility, enhancing its touring capabilities or altering its appearance to suit its owner's preferences.

In the midst of those unfamiliar design flourishes, BMW's traditional boxer engine gave the cruiser an unmistakable Bavarian identity. With 1,170cc of displacement, the A63 engine was BMW's largest oil-head boxer, and it would be available exclusively in the bike designated as the R 1200 C for the duration of its production run.

With its fuel injection system hidden behind nicely detailed panels, the A63 delivered 61 horsepower at 5,000 rpm and 72 pound-feet at 3,000 rpm. Its torque-biased output was a clear shot across Harley's bow, as well as a nod to the R 1200 C's mission as a bike for relaxed travel over moderate distances rather than high-speed canyon carving or cross-country adventures. As such, the bike drew criticism from BMW's traditional clientele, who questioned its authenticity after its launch in 1997.



“We’d never had such a thing, so there were questions whether this was really a BMW,” Capossela said. “But once people started riding it, they did embrace it, and so did the dealers, who were getting a totally new product in a totally new segment.”

Just as the R 1200 C was arriving in dealerships, it received valuable exposure as the second BMW

to appear in a James Bond film. Thanks to a product-placement agreement negotiated by Tom McGurn of BMW's Corporate Communications department, James Bond had driven a pre-production Z3 roadster in 1995's GoldenEye. It was set to be followed by another BMW sports car, but the company had nothing suitable in the pipeline when the Bond producers arrived in Munich in the fall of 1996. Perhaps a motorcycle would do?

"I presented this still-new bike, the R 1200 C, which wouldn't be released until the fall of '97," Robb said. "Polite compliments about the bike and the presentation were exchanged. After that, plus the narrative that their film had no motorcycles in it, they flew back to Southern California.

"A week before Christmas, our marketing department got a call from Hollywood. The company would like six of the motorcycles early next April, plus a fleet of BMWs and Range Rovers. They had rewritten the script around the bike, and now we had to knock out half a dozen of these motorcycles by hand!"





Tomorrow Never Dies premiered on December 9, 1997. The film put Pierce Brosnan and Michelle Yeoh, hand-cuffed together, in command of the R 1200 C for a chase scene. That gave the bike a big promotional boost shortly after its launch, and later that year the Guggenheim Museum included the R 1200 C in its The Art of the Motorcycle exhibit.

The R 1200 C had broken the mold for what a BMW motorcycle could be, it brought in new customers to the brand and added significantly to BMW Motorrad's volume in the USA. From 1997 to 2004, BMW sold a total of 40,218 examples, most of which were sold in North America.

"I thought that number was pretty good, and developing a totally different motorcycle was a good step to take," Capossela said. "I think the Harley people were laughing at first, but then they weren't. They realized it was a pretty damn good motorcycle."



The R 1200 C had no direct successor, but in 2020 BMW re-entered the cruiser segment with the retro-style R 18. Like the R 1200 C, it used BMW's largest-displacement air/oil-cooled engine, this time a massive 1,802cc boxer twin. Its distinctive styling—by a team led by Ola Stenegard,

working under Motorrad design chief Edgar Heinrich—took inspiration

from the R 5 that had revolutionized BMW in 1936. Like the R 5, the R 18 used a frame made of steel tubes of varying thicknesses, mated to a swingarm that mimicked the look of a hardtail. The driveshaft was plated in nickel and left fully exposed just like BMW's traditional bikes from Munich. At the front, the R 18 eschewed the Telelever in favor of traditional telescopic forks like those pioneered on the R 5. Spoked wheels and a single round headlight completed the vintage look, the latter with modern LED technology and optional adaptive turning. Other contemporary features included keyless operation and three riding modes—Rain, Roll, and Rock—for throttle and traction control.

The R 18 launched in the middle of the Covid pandemic, a difficult time for vehicle sales worldwide, yet it helped BMW record its second-best sales year to date in 2020. BMW Motorrad delivered 169,272 motorcycles to customers that year, about half of which were boxer-engine bikes including the R 18. Now offered in three model variants, the R 18 helped Motorrad sell 209,257 motorcycles in 2024, a record number in its 101<sup>st</sup> year of producing 2-wheeled BMWs.

—End—