



SIMON THOMAS TALKS US THROUGH THE BUILD OF HIS NEW BMW R1200GSA LC SPECIAL

HEAD IN THE SHED

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xciting and bloody surreal! That’s how I’d describe our recent bike build orgy.

To anyone living in ‘the real world’, the idea of being handed new bikes and being lavished with upgrades and accessories is the stuff of, well, fairy tales. It just doesn’t

happen in real life, does it?

A chance social meeting with the CEO of ‘LXV OUTDOOR’ would change our lives.

“We’ll buy you two new bikes, any brand, any style and any model. What you two have done is incredible... But you need to finish this journey”. After coughing out whatever I was eating, I looked at Lisa, she stared at me, and I eloquently sputtered “Uh, what”?

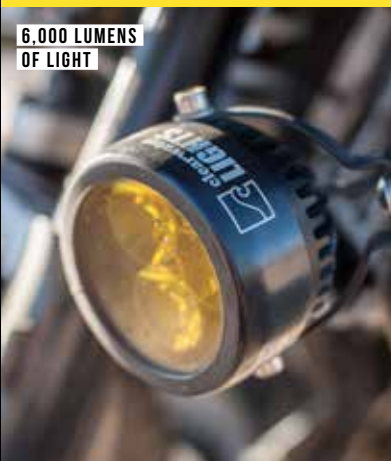
It was true, our bikes (an 1999 R1100GS and 2001 F650GS) were tired, but then so would you be after 400,000 miles.

They had done us proud, but for the last five to six years, we’d been the riding personification of the phrase “the definition of permanent is a temporary fix that’s holding”. Over the course of our 13-year global journey, we’d made hundreds of roadside repairs. In the end all that was holding our precious babies together was cheap electrical wire and an assortment of hastily found nuts and bolts collected in countless back-street bazaars from around the world. Haemorrhaging oil from engine cases had become our ‘normal’. Still, the idea of finishing our ride on anything other than these two bikes was as alien as it was unlikely. There’s no point denying it, we’d become (and are still) incredibly sentimental about our original bikes. After all we’ve been through, how could we not be?

After weeks of deliberating and tons of soul searching, we excitedly accepted the offer. Following another four weeks of frantic two-wheeled research, we came full circle and chose to stick with a familiar brand. When we finally got our hands on the new bikes, a 2015 BMW F800GS for Lisa and a BMW 2015 R1200GSA LC for me, the pressure was on.



TOURATECH DRI-RIDE SEAT



6,000 LUMENS OF LIGHT

We'd planned on reaching Deadhorse Alaska this year, but with winter fast approaching and our US visas running out, we were left with just 10 weeks to strip and rebuild both bikes.

After 13-years on the road we've picked up a few 'industry friends', lucky really, because if we were to have any chance of creating bikes that were as capable as our old steeds, we were going to need their support.

THE CONCEPT

The idea of what we wanted to create was clear; we wanted to take all that was best and exciting about our original bikes and transpose those modifications onto machines that were four generations younger. We wanted to make two heavy machines lighter, taller, more off-road capable and able to carry us through another 49 countries. I said the idea was clear, not simple.

We gathered the essentials; two bottles of our favourite rum (Guatemalan), ice, a notepad, a set of coloured pencils and a quiet room borrowed from a friend. We then sat and scribbled. We listed every modification and upgrade we'd made to our bikes over the last decade and scored their value. We needed to recognise what was bling and what had been essential. What was good, great or silly and what had genuinely added to the riding experience. It was a friggin' long list!

Fast forward 10 weeks and what we've ended up with are two motorcycles beyond belief. Think I'm being over-the-top? Normally with any project, there's a degree of compromise, underpinned by budget, or lack thereof. Not here!

Lets look at how we transformed an already impressive machine, my R1200GSA and turned it into something unique that could take on the world.

The concept was simple. Take a heavy, computer controlled high-tech motorcycle and make it field repairable. Take an already tall bike and make it taller. Then make it more off-road capable and able to carry me through another 49 countries.

TWO UP

Unlike many travellers who ride two-up, Lisa's riding her own machine. I'd have to make sure that there was a small conciliatory nod of acknowledgement to maintaining the bikes ability to carry a pillion but it's not a priority.

WHEELS

Before this build started, I'd sat down with Woody's Wheel Works in Colorado and made a wish list of components; the Excel Takasago A60s had been at the top of my rim/hoop list, with the outstanding Takasago Excel Signature Series rims running a very close second. The A60s only come as 1.6"x21" and that's pretty narrow. After some deliberation, we decided a wider rim would offer a better dirt and road compromise, while handling the weight of the bike and luggage a little better. We're planning on continuing to use Continentals TKC80s and needed to fit 90-90/21 front rubber and 15-70/17 on the rear. The Takasago Excel Signature Series Rims are some of the finest available and have proven to be a great choice.

Looking to create a lighter and stronger wheel set, the next decision was which hub to use. Sure, we could have re-used the OEM BMW hubs, but, like I just said, we were looking for lighter and stronger. At the end of the day, there was only one real choice. Made from 6061 billet aluminium and weighing three pounds lighter (almost 1.5 kilograms) than the stock front hub, the Woody's Custom Superlite Hubs, were chosen for the front

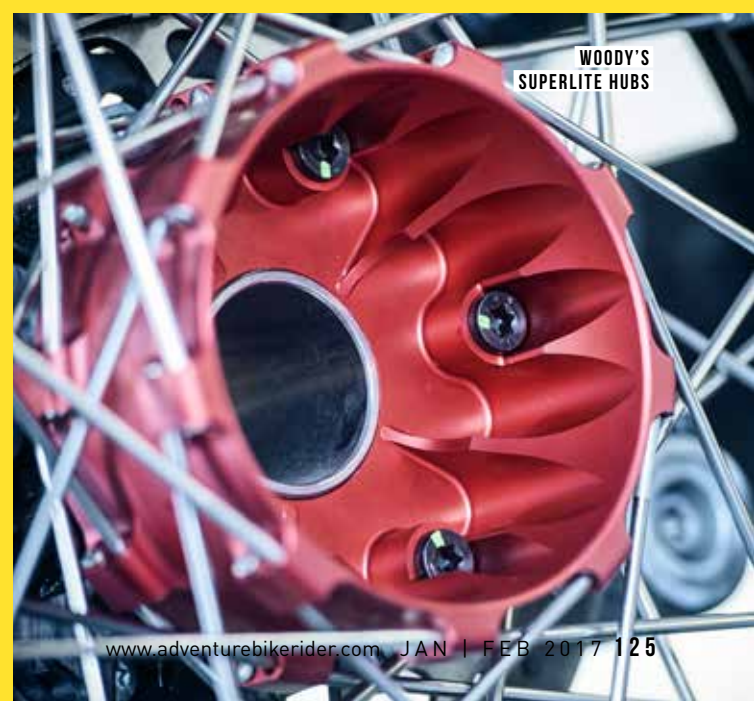


and rear wheels.

Woody's laced the rims to the hubs with American high grade 175 x 6-7 guage, and Woody's own Superlace pattern to form the strongest and lightest wheels available.

SUSPENSION

My R1200GSA LC picked up new suspension courtesy of Touratech's 'Extreme' shocks, front and back. Unlike the stock suspension, the Touratech, units are rebuildable and serviceable and crucially, for me, adjustable. With the addition of the 21" rim, the nose of the new R1200 has been lifted. Being keen to keep BMW's stock geometry, I needed a way to raise the rear by a proportionate amount. The Touratech Extreme rear suspension, offers adjustable shock length, with up to 8mm of adjustment. By increasing the static length of the rear suspension I've increased the ground clearance and ride height and regained close to the bikes original geometry. Every traveller I know overloads their bike. The extreme unit also has 50% more pre-load adjustment than any shock on the market. I was also ►



able to do away with BMW ESA (Electronic Suspension Adjustment) as I ride 99% of the time with my bike fully loaded. Hey, it's one less electronic gizmo to go wrong.

HANDLEBARS

BMW stock bars have always given me wrist issues and the 19-degree sweep of the new R1200GSA LC bars offered more of the same. Instead of conventional bars we've fitted Flexx Bars. These are tuneable handlebars designed to absorb high frequency vibration and soak up the abuse dished out by big hits, aggressive braking, bumps, jumps, rocks, roots and rider error.

Using a mix of elastomers (to control bar compression and rebound) and hinges, these bars absorb the abuse of a day's ride instead of transferring it through to my hands, wrist, elbows and shoulders. This is clever shit that really works. My bars have a 12-degree sweep, which creates a more aggressive riding position and pulls me closer to the tank.

SEAT

The stock seat also got switched for Touratech's new Dri-Ride seat. I've always preferred single piece sports seats to BMW's two-piece options. When off-road and standing the single piece seats are less obtrusive, and Touratech's new seat is also water-proof and breathable. No more morning wet arse after a night of heavy rain: it looks the part too.

BRAKES

Whilst dealing with the wheels, we also ditched BMW stock discs and pads in favour of Galfer's. I'd happily used their wave disc for eight years on the R1100GS, they'd lasted longer, were lighter than stock and I felt gave more feedback in conjunction with Galfer's high end ceramic pads. Oh, both disc and pads are also cheaper than BMW's OEMs. Hey, food for thought right?

EXHAUST SYSTEM

I'll confess to being a compulsive bike fiddler (wow, that reads far worse on paper than it sounded in my head) and yes, I definitely went overboard on the exhaust system. In many parts of the world unleaded fuel isn't available, and although leaded fuel will work in conjunction with a catalytic converter, it will, if used long term, end up 'killing the cat'. The stock silencer was changed in favour of AC Schnitzer's sexy carbon fibre unit, which is substantially lighter. It also allows the bike to sound like a bike, as opposed to an electric toothbrush on speed. We removed the electronic exhaust flap and installed Remus 2mm oversized header pipes. The increase in power is



SERIOUS PROTECTION

totally unnecessary and very noticeable.

LIGHT SYSTEM

Auxiliary lights are like an insurance policy, that you hope to never use but...! Every year there seem to be more and more LED manufacturers who will happily turn your beloved bike into a rolling Christmas tree: Remember less is more. The Clearwater light's are the best I've used and so were an obvious choice for the new bike build. I've installed a hybrid system of two Ericas (model name). Both lights are mounted high and on the inside of my upper tank protection system. The light optics are different though on both lights, one producing a more traditional, wider fog light pattern, and the other a piercing pencil beam. As both lights produce a retinal scaring 6,000 lumens, I can turn night into day at the flick of a switch and both lights are fully dimmable. The draw from the battery is also one of the lowest on the market.

PROTECTION

I'm a shit magnet! In Tajikistan I lost track of the amount of roots and rocks that we ended sliding across. When it came to choosing an engine skid plate I wanted something substantial and went with Touratech's Long Expedition Skid Plate, which protects the entire engine length all the way back to past the centre stand. It's made with both a 4mm stainless steel reinforcement plate and 4mm aluminium skid plate to take the big hits.

I'm not a fan of metal tanks on adventure bikes and since starting our journey in 2003 I'd used Touratech's Polyamide large capacity fuel tank on my R1100GS. The extra fuel capacity was nice but the tank's main advantage was its construction from ultra resilient polyamide nylon. No one is making polyamide tanks for the new water-cooled boxer and so I've conceded to using Touratech's bolt on tank protectors. The upper bars protect the vulnerable stock tank and make the bike look more like Optimus Prime, but, I'd rather that than a ruptured fuel tank.

To protect the cylinders I've kept the BMW stock cylinder protectors and added Touratech aluminium cylinder head guards.

Note: I'd wanted to install Touratech's BMW reinforcement bar, which adds a brace to the stock protector. However, the reinforcement bar will not install in tandem with the upper tank protector.

A simple quick-release stainless steel headlight guard from Touratech protects the headlight from flying debris kicked up by Lisa, or any other rider up front.

I've also installed several small plastic frame protectors just to minimize damage to the frame. They are small relatively inexpensive and install with a few cable ties. ►

QUICK RELEASE
HEADLIGHT GUARD

THAT'S ONE
PIMPED UP GS



MIRRORS

Some of the best additions can be the simplest and least expensive. Whilst working on the Flexx handlebars we pulled off the stock mirrors and installed the Adventure Mirrors by 'double-take'. They are mounted using the adjustable arms by RAM Mounts. They provide better visibility than BMW stock mirrors and when we're heading off-road I can fold them inwards and out of harm's way: Simple but ingenious.

LUGGAGE SYSTEM

If it ain't broke don't fix it! Not a bad mantra to live by. There was no exhaustive research when it came time to choose luggage. We've used the Zega system from Touratech since 2002 and have used the Zega Pro version since it was released. The Zega Pros were a simple choice for the new 1200. With four panniers (between us) we can easily carry everything we need to live on whilst on the road and lock it away once we've arrived at our destination. Contrary to popular belief, neither Lisa nor I have ever trapped our foot under a pannier whilst riding.

The Zegas aren't the strongest panniers on the market and that's their advantage. When your bike goes over, it hits with a lot of energy that has to go somewhere. Trust me, it's easier and cheaper to repair a simple aluminium box than your bike's expensive frame.

Note: If you're buying Touratech locks to go with your panniers, and other locks for your GPS, or oil cap, remember to get locks that are keyed alike. This way one key will work on all your locks.

TANK

Without options available, I've kept the BMW OEM tank. It is bloody huge.

CUSTOM BIKE WRAP

Overkill is fun. When it came to finishing off the bike we were stumped when it came to design. A fancy paint job was going to be pricey and ruined in no time. We'd researched the possibility of a custom total wrap but after a few hours online, couldn't find anyone that had attempted it. How hard could it be? It turns out it's damn hard, and that you need the patience of the saints when it comes to wrapping the R1200's 'hard to

reach' surfaces and acute angles. I handed over a selection of digital artwork, that I'd knocked up over the years, to a good friend and talented digital artist who came up with a stunning design for both bikes. The results are stunning and unique.

FRAME

After some careful scrutinising, we chose to leave the stock frame untouched. The R1200GSA LC's frame is simple, strong and flexible. Unlike my original R1100GS, which underwent multiple 'frame-ectomys', with a dozen gussets and welds in order to strengthen and reinforce it.

ENGINE

I've not tinkered with the engine block. The units does a great job of belting out way too many ponies as it is.

TYRES

Our tyre of choice has, and remains, Conti's awesome TKC80. They are not the cheapest but they're worth every penny. They've carried us around the world and through 27 deserts, countless mountain ranges and a few jungles in between. If your tyres don't instil confidence, then by default, they take it away. Why fit tyres that don't allow you to get the most riding pleasure from your chosen machine?

FARKLES AND EXTRAS

I've kept gadgets to a minimum. It's all too easy to end up with an unmanageable birds nest of wires and cables. There's nothing attached to my handlebars other than my mirrors. I'm using foam Uni-Filters instead of BM's paper filter, which makes maintenance easy. I've also added some simple high voltage cables to the right hand-side frame which gives me easy access to the battery if I need to jump start the big girl.

I've added Pivot-Pegz to take care of my feet and after using them for eight-years on the 1100, I love them. I'm using ROX risers to bring the bars up a little higher and to pull them six degrees backwards. I also swapped out the BMW steering damper for the Touratech version, which offers more adjustability. I also replaced all the BMW indicators for smaller and shorter OEM units designed for the R1000ss. Touratech radiator guards help keep stone damage to a minimum.

The build is finished and I've spent the last eight months wearing a grin that will now need to be surgically removed. There's no doubt that the end result is over the top and excessive, but I love it. The final build is better than I could have imagined and the bike is ridiculously fast.

Right, I'm off for a ride. See you on the road. **ABR**

