



## BMW's /5 Motorcycles, 1970-1973

by Moshe K. Levy

**T**HE LATE '60s were a tumultuous time in the motorcycle industry, marked by the rise of the Japanese and the beginning of the end for the British. Amidst this backdrop of rapidly evolving consumer sentiment, BMW introduced its /5 series for the 1970 model year. In its three years of production, the /5 family of motorcycles reinvigorated the brand with its contemporary design, and also ushered in BMW's fabled "Airhead" Type 247 boxer twin engine, variations of which would continue to propel the marque's R-series motorcycles for the next 25 years!

The /5 Series, built at BMW's then brand-new facility in Spandau, Berlin, was available in three variants: The R50/5 (500cc) was the most affordable, the R60/5 (600cc) rounded out the mid-range, and the R75/5 (750cc) was the top of the line. Compared to its predecessor, the BMW /2 Series, the /5 was a thoroughly modernized ground-up redesign. It boasted up-to-date 12 V electrics complete with 180-watt alternator, an electric starter, more powerful drum brakes, and a slew of other noteworthy upgrades. The frame was made of tubular steel construction with a double downtube cradle for the engine, similar to the benchmark Norton Featherbed. A rear subframe was bolted on to the mainframe and served as the

upper mount for the twin rear shocks. Up front, the former /2's Earles forks were replaced with telescopic forks for the /5, signaling a functional change of focus from utilitarian sidecar duty to improved handling as a solo motorcycle.

Of course, no discussion of the BMW /5 would be complete without an examination of the Type 247 "Airhead" flat twin engine. Special care was taken by the company to design a simple, reliable motor that addressed some previous concerns about the /2 mill. To this end, the 247's chain-driven camshaft runs below the crankshaft, allowing gravity to assist with oil delivery to the camshaft, and eliminating the periodic complete tear-downs required to maintain the former /2 design's "oil slingers." Two valves per each hemispherical cylinder head are conventionally actuated by the camshaft through followers, pushrods, and rocker arms. A stroke of 70.6mm was constant within the /5 line, with varying bores of 67mm, 73.5mm and 82mm, determining the displacement of the R50/5, R60/5 and R75/5 respectively.

The R50/5 and R60/5 models were equipped with 26mm Bing slide carburetors, while the R75/5 featured 32mm Bing CV units. On all models, the engine power was transmitted via single-disc dry clutch to a stout four-speed gearbox, and from there to the swingarm-mounted final drive via maintenance-free shaft.

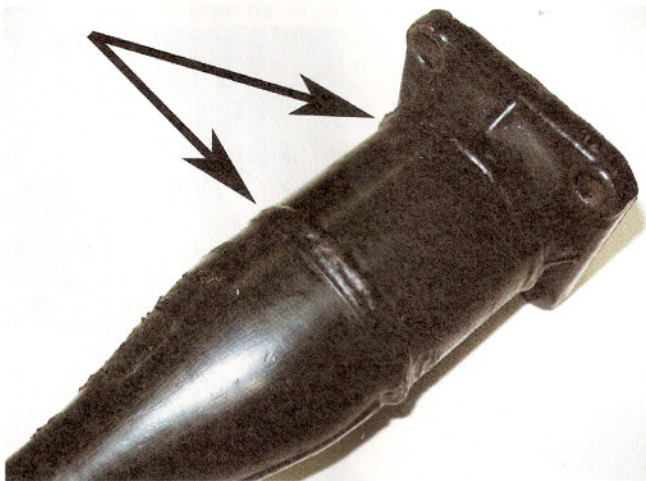
For the late 1973 models, BMW lengthened the swingarm by approximately 2", resulting in the so-called "Long Wheelbase" /5. Weld marks on the final-drive side of the swingarm where the extension was added by the factory are the telltale sign of a Long Wheelbase model. The extra room allowed a larger battery to be installed behind the engine, and also gave the rider some additional clearance between his/her shins and the carburetors. To this day, /5 enthusiasts argue over whether the sharper handling merits of the original short-wheelbase models trump the high-speed stability of the 1973.5 long wheelbase versions.

Either way, at barely over 460 lbs., the R75/5 was one of the lightest 750cc bikes of the era, and with a top speed of 109 mph, one of the fastest as well!

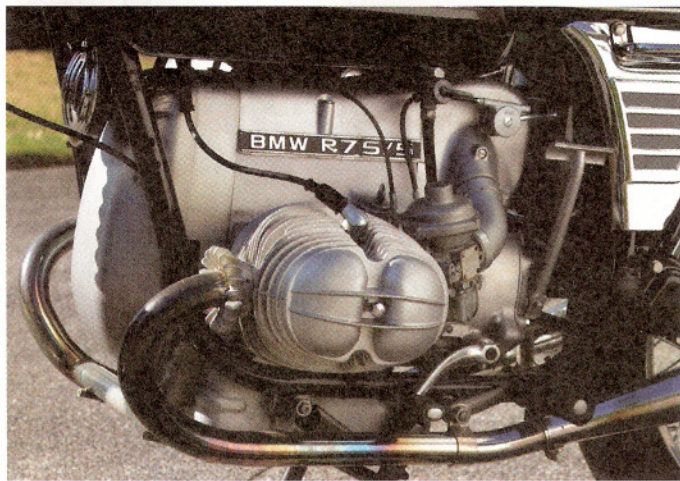
Complementing these functional upgrades to its new motorcycle line, the /5's aesthetics were also a spicy departure from the more somber BMWs of yore. Although initially available only in white, black, or silver for 1970-71, 1972-73 models were available in seven hues including Monza Blue and Granada Red. Further shocking traditionalists, 1972 saw the introduction of the 4-gal. "Toaster" gastank, with its prominent chrome accent panels. Though excessive chrome on a BMW was heresy at the time, today the Toaster-tank /5 is considered especially collectible as it was only produced for the 1972-1973 model years.



Top and above: Two views of Arden White's pristine 1972 R75/5 Toaster.



Weld marks like this on the final-drive side of the swingarm extension signifies a "Long Wheelbase" /5 model.



The 247 Airhead's ingenious flat twin configuration means easy access to most serviceable components.

Contrary to the initial worries from BMW traditionalists that the company had strayed too far from its function-over-form roots, the Slash 5 motorcycle family has earned a sterling reputation for anvil-like reliability. Being classic European motorcycles, the /5s naturally have certain idiosyncrasies, but on the whole the design and construction are robust. Properly running /5s with well over 100,000 miles on them are commonplace at rallies, and usually outnumber the "Garage Queens" by a healthy margin.

In fact, almost four decades after their initial production, these are motorcycles which are still quite often used as daily runners. Experienced owners claim that with proper timely maintenance, these bikes are nearly indestructible. I met one such owner, the late Fred Tausch, at a rally in 2004. With well over 600,000 miles on its clock, Fred's 1970 R60/5 actually out-

lived its owner. Details are sketchy, but supposedly the engine was only overhauled twice during this remarkable service run!

The classic BMW motorcycle community is an active one, with abundant technical support and a well-organized network of enthusiasts (aka "Airheads") who gather regularly to celebrate their favorite machines. Parts are plentiful, though getting more expensive as time goes on and the dollar continues to plummet in value.

Some helpful links for prospective and current /5 owners include:

- 5 United Classic BMW Motorcycle Club: [www.5united.net](http://www.5united.net). The links page is invaluable.
- 5 United Yahoo Group: [groups.yahoo.com/group/5united](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/5united)
- Airheads Beemer Club: [www.airheads.org](http://www.airheads.org)
- Internet BMW Riders [www.ibmwr.org](http://www.ibmwr.org)

[www.ibmwr.org](http://www.ibmwr.org)

• BMW Motorcycle Owners of America: [www.bmwmoa.org](http://www.bmwmoa.org)

In addition, there are many more local /5 clubs throughout the world.

The /5 series represented an initially dramatic but ultimately triumphant gamble for BMW. These motorcycles were not the cautious evolutions of the existing /2 designs the faithful had expected. The /5's newfound emphasis on performance and style, combined with significant price increases over the /2 Series it replaced, could have easily spelled marketplace doom. Luckily, they became a mild hit, embraced by many riders, including former Road Rider editors Bob and Patti Carpenter. Their 1972 Toaster-tank R75/5 "handled like a ballet dancer on steroids and gave two people a reasonably comfortable ride for the longest haul. We loved the old beast." 🍷



Fred Tausch's 1970 R60/5 in 2004. Today, the bike resides at Bob's BMW Museum in Jessup, MD.



The author's wife's first bike, a 1971 R60/5 with standard 6.3-gal. tank. With almost 100,000 miles, it's still going strong.