



2002 BMW F650CS

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By Kevin Duke

Funky, Happening, and Fun, Too !

Just as Harley-Davidson has enjoyed a raging success by producing cruiser motorcycles that fit the American idiom (\$1.9 billion in the last six months), BMW continues to grow heartily with its range of bikes that are idiomatic of Teutonic expression.

The German company reports that 2001 worldwide sales were up 13.5 percent in a world market that grew just five percent. And while the 13,023 units sold in the U.S. last year won't scare a huge company like Honda, for BMW this represents a doubling of sales from just four years ago.

And the spinning propeller company knows which side of the bread is buttered, as America is BMW's largest export market for third year in a row. To further illustrate BMW's emerging force on these shores, consider that four years ago there were only two U.S. dealerships that sold more than 100 Beemers annually; contrast that with the 48 dealers which surpassed that threshold in 2001.

Part of that success is due to the surprisingly strong sales of the F650GS - surprisingly strong because of American's general aversion to riding one-lunged machines. The standard GS ranks fourth on BMW's sales leaders, and the more off-road-oriented Dakar version sits in seventh.

This year BMW offers a new version of the F650 to expand its envelope, the F650CS, a bike designed for upwardly mobile young and re-entry riders.

We'll begin the riding impression of the F650CS with another Harley-Davidson parallel. Like the Motor Company, the average age of a BMW owner is around 47 years-old. H-D has responded to the graying of its customer base by purchasing the Buell Motorcycle company and introducing its entry-level Buell Blast to entice younger buyers into its showrooms.

BMW's response is the F650CS, a bike general manager of BMW North America's Motorcycle Group Tom Plucinsky calls "a funky, happening motorcycle." "Funky" and "happening" aren't typical words in a 50-somethings lexicon, so it's clear the CS is aimed at riders in their late-20s and early-30s.

"If we want to offer something to new people," said BMW chief designer David Robb, "we have to offer something new."

And Robb has delivered just that in the F650CS. The design is fresh and visually interesting, with links to contemporary industrial design. The most obvious example is the translucent polycarbonate rear luggage rails and the hand rails/luggage bridge at the rear of the "fuel tank," a material similar to that used on contemporary Apple computers. By placing the actual (4-gallon) fuel tank underneath the seat, BMW freed up space in front of the rider for various modules that add to the bike's versatility.

Most handy is the standard tank bag with map pocket that sits in the cavity between the stylish rails. Other optional items are: a helmet/luggage rack (\$89) that utilizes secure cable straps; a 10-liter hard-shell case (\$195); and an audio system consisting of two speakers and an amplifier that sits on top of a hard case (\$495). Powered by the bike and fed by a rider's own CD, cassette or MP3 player, the amplifier automatically increases the volume in relation to the bike's speedometer and also boosts bass at low speeds. All three of the locking pods are keyed to the bike's ignition key for convenience.

Somewhat surprisingly for BMW, no saddlebags are offered for the CS, but there are two luggage bags available. A 16-liter, waterproof soft bag (\$85) that expands to 27 liters and attaches to the rear luggage rack is quite handy, and it comes with straps that convert it to a backpack when off the bike. For added stowage, a 35-liter soft bag that sits on the rear seat area retails for \$129.

The other aspect of the CS that gets immediate attention is its styling, which, depending on who you ask, is kinda funky and happening. Particularly interesting is the nose of the CS with modern looking dual headlights and a blue-gray Lexan windshield. Lines flow cleanly from the nose past the gas tank/upper fairing area and through to the swoopy seat. The plastic sidecovers on the fairing are interchangeable, so they can be ordered to customize the appearance of the bike.

The stylish aluminum-painted steel frame serves two functions. In addition to holding up the suspension and wheels, it also doubles as the engine's oil tank. Attached to its rear is a beautiful aluminum, single-sided swingarm onto which is mounted the drive pulley for the belt drive and a stylized, 4.5-inch aluminum wheel. Up front, 41mm fork tubes are set at a lazy 27.9-degree rake, carrying a 3.0-inch, three-spoke wheel.

Sitting astride the CS, a low, 30.7-inch seat height allows secure footing for short legs. And by fitting a different seat and a shorter rear tire, seat height can be dropped to 29.5 inches. Obviously the CS was designed to include the female market, though BMW was somewhat reluctant to say that explicitly at the press launch.

The 652cc, Rotax-built Single fires up without the aid of a enrichener lever, as the BMW fuel injection takes care of the fuel mixture automatically. Exhaust gases are cleaned by a 3-way catalyzer. Clutch take-up is smooth, and the thumpy engine assists with easy getaways. The rubber drive-belt eliminates slack in the drivetrain when shifting the slick, 5-speed transmission, and the bike is very light on its feet.

BMW says the thumper cranks out a relatively paltry 50 horsepower at 6800 rpm, but the CS doesn't feel out of place at higher speeds. Aided by ample torque that peaks at 46 ft.-lbs. at 5500 rpm, the CS can ably squirt through freeway traffic.

Vibration, which begins past 4000 rpm, is evident at freeway speeds, but the low-amplitude shakes don't bother a rider much. Give credit to large bar-end weights on the tubular handlebar; footpegs buzz more intently. Unlike some other F650s I've ridden the CS wasn't troubled by a steady-throttle surging condition.

The smallish windscreen deflects a surprising amount of air, though I experienced some buffeting noise when in a riding crouch. The turbulence diminished if I sat my five-eight body up straight or crouched down low.

When it came time to hit some of SoCal's twistiest roads, I wasn't expecting much from the CS and secretly wished I was riding a more dedicated sportbike instead. But it didn't take more than a few peg-scraping corners before I had a huge grin on my face. The high and wide handlebar allows the CS to be leaned into a corner faster than Ken Lay can sell off Enron stock. The peg scraping isn't so much an indictment as a compliment on the playfulness of the bike and the grip offered by the sticky Michelin Pilot Sport tires. In fact, the pegs offer a clear indication of lean angle, so a rider can confidently bend it in till hearing the sound of metal on pavement, knowing there's still plenty of traction remaining.

Sure, the rear rebound damping and fork springs are a bit weak for this kind of action, but the non-adjustable suspension is set up nearly perfect for its intended uses, such as soaking up pavement cracks and pot holes. The 300mm, 2-piston caliper front brake is firm and powerful, and the optional ABS on my bike didn't interfere too early. When at maximum braking, I could feel the 41 mm fork twist from the one-sided braking of the single disc, but this isn't a concern for the typical CS rider.

The CS's super-nimble handling allows aggressive runs into tight switchbacks, and the flexible engine has none of the harsh off-on abruptness that ails some injected bikes. It's quite possible that I rode through the downhill section of Latigo Canyon quicker than I had on a pure sportbike. Sure, there are plenty of bikes that can accelerate faster, brake harder and lean over further, but on a tight, twisty road like Latigo and the relatively low speeds it demands, the CS was delightfully quick. And the CS proved to be a willing and able companion in nearly every environment.

What's not to like? Well, the short seat-to-peg relationship will pretzel the legs of tall riders; the airbox makes an annoying intake honk below 3700 rpm; and the optional chrome instrument panel cover fitted to our test bike reflected the sun back into my eyes.

Oh yeah, I caught a false neutral a few times during high-rpm one-two shifts, and some BMW devotees will decry the absence of a centerstand.

But these are small complaints next to the elephant in the room that motojournalists often overlook: cost. The F650CS retails for \$8690, while the ABS-equipped version costs \$500 extra. An entry-level bike with a \$9190 entry fee puts the CS in a class by itself. That's a lot of pizza money for a college student (an otherwise ideal candidate for the CS) even with the standard heated hand grips.

But for those who can afford the added cachet that comes with owning a BMW-anything, the F650CS will undoubtedly satisfy. The spinning propeller badges buy you more than prestige; it also offers top-notch build quality, high style, ease of use and loads of versatility.

As a daily rider with considerable riding experience on the latest, greatest, fastest bikes, I'm not exactly the target demographic for the CS. So the highest endorsement I can offer is that I'd be happy to spend several weeks aboard the hip and capable CS.