

IMPROVING MY PERFORMANCE

South Carolina held the key



I learn a new facet of motorcycling and the one my bike was designed for—dirt.

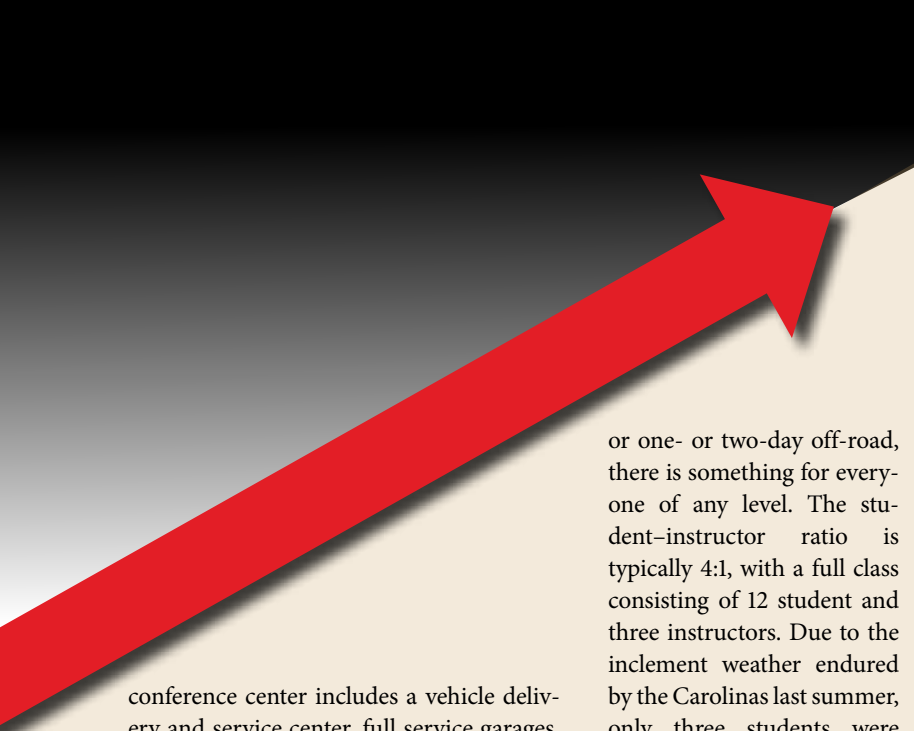
While visiting friends in Greenville, South Carolina, I stumbled across the BMW Performance Center in nearby Greer. What is that, you ask? The Performance Center is a little known secret, tucked away between Greenville and Asheville, and part of the BMW US factory complex. Constructed in 1999 with sleek modern styling, the 64,000 square-foot state-of-the-art

By Cristi Farrell #180539

OVER THE PAST SIX YEARS, I'VE OWNED more dual sport bikes than any other, yet I have little to no experience in dirt riding. To my delight, all the roads to destinations unknown on my agenda in South America were paved. The only time I tackled dirt track was to my chagrin, voluntarily, and it was the hardest of my 30-day short riding career. With nary a soul, gas station or convenience store in sight, I was surrounded by soft sediments obscuring hardened ruts, a water crossing or two, cobbles and boulders. The remoteness and variety of surfaces weekend off-road warriors dream of scared the life out of me, as it was a foreign environment requiring a skillset I had yet to acquire. My careful puttering allowed me to not drop the bike, but I can assure you the day was not without its share of close calls. Motorcycling is and always should be an absolute joy; therefore it's long overdue that



Down the hill



conference center includes a vehicle delivery and service center, full service garages, classrooms, a (really good) cafeteria and gift shop, flanked by a race track, paved practice areas for the on-road motorcycling program and an extensive network of off-road trails that wrap around the facility and

or one- or two-day off-road, there is something for everyone of any level. The student-instructor ratio is typically 4:1, with a full class consisting of 12 student and three instructors. Due to the inclement weather endured by the Carolinas last summer, only three students were signed up for my class with two instructors, Liz and Ricardo.

As one would expect, skill levels varied between students and class began by talking about our individual motorcycling background, goals and comfort levels. In our class, one student had previously taken the off-road course and had more experience than the remaining two. When the

Own your mistakes

group lectures ended, practice sessions were often separated so that one instructor (in this case, Ricardo) could lead us beginners in developing muscle memory through repetition for each exercise, and the other worked at a more advanced pace by putting



My class

serve as both the course for the off-road program as well as the GS Trophy North American trials.

BMW Performance Center began with offering Performance Driving School courses and did not provide motorcycle instruction until 2007. Performance Center Motorcycle Rider Training instructors are trained and certified in Hechlingen, Germany, at the BMW Enduro Park off-road facility. With three course offerings to choose from consisting of a one-day road,



Sandy "burnout"

skills into practice. While the instructors fostered a positive learning environment, there was no pressure and no requirement to participate in any of the exercises beyond our comfort zone. We always have the option to opt out.

After introductions, we were each introduced to our own brand new, water-cooled 2013 BMW R1200GS. I was hesitant, at first, to take on a bike twice the size of what I'm accustomed to riding, but instructor Liz convinced me otherwise. With the fall back plan of resorting to an F650GS or F800GS, we started the initial process of getting to know our BMW. Operating system and riding style modes were briefly covered and we practiced basic off-road turning postures and different mounting techniques. Interesting fact: one can easily walk around the bike in its fully upright position with only two fingers on it, essentially proving its balanced design for a 525-pound beast of a bike.

In the "only way to get your feet wet is to dive right in" fashion, off we went in search of dirt. Miraculously, the bike and I stayed upright...for the first part of the ride. Contrary to what I would have thought, the



balanced design and weight factor worked in my favor, making the bike possibly more forgiving than my F650GS in similar conditions.

First up on the off-road menu was to establish basic handling techniques in a gravel-packed clearing, including throttle control while off our motorcycle, turning, balancing with one foot, and the always fun follow-the-leader exercise. Moving onto the course, posture and handling was practiced for scenarios such as washboards, railroad ties, ruts, tight corners and riding through trees. For one of us (cough), the combination of riding through trees and muddy ruts didn't work out so well. But, the unspoken rule of any safely supervised off-road course is: if you haven't dropped the bike, you're not trying hard enough to apply the skills you've learned. That is one of many reasons BMW Performance Center encourages students to use school rentals for the courses in lieu of riding their own motorcycles. I agree, having ridden my own motorcycle in dirt so slowly and carefully, yet not skillfully.

Day 1 was designed to boost our confidence before undertaking our first dirt track and to provide us with a foundation on which to build a more challenging skill-set. It was the sort of expertly dispensed advice you wish someone had offered you before your first attempt at an other-than-paved surface. Day 2 coursework included a warm up of balance exercises; emergency braking with and without ABS; recovery after front and rear wheel lock; riding through water (if by chance it rained), sand, and gravel; and steep hill climbing techniques, including recovery. By Day 2, I found myself jotting down the techniques I'd learned from this massively informative course. With as much training as Performance Center crams into their course(s), it is no wonder that many students repeat the course every few years to refresh what they have learned.

I can attest to fulfilling the expectations of the BMW Performance Center mantra – "Feel everything, fear nothing." With a little instruction and practice, that is something we can all achieve.

Check them out on the web at www.bmwusa.com/performancecenter#overview and click on the motorcycle.

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