

Virginia Motorrad Werkstatt:

The role of the independent BMW motorcycle mechanic is more important now than it ever has been before.

As BMW struggles to gain market share in the United States, it is making changes at both the macro (intro-

duction of the S1000RR) and micro (using Japanese-style turn signal switches on all new models) levels. With every evolutionary or revolutionary move forward, BMW dealers are being forced further away from the ancestors of the current generation, the Airheads and Oilheads that many of us continue to love and ride. The typical independent mechanic, such as Anton Largiader, doesn't shy away from working on these older models; indeed, they may, at some level, not only relish working on the previous generations but also be the last bastions of the esoteric and specialized knowledge required to keep these old bikes on the road.

It's long been well known that if you're on the internet looking for technical information about BMW motorcycles, sooner or later you're going to run across Anton's website. That site is where many of us first learned about the subtle differences between the various generations of transmissions attached to the R1100-series bikes. Anton's repair shop, Virginia Motorrad Werkstatt (VMW), has been a fixture in central Virginia for the better part of a decade. It used to be in a cramped room at the back of his house – accessed only by riding up a precarious wooden ramp with a sharp curve at the top deck level – but now VMW is located in a spacious, easy-to-find spot in downtown Charlottesville.

When I visited Anton's shop, which he opened in December 2010, I found it to be a familiar and comforting place. There's just something about an independen-



This page: Top - Disassembling a transmission after it's been baked. Bottom - Anton performs routine maintenance, including replacing the fork seals, on a customer's R1150R.

Opposite page: Top - R1100 and R1150 generation final drives and gears in storage. Center - transmission internals; the notches on the smooth metal band are known as shift dogs. Bottom - Anton washes a set of forks before reinstalling them.

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Charlottesville's independent BMW shop

Text and photos
by Wes Fleming



dent mechanic's shop that conveys a sense of peace to this rider. It's not the lack of corporate logos or the missing racks of branded clothing so much as it's the air of hard-earned experience and an atmosphere of controlled chaos. From the parts washer to the electric oven, Anton's shop has that comfortable feeling. The smell of metal and grease permeates the air, letting you know you're in a room where work gets done.

One thing Anton doesn't miss about his formerly home-based operation is that infamous ramp. "Snow and rain made it pretty much unusable," he said, "and it was an eyesore." Both he and his wife, Meredith, were happy to see it go as part of their extensive home renovations. The new shop is extremely well organized and well lit. The two traditional lift stations are situated within easy reach of the toolbox and air hose; a workbench at the end of the toolbox extends the workspace effectively. In addition to the regular lifts, VMW features a sturdy, hand-built wooden lift where more long-term projects like restorations can be stationed, yet still easily be rolled around to free up floor space. An oven and a hydraulic press separate the shop floor from a low-ceilinged bike storage area, over which a large, open storage area filled with tires and other bulky items is located. Shelves filled with parts create a hallway of sorts along the left side of the space, creating both efficient storage and a natural flow from the shop sink near the front door back to the ladder that accesses the overhead storage area.

Anton's path to where he is now started with a job at Yuasa Batteries, which is also where he was when he got interested in motorcycles, starting with a K75. After moving to Virginia, his plan to keep spare parts on hand for travelers led to a stint in service school and

later, a position at Battley Cycles before he opened up his own shop.

VMW sees about 100 motorcycles a year through the shop, and Anton reports that much of what he does is routine maintenance. Such work is the bread and butter of any independent mechanic, as nearly all the time is billable, the parts needed are both minimal and easily available and the work is relatively simple. Complicated repairs might be more interesting due to the problem-solving involved, but according to Anton, they tend to tie up the lifts for longer periods of time.

A lot of the work that shifts through VMW doesn't involve the actual bike being in the shop, though. Anton gets a lot of components by mail – especially transmissions, which is the whole reason he keeps an electric oven in the shop. As I was able to witness, baking a transmission at 250° for an hour makes it a lot easier to disassemble. Bake it, remove some bolts from the housing, tap it with a mallet and it comes right apart. The aluminum and steel parts expand at

different rates, and a little time in the oven is just what they need to be easily dislodged from each other.

Even though Anton says some of the older Beemers are just plain pleasant to ride – including his all-time favorite bike, an R100GSPD that was stolen from him – he says the more modern bikes have "better engines, engine management, transmissions, brakes, suspension, everything." He says the increased complexity of the late models is offset by

their increased reliability. "The R1200GS is better in every way, but [the R100GSPD] is a classic and I'll probably own another one at some point." He currently uses a different R100GS, purchased from club member Chaz Fisher, as his off-road bike and rides Meredith's R1100GS on the street.

