

Flatfooting a BMW on a Budget

Options for the Vertically Challenged

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I OFTEN PONDER WHAT BMW'S ENGINEERS are thinking when they design "standard" height bikes that are only fit for Sultan Kösen to flatfoot. Indeed, it seems that with rare exception, BMW seat height hovers somewhere between noctilucous and nacreous. In recent years, the company has finally offered "low suspension" and "low seat" options to help riders whose inseams aren't measured in miles, but what about the rest of us? Those who have older models, or bought used Beemers? Especially those of us who do not have a spare \$2,000+ with which to purchase dedicated lower suspension bits?

Fret not, dear reader! There are saddle solutions out there which are easy to implement, reasonably priced, and which greatly enhance the overall comfort and ergonomics of your motorcycle. First, let's state the obvious: Swapping out the stock suspension for new or modified "low" shocks is a wonderful solution for those who can afford it. It will have not only the effect of dropping the bike but of improving the ride and handling as well. However, good suspension, professionally installed and tuned, can easily exceed \$2,000 or much more, depending on the hardware. This article will instead focus on how to get the job done for much less than half of that figure, on a stock 2009 RT test mule. All of the lessons learned here apply to most other BMW models as well.

We start with the seat, which is the centerpiece of our efforts. The stock seats are a great contributor to the ride height issue. Our 2009 RT's seat height clocked in at a stratospheric 32.5 inches (measurements taken on a stock 2009 ESA-equipped R1200RT with suspension and seat completely unladen.) For my 5'8" tall 30" inseam frame, this meant the cumbrous "tiptoe dance" whenever I had to maneuver or back up the motorcycle under my own motive

power. Stopping also meant using tiptoes to keep the bike upright. Uncomfortable and cumbersome – even dangerous!

Our search for a solution to the high seat height issue led us to Bill Mayer Saddles of Ventura, California, a company with a sterling reputation in the BMW community as a manufacturer of fine custom saddles. "Rocky" Mayer, eldest son of Bill, guided us through the process of manufacturing a saddle custom tailored to lower seat height to a manageable level. This isn't an off-the-rack solution – it's specifically built to fine tune many individual variables. Ordering the seat involves answering a series of questions about rider height, inseam, weight, posture, typical miles ridden per day, seat height issues, riding style, and more – with the same applying to the pillion area if needed. Photographs of the motorcycle and traces of your rear's outline on the stock seat must also be provided, to show typical positioning. This information is all used by Mayer in selecting from five different foam densities and a multitude of shapes, as the saddle is built up to each rider's uniquely precise requirements.

Once this information was provided, we shipped off our stock seats to Mayer and had the finished product back in hand within 10 days. Our tester was the "Endura" rider and pillion model in vinyl. An upgrade to the genuine leather "Ultima" covering is



Figure 1: Bill Mayer Custom Low Seat installed

a little extra change, should you prefer. Immediately upon inspection, one can see the difference in the lower, wider profile and feel the firmness of the Mayer cushioning vs. stock. All seams are straight and true, and the padding material on the pillion section is substantial, as you can see in **Figure 1**, resulting in a built-in backrest which helps support the pilot's lower back on longer trips. Installation of the Mayer seat is a sub-60 second no brainer, since the stock pans are used, along with the OEM plug for the heating elements if so equipped.

Obviously, seat comfort is a very subjective issue; but to say that there is a profound night and day difference in all functional facets of the Mayer saddle vs. stock would be a severe understatement. As we all know, after about two hours, the stock BMW RT seat feels about as comfortable as sitting on a bare wooden plank. The soft, unsupportive foam eventually collapses to the point where the rider might as well be perched on the frame rails themselves – or at least, it certainly feels that way! The Mayer saddle, by contrast, feels like your bum is being continually hugged, with plenty of snug



Figure 2: Sitting on the stock seat – note the tiptoe positioning.

lateral support and a refreshingly firm base. The tester seat “broke in” as the miles wore on, and now feels as though someone made an exact mold of my butt which I fit perfectly into on each ride. It is very comfy on long distance trips, without any of the sore points, hot spots, or general discomfort associated with the stock seat – a striking improvement! The overall feeling is one of sitting “in” the bike, rather than “on” it, similar to how some cruiser-type bikes position the rider – though in this case, one still has a commanding view of the road, as befitting a proper sport-touring machine like the RT.

But what of the tip-toeing, our primary concern? Banished for good! The stock seat height’s 32.5” has been replaced with the Mayer saddle’s more reasonable 30.7”. Note that’s not a direct translation to bringing your feet 1.8” inches closer to the ground, because the Mayer seat is wider than stock by approximately two inches at the widest point and has a “dished” shape; but as you can see in **Figures 2 and 3**, the net effect is that I’m now flatfooting my RT. For my frame, the Mayer saddle simultaneously solved the height problem and remedied the substandard comfort issue as well. But in certain cases, there is an unintended circumstance from this solution which must be dealt with in turn.

A lower seat moves the rider’s bum down, but the footpegs are still in the same



Figure 3: Sitting on the Bill Mayer saddle – note the flatfoot positioning.

location. Depending on your inseam, it can be just enough to lead to a “bunched up” feeling in the legs after a few hours. Enter Suburban Machinery’s Footpeg Lowering Kit, shown in **Figure 4**. As the name implies, these aluminum brackets move the stock footpeg location 1.45” down and 0.38” forward, just enough to recapture what was lost on the saddle swap. Once installed, some minor adjustments of the brake and shift lever locations may be in order to fine tune placement to your particular tastes. Obviously, the shorter your inseam, the less need you will have for this kit. Our suggestion is to try the seat first for awhile, and then opt for the footpeg relocators if necessary. In my particular case, I found maximum comfort with the relocators installed. Likewise, some riders may experiment with bar-backs if reach is affected – in this case, it wasn’t. Readers interested in the subject of motorcycle ergonomics should

check out <http://cycle-ergo.com/>.

In conclusion, we have transformed a stock-height BMW R1200RT from intimidatingly lofty to perfectly manageable for the vertically challenged. Backing up and wheeling around is no longer the gawky tiptoe two-step, but more a confident flat-footed affair. In the process we have vastly improved long-distance comfort and ergonomics, and best of all, we have done this for a bargain. Bill Mayer’s custom solo seat in vinyl starts at only \$444 (substantially less than many off-the-rack aftermarket seats,) and Suburban Machinery’s Footpeg Lowering Kit is \$169.95. Not much to spend for such a worthwhile functional renovation!

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Figure 4: Suburban Machinery footpeg lowering brackets installed – move stock footpeg location 1.45” down and 0.38” forward.