

Bill's Garage

Column by **Bill Drago**
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The "Idiot" Light

If you are old enough, you might remember a song by the band Three Dog Night, "Mama Told Me Not to Come!" We have those premonitions now and then, even without the help of Mom. I had one as I tromped around the Rawhyde Ranch in Castaic, California last May, looking for the keys to the KLR 650 I was supposed to ride in the American Adventure Rider's Challenge. I finally gave up on the key and strolled over to KTM's Paul Krause of Paris-Dakar and Baja 1000 fame. Paul was kind enough to introduce me to Robbie, the KTM factory representative assigned to that event.

"Hi, Robbie. Nice to meet you. Can I borrow a bike?"

"Sure, Bill. Which one do you want?"

I sucked in a line of drool as my eyes darted between the new 990 Adventure and its rowdy brother, the 100-horsepower, 950 Super Enduro. What a machine! I've wanted to ride one since I first saw it at the Fort Worth Motorcycle Show last November. "I'll take that one." A warning light flickered in my brain, but I ignored it.

Robbie checked the fuel and oil while I lowered tire pressure for the gnarly off-road conditions I expected to encounter. Two new "friends" had invited me along on a "fun ride" before Day One of the Challenge began later that afternoon. My new friends rode 105-horsepower, BMW HP2's. The light flared up again. I paid it no mind.

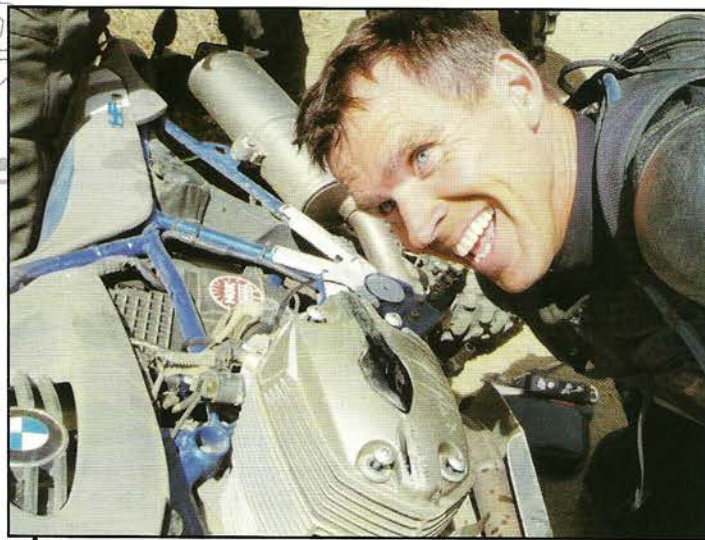
My hip was almost unhinged, slinging my leg over the 37-inch saddle. I felt like my wife

says she feels when I try to get her to ride my KLX. Small. We fired up our engines and I eagerly fell in line as we wound our way out to Interstate 5 and turned north. I soon learned that 12 psi in a fire-breathing KTM 950 feels a lot different than 12 psi in my 30-horse KLX. Especially at the, shall we say, "brisk" speeds we ran for some 30 miles before exiting onto a mountain road.

Gary Kepple set a good pace down the narrow, paved park road on his HP2. When the road turned to dirt, we stopped to wait for his friend Mike Moore, also riding an HP2, Don Rotundo on a KTM 525 (the little bike among us), and Blaine Dehmlow on his Ducati 695 Monster dirt bike, the "Terra Mostro."

A few miles into our ride, we began to switch off, each wanting to try out the Terra Mostro and the Super Enduro. When Gary climbed aboard the KTM, I took the reins on his HP2 and followed along. By now my mental warning light was glowing bright red, but it had been on so long I hardly noticed as we did our best imitation of a pack of Pike's Peak racers.

Suddenly we came upon the dust of a dozen big adventure bikes. These were the 1200 GS's, KTM 990's and a mix of KLR and F 650's, also out for a warm-up before the afternoon's event. As I threaded my way through the pack, a black 950 Adventure slewed sideways, right smack in front of my speeding HP2. He hit the dirt like a brain-shot buffalo. I swerved right, hoping to miss the massive obstruction, but I was launched airborne off his rear tire and found myself heading for a cliff. I landed in the windrow from a road grader with my front wheel peeking off the edge, still rolling, "tic-tic-tic." Keith, the KTM pilot, helped me



Gary smiles to keep from crying, note two-inch slit in valve cover!

right the BMW. When we did, oil spewed from the left valve cover like blood from a severed artery. Now what? Anybody have a tow rope?

Gary had backtracked and rode up on our little party before I could kick dirt over the evidence... not that he could miss the two-inch slit in his magnesium valve cover. Gary was a true, albeit new, friend when he saw the damage. He didn't deck me. Someone did mention the 20K price tag on HP2's, but I gave that comment the same attention as the idiot light.

We patched the valve cover with a JB Weld "Tootsie Roll" and hot-footed it back to the rider's meeting a half hour late. Someone had warned them of our plight, so they had held the meeting for us. We walked in amongst their jeers, grinning and covered with sweat.

Two days later, I was scouting the course for the final set of elements when Gary rode up on his HP2. "Climb on," he urged. "I'll take you to the top."

My internal warning light flashed on again as I looked at the nearly vertical trail ahead. It finally went out for good as I squelched the judgment my mother tried to impart many years before.



The temperature was in the 90's and it was a long hike to the top, so I climbed aboard. I honestly expected him to take the road, but no. Gary immediately turned uphill, taking the shortcut which most riders wouldn't have tried even without a passenger.

"Stop! Don't do this!" I ordered, but Gary gave my entreaties as much credence as I had given my warning light. It was like being on an amusement park ride that you knew had been assembled by a pack of Cub Scouts just before pool time. The probability of a catastrophe was off the scale. Halfway up I began to feel cocky. My new pal handled that bike like it was on rails. We hardly bobbed the whole way to the top. I breathed easier once back on level ground, at least until he pointed his headlight back down the mountain. We were going back the way we had come! It was then that the song came to mind again and I heard, "that's not the way to have fun," or maybe, at least sometimes... it is. ■