

PRO RIDER

ARE FRIENDS ELECTRIC?

DTC EVO, DSC, DQS EVO and Bosch EVO ABS – can you guess the bike? Well, if those MotoGP inspired electronic gizmos from the (very) sporty Ducati Panigale V4R don't do it for you, how about the more adventure orientated Dynamic ESA, ASC and Motorrad ABS adorning the top-end BMW R1250GS? It was the rider of one of these Beemers that got me thinking about writing this article.



We were a small group of five and all very pleased with our machines, but none more so than the Adventure owner – his bike was the proverbial dog! He didn't need to hear about braking techniques because his bike could out brake anything, changes in road surfaces were not a hazard warranting any particular concern as his bike could read the road and soak up everything; and all of this came with the added benefit that he didn't have to think about riding at all as his bike had an electronic brain outsmarting anyone. I did have to restrain a snigger when another member of our group asked, "Why don't you just pay someone else to ride it then?!"

Fair enough, BMW's current anti-lock braking system (ABS) is leaps and bounds ahead of their original version launched in the late 80s, and will no doubt save your bacon if it's a challenge not to grab a handful and stomp on the rear brake when faced with some idiot pulling out in

front; likewise Ducati's EVO ABS. And no doubt the German's automatic stability control (ASC) when talking to its friend the dynamic electronic suspension adjustment (ESA), will give the Ducati traction control (DTC) and Ducati Slide Control (DSC) a run for their money as it keeps the hulk of the R1250GS on the straight and narrow no matter how poor the road surface and rider's ability to twist the throttle accordingly. A flick on the Italian's DQS EVO would have the Panigale quick-shifting into the distance before the BMW had a chance to draw breath though!

So, was the rider I poked fun at (sorry if you are reading this) right though? Surely these electronic rider safety aids (ERSAs? made that one up) are a great advance and should be welcomed by us all as we try and reduce bike riding casualties? Of course, they are. BMW's pioneering work on ABS helped reduce the bean can-sized pump and weighty sensors fitted to the K100 down to the neat and tidy lighter weight systems of today that are even cheap enough to fit to the majority of LAMS bikes. The other gizmos mentioned generally appear on the spec sheet of higher-end bikes, though traction control is increasingly being found on middleweights and L plater machines.

However, apart from the obvious question as to what happens when the ECU dedicated to driving the ERSAs calls it quits or a piece of wind-blown branch flicks up and tears off the wire to a front brake ABS sensor, do we need to be a bit wary as we increasingly rely on these aids? No system is clever enough to determine a rapid wheel deceleration is leading to wheel-slip, lock up and skid if its brain or sensors are disconnected. These are no doubt rare occurrences, but wouldn't it be nice to have

been humble enough to practice some braking drills in a carpark before everything went pear-shaped out on the open road? Same deal for semi-active suspension. Sure this beats the age-old skinned knuckles from wielding a C-Spanner each time a pillion wants to upset the stability of your bike, or in preparation for a ride along a section known for potholes or a bit of 'off-roading', or even the angst of twisting a knob on a remote preload system. But wouldn't it be useful to know how a dodgy road surface affects your bike if you give it a handful rather than just rely on the gizmos to do their thing?

By all means, buy a bike with every ERSA available – ABS is certainly worth having at the very least – but know what these examples of electronic wizardry are doing and why, and without scaring yourself too much learn what they are compensating for and what to do if they should fail. Knowing that hauling in the anchors with all our might at the instant we see a vehicle cross our path in the rain, or applying all 200hp to the back wheel of our superbike on a patch of gravel isn't going to end well will not only increase our admiration for the electronics that save us, but maybe, just maybe, make us safer and smoother riders into the bargain.

The title of this piece gives my age away, but Gary Newman's electro-pop 'Tubeway Army' was pretty cool back in the day. Google the lyrics, and you'll find the verse pondering "You know I hate to ask but, are 'friends' electric? Mine's broke down, and now I've no one to love." Aside from losing the love of our life cossetted in the garage, think about who might lose the love of their life if the electronics go west (another great 80s band) and we don't know how to stop ourselves joining them

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