

Where grey matter matters as much as petrol

Robert Koeber traveled everywhere on his motorcycle: Kenya, Japan, Russia, and Iran. But the Iron Butt Rally through the USA pushed him to his limits. Impressions from a tour where the goal is to outsmart the others.

BY WOLFGANG GÖRL

Back in July 2013, things really went wrong. When Robert Koeber sat in the hotel lobby in Pittsburgh at the end, after there was nothing left to win, watching as the other riders trickled in, he wrote in the rally report on his website (hutzlmandl.com) that the whole ordeal was "simply bad luck." Yes, you could say that, despite the almost outrageous decision by the rally organizers to classify Koeber and his Honda XBR 500 in the "hopeless class" even before the start—essentially grouping him with those desperados who supposedly had no chance of reaching the finish line with the minimum score after eleven grueling days. And for the American participants, he and his motorcycle were indeed a lost cause. But still: "With my little Honda, I was a bit of a character." Sure, let them mock; they simply didn't know Koeber's good old XBR 500. It was, and still is, indestructible—it had never let him down. He was determined to show the Americans what he was made of. After all, he was from Bavaria, specifically from Miesbach, and as an educated Bavarian, he knew his Achternbusch: "You have no chance, but take it!"

Robert Koeber sits comfortably at a living room table in Munich, sipping his espresso as he talks. He tells stories of his adventures on the road, of roaring engines, and the freedom of riding a bike. He is a captivating storyteller. Listening to him, you might think you're sitting in a theater. Koeber slips into different roles—sometimes he's a redneck in the American West, then back to being himself. And then there's the story of the little Honda: Koeber chuckles with a hint of pain—those Americans weren't entirely wrong after all.

Things started off well after the rally began—two or three thousand miles without any major issues. But then, on the long road to Sacramento, the tires began to cause problems, and for a really silly reason: "My tire dealer accidentally mounted a front tire on the rear." Valuable time was lost. The next day, the gearbox also began to fail, and Koeber could no longer shift properly. This was a real threat. He had planned to ride to Los Angeles, Tucson, and New Orleans—but with a broken gearbox? No chance. Gradually, it dawned on him: that was it. "Continuing would have been too risky." So, the rally was over—for him, at least. Reaching the necessary point total was impossible. Koeber limped back to Pittsburgh with great difficulty. "Okay, I guess I'm not a Finisher." Only those who collect enough points at the end can call themselves a "Finisher"—Finisher of the "Iron Butt Rally," the queen of motorcycle endurance rallies. Well, it was simply bad luck, but not the final word. He knew he would return.

But what kind of rally is it anyway? Iron Butt? A polite translation is: iron bottom. Koeber calls it the "mother of all rallies". It was in 1984 when the bikers with the indestructible buttocks first roared through the USA under the name "Iron Butt Rally" (the English and Americans write the word without the "e" at the end). It was "a weird idea from a couple of motorcycle buddies," says Koeber. Every two years the Iron Butt Association calls for a rally. Around 100 male and female riders take part, experienced bikers who have to apply and are selected after rigorous testing. No beginners, but also no professionals. Support vehicles are not tolerated, nor is sponsorship. "Everyone is on their own," says Koeber.

The tire dealer fitted a front tire to the rear.

The Iron Butt Rally is a tough test for man and machine. Eleven days and more than 10,000 miles crisscrossing the United States lie ahead for the knights on the iron horse. And every participant knows: this is not a speed race. Not a speed race like the Tourist Trophy on the Isle of Man. It's not about doing the fastest laps or being the fastest to race from A to B. "This is not riding a motorcycle without regard for losses, it does require a bit of brainpower."

In fact, grey matter is at least as important in this sport as oil and petrol. Put simply, it's all about collecting as many points as possible without exceeding the time limit. The drivers are given a wide selection of destinations the evening before - there can be more than a hundred - and then they go back to their lonely hotel room, where they start thinking. The question of all questions is: How can I reach as many destinations as possible in the given time, preferably those for which there are many

points? This requires the ability to combine things and to find one's way of orientation.

Koeber, who is considered a kind of mastermind in the European rally scene, gives lectures on this, and at this moment he also brings science into play: "There is a mathematical problem here that is still unsolved. It's called the 'Travelling Salesman Problem'." To understand this, you have to imagine a traveling salesman who has to visit many customers who live far and wide across the country. What, the man will ask himself, is the shortest and fastest route to visit all the addresses? That is a damn tricky question, especially for a rally biker who has to consider the weather, traffic volume, the condition of the roads, petrol stations and much more. "Planning is usually half the battle. It's about being the smartest."

It's easy to see that Koeber has a good hand in the competition of cleverness when he tells his adventures with wit and parody. Of course, he has an insatiable passion for motorcycles - he often speaks of his "moped" with affectionate understatement - but Koeber has plenty of other things on his mind. Chemistry first and foremost, specifically chemical analysis. He wrote his doctoral thesis at the Technical University of Munich (TUM) on pollutants in soot. He had previously studied chemistry at Ludwig Maximilian University, worked part-time at the pharmaceutical company Hexal in Holzkirchen, and one day - he was already at TUM - his doctoral supervisor asked him if he wanted to continue his research in Barcelona. Of course he did.

Later he worked as a laboratory manager at Munich Biotech in Martinsried and the Tyrolean Sandoz branch until an offer came from Belgium "that I couldn't refuse". At the EU Commission's "Joint Research Centre" in Geel they needed a quality manager for the reference materials department. That sounded promising, especially as they paid well. So off he went to Belgium. Marie José, his partner from Spain, was already there, and since then the two have lived in Retie, in a shared house with two cats, several guitars, for which Koeber has little time anymore, and various motorcycles. Occasionally he hides away in the kitchen, he is a gifted cook.

Whether in the kitchen or on the road – Robert Koeber doesn't give up easily. He also had a bone to pick with the Iron Butt Rally. 2013, the unfortunate end – it couldn't be left like that. Four years later, he's back at it again, with a very clear motto: "I just have to get through. I have to finish, everything else is unimportant." To achieve this, he has given up his faithful and beloved Honda XBR. He had a more powerful machine shipped to the USA, a Honda ST 1100, used, "but everything has been brought up to scratch."

The start and finish point is Minneapolis in the US state of Minnesota. There is an exciting atmosphere in the rally hotel, where the drivers come together, celebrate and exchange experiences. "It's a bit like the Olympics: the world's best meet there." There are some daring types among them, most of them in the second half of their lives. Some are shaggy guys with long hair and Santa Claus beards. "You'd think they're rockers, but in reality they have companies and endless money." Trump would probably have the majority in the paddock, says Koeber. He is pleased that a few black people are now taking part too.

They all have to complete a complicated course full of formalities: proof of insurance, safety checks, instructions, until they are finally in the parking lot at eight in the morning. Koeber remembers the moment exactly: "Everyone is feverish with excitement, and there are a lot of spectators too." A little more palaver, and then it's off, orderly and disciplined, as the starting referee ordered. "If I point the finger at you, then you drive off – and only then!"

Koeber doesn't want to take any risks. He'd rather take a safe route than break down in some godforsaken place. From Minneapolis, first into Chicago, where there are a few points to be had, then via Cincinnati to Tennessee. He's heading for "iconic cities"; he knows them all from songs: Nashville, of course, Memphis – and Rocky Top. The Osborne Brothers sang about the city, and with their melody on his lips, Koeber roars through Tennessee. Beforehand, he photographed a dinosaur statue in Rocky Top; animals and imaginary creatures like the Appalachian Yeti Big Food are the theme of the rally this time, and he gets points for them. Finally, Jackson. Another music city. He has something to sing again, Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazlewood in memory: "We got married in a fever..."

Music has always played a big role in Koeber's life, even at a young age he played guitar in a rock band. He is from Miesbach, where he was born in 1968 in the now defunct hospital that his great-grandfather had planned. He grew up with his father, who gave his son more of a free rein, which was just what Robert liked.

"I've always had this feeling of freedom." Freedom also included traveling to faraway countries and cities. Fascinated, little Robert leafed through the photo albums filled with pictures of his dad on tours in the 1950s – on a motorbike, of course. He then begged his father for money to buy his first motorbike, a Suzuki GT 80 L. Robert was only 15 and didn't have a driver's license, but he drove 6,000 kilometers around the district on a trial basis. Later (with a driver's license) he took his first trips to Switzerland, Austria and Italy. Once he went to Milan, with his first girlfriend clinging to his back. There it was, freedom as he understands it: "Freedom in the sense of discovery." Back to the Iron Butt Rally, the next day. There is the Mississippi, there is an endless bridge. "It's always something special to

ride across the Mississippi." The heat rises, and suddenly - Koeber shows us how - his Honda purrs: "Bs-bs-bssss-bssss-bsssss." No, not again! Koeber looks for the cause, but finds nothing. After half an hour the machine has recovered. He carries on, "no idea what was going on." In the second section of the rally, on the road to Amarillo (Koeber sings: "Is this the way to Amarillo?"), in the middle of the desert, the machine starts making strange noises again. Brrb, brrb, brrrb. And then the engine goes out completely. What's going on now? He pushes his vehicle almost a kilometer to the only tree, bleeds the gas line - and lo and behold: it works again.

The big question is: how long will his bike last?

But not for long. The breakdowns continued over the next few days. "I noticed that it's always in the second half of the day when it gets warm." At night in the hotel he googled around and found what he was looking for. Aha, the fuel pump! That's the problem. What to do? Koeber prematurely terminates an attempt by a local helper to install a different type of fuel pump. That can't end well. Instead, he keeps filling the tank with cold petrol, which cools it down and helps for a while. The crucial question now is: how long will the machine last?

In moments of need like these, it's good that Koeber has a lot of experience. After the turn of the millennium, the Orient was his preferred destination. He visited Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iran, Oman, Dubai, and Turkey. He also drove through Syria, when the country had not yet been destroyed by civil war. In 2011 he flew his machine from Mombasa in Kenya down to Cape Town, and then up to Windhoek, Namibia. Eight years later, he would undertake a similar trek: from Belgium via Poland and Latvia to Moscow, then on the Trans-Siberian Highway to Vladivostok, from where he took the ferry to Japan. 12,000 kilometers in 16 days, all on the ever-trusty Honda XBR 500. He wanted to use it to visit the Honda factory in Kumamoto, but the gatekeepers were merciless: no entry without a written registration several months in advance. And in between, there were always rallies in Europe. To date, he has taken part in 52, and won half of them.

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Anyone who has spent so much time on a motorcycle knows what to do in precarious situations. The thing with the fuel pump: Koeber knows that he can forget about the big, high-scoring route from Texas up the west coast and then via Seattle back to Minneapolis. The heat would be far too much

for his sensitive hot-head. "It doesn't matter, the placing doesn't matter. The main thing is to get through. I just need the minimum number of points." When he arrives in Buffalo, he still has two days to reach his destination. To avoid the heat, he rides at night. After Chicago, the Honda starts bucking again. Koeber drags himself along, his machine like a sick horse. Every hundred kilometers he gives the horse fresh, cool fuel. Then the machine sputters again. Two cylinders have failed - fifty kilometers from the finish. "No matter, keep driving, rolling, rolling." At the last traffic light in Minneapolis, he almost couldn't move, he says. And then he made it, 20 hours before the official finish line. There were still no spectators, no applause, no cheering, no ballyhoo. "I arrived first, in a completely empty parking lot." It didn't matter. The only thing that counted was that he had enough points. Robert Koeber is a finisher. Finally. The mistake he made in 2013 has been made up for.

Last year, he threw himself into the Iron Butt adventure again. But this story isn't quite as exciting. Everything went great, the equipment was right, the weather was perfect, "I rolled comfortably through the continent," says Robert Koeber. In the end, he came in 16th. Only once was a European better.

As a child, Robert Koeber leafed through his father's travel photo albums with fascination. He has now collected a lot of pictures himself: in 2008 he was in Dubai and Iran on his motorbike, and in Central Anatolia he had to have his Honda XBR brought to the other bank by boat (above). In 2019 he drove to Japan and passed Red Square (right).

"I've always had this feeling of freedom." The biker from Miesbach reached Vladivostok after 16 days and 12,000 kilometres through Siberia. On his tour to the desert city of Palmyra in 2006 (below), he had a lot of contact with the local population. Here he explains his motorbike and what he has in his luggage.

Photos: Catherina Hess (1); private