

Iron Butt Rally
Ojai, California
8/29/99 - Day 0

This place has been like a war zone the day before a war comes to town.

People chatter nervously without actually communicating any meaningful information. They go to bed late, get up early, and wander around aimlessly the rest of the time. On the way here Michael McDaniel and Carolyn DeMelo, riding two-up on a Ducati, stopped by a weddings-while-U-wait chapel on The Strip in Las Vegas and got married. Now really, is this not straight from the script of a 1942 war movie? In the next room I can almost hear someone singing "There'll Be Bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover."

This is the second (and last) day of registration and tech inspection. Ninety-eight bikes will head for Kennewick, Washington tomorrow morning, a field 25% larger than that which took to the starting blocks in 1997. They come from places as far away as Great Britain, Germany, and Australia. For the first time Iron Butt rallymaster Mike Kneebone, like Queen Victoria before him, can legitimately claim that the sun never sets on his empire.

Pat Widder, the king of electric clothes, opened his shop in this fern-bar town in the mountains of southern California to accommodate contestants and rally volunteers. Parking lots and alleys around the building have been swamped with some of the most exotic motorcycles imaginable. The high-tech craze has settled upon these riders with a fury. Global positioning satellite units are a dime a dozen --- even Leonard Aron's '46 Indian Chief has one --- as are auxiliary fuel cells, notebook computers, monster driving lights, and mapping programs.

Most of the machines in the rally are heavily prepared BMWs and Hondas, usually not more than a few years old. But there are aged and bizarre ones too --- Aron's Chief, the beautifully restored BMW R75/5s of Doug Jacobs and Kevin Chase (with odometers so primitive that they read only to the nearest mile), and Ken Hatton's hopelessly underpowered Suzuki GN125, essentially a hair dryer with wheels. He wants to be the smallest bike ever to finish this rally. I'm wondering how he's even going to climb through the mountains north of Ojai, much less push that little piglet around the entire United States.

One of the truly competitive bikes --- Morris Kruemcke's Gold Wing --- had its picture in Motorcyclist magazine earlier this summer. It is justifiably famous. The machine carries, in addition to the customary warehouse of electronic weaponry, four 8" PIAA driving lights and a drain tube that enables Houston's favorite son to avoid stopping for nature's calls. Morris once rode this machine over 1,200 miles without putting his feet on the ground. If you go for a long trip with him, do what you can to stay in the lead.

If the machines are tough, the machines' owners are even tougher. This is easily the finest group of riders ever to have entered the Iron Butt Rally. Three former winners of the IBR are here (Rick Morrison, Gary Eagan, and Ross Copas). The best rider never to have won a major rally, Peter Hoogeveen, returns after heartbreaking second place finishes in '91 and '97. The top three riders in the this year's five-day Butt Lite --- Eric Jewell, Gary Parece, and Richard Bernecker --- are ready to go, as are the two top finishers in the recent Where in the Hell Is Peter Heesch rally in Nevada. Virginia's Paul Taylor showed up yesterday on his BMW R1100GS. In his brief career he has run just three rallies, all on the east coast, but has won each one. Eddie James, Shane Smith, Mary Sue Johnson, Tom Loftus, Heinz Kugler, and Harold Brooks all were highly-placed IBR finishers two years ago. They've returned. So has Fran Crane, this time

on her BMW K1200RS. I know of no steadier, more determined rider in this group of world-class contestants.

Tonight former Iron Butt finisher and neurosurgeon Mike Murphy gave the group a safety lecture before dinner. The rules were reviewed. Mike Kneebone assigned numbers to the riders and handed out the first leg's bonuses. There's nothing for them to do now but figure out a route north and try to get some rest.

They may have trouble, but I plan on sleeping like a baby and dreaming about bluebirds and white cliffs.

Bob Higdon