

ALONE

BUT NEVER ALONE

by Ineke Koene



Swapping the Dutch lowlands for a year in the mountains of Colorado seemed exciting enough—but I wanted more. From previous visits to the U.S. I knew how vast and beautiful the backcountry of the West could be, and I felt a strong urge to see and explore more of it.

Because of my interest in American history, I was drawn to retrace the *Old Oregon Trail*: 2,000 miles from Independence, Missouri, to Portland, Oregon. But, no wagon drawn by oxen for me—instead I chose a 17-horsepower *Yamaha*—a small bike, especially by modern overlanding standards, but big enough to do the job. Since I planned to follow the original trail as closely as possible, quite a bit of off-roading would be involved, so it was important that I be able to pick up the bike. After all, I was going to do this trip alone, and worst case scenarios involved empty stretches of desert with temperatures going well above 100°F, where the only “help” would come from vultures and rattlesnakes.

My budget was limited, another factor making a used \$1,000 '87 XT 350 a perfect fit. It didn't have fuel injection, so an occasional change of pilot jet would be necessary. It came with a butt-numbing Japanese “saddle” that felt like a piece of wood after riding more than 70 miles, and no fancy custom-made aluminium cases either, just a pair of waterproof saddlebags mounted on a homemade rack of bent aluminium tubes bought from the local hardware store for \$15.

A cheap bike made the investment a lot easier, but a 25-year-old bike also has its down sides. Only a week before I planned to leave, the bike decided to stop altogether. It took my husband and friends a full day in the garage before they could coax it back to life (the culprit turned out to be a damaged wire that led to the ignition generator coil). That event made me realize just how vulnerable I was going to be, and I began to have second thoughts. It wasn't as if I was traveling the Sahara on my own, or trying to cross an Angolan minefield... or even riding the

Author, Ineke Koene, standing proud and happy on her Yamaha XT 350.



infamous Road of Bones in muddy and mosquito-infested Siberia. But, it was exciting enough for me. Likewise, there wouldn't be a back-up crew helping with technical issues, I carried only the most basic tools and spare parts. Cell phone service would also be sporadic, at best. The wisest thing was get the bike in perfect shape before leaving, do the proper maintenance on the road, and hope for the best.

Meanwhile, I kept telling my parents just how safe traveling through the U.S. is for a woman on her own. But, whenever doubt arose, I reminded myself that this trip was about adventure. I wasn't just going from A to B, I wanted to see this country, meet the people, and find out if I could make this trip on my own. The Netherlands, where I'm from, is a small country where you are, at most, four hours away from home, or a telephone call away from road service or help from friends. Nothing compared to the enormous land that I was about to cross. This would be an adventure!

Between 1840 and 1860, an estimated 300,000 Americans went on an adventure, too. They traveled west in search of new futures, often to Oregon to farm, or to California to dig for gold. The remnants of the trail took me through the green prairie hills of Kansas, mostly on very passable and

well maintained gravel roads. On these roads, I was greeted by every pick-up truck driver, either with a raised hand, or, in case of a really cool guy, with just a finger lifted slowly from the steering wheel. It felt reassuring, if I was to have a breakdown here, help wouldn't be far away.

Eastern Nebraska was still green, but the farther west I rode, the drier and hotter it became. This is open ranch country, where the yucca, sagebrush and prickly pear rule. This was where the "real" West started—exactly what I was looking for.

Although the landscape seemed unapproachable, the people certainly were not. Countless times I was asked: "Where you from?" or "Where you goin'?" People were genuinely interested in strangers, and glowed with pride when they heard I was fascinated by the history of their nation. There is a collective national pride in this country, and I couldn't help but notice how many people like to show this by their exuberant display of flags, something we cynical northern Europeans sometimes mistake for fanatical patriotism.

My journey wasn't without mishap, however, and I had a skirmish with a land owner for illegally riding on her land. Being accustomed to riding in the "park" that is the Netherlands, the whole concept of trespassing was completely new to me—despite the very obvious posted warning signs, usually decorated with multiple bullet holes. But, once I apologized, she became very friendly and even showed me an alternative route to take.

Of course I couldn't escape Mother Nature's torments. High temperatures during the day and strong winds in the afternoons were common. And, occasionally I was given a little extra attention. Not long after riding into a dark sky somewhere near Glendo, Wyoming, I felt the first raindrops exploding on my jacket. For about 20 minutes I rode through a swirling downpour. But soon nature's bad temper was over, the sun broke through the clouds, and dried my soaked riding gear within minutes. I was riding off road through the beautiful Black Hills, in a world refreshed, all the while being stared at by curious antelope from a safe distance—making me realize just how lucky I was to make this trip.



An Oregon Trail beauty pageant.





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Soon afterwards, I crossed the Rocky Mountains over the south pass, a much-dreaded route by overlanders. The landscape has hardly changed in the 150 years since the first immigrants made their way. The narrow, rocky 7,411-foot path along bloodcurdling precipices would have had barely enough room for their wagons. And, the vast landscape of sloping hills only seemed to attract two living things: sagebrush and cows.

Despite the fact that I could only carry about three gallons of gas in my tank, I never had any problems finding fuel. Even the smallest town usually had a gas station, but to be really safe, I adopted the habit of topping off my tank whenever an opportunity arose, so I never ran into trouble.

Finding food, too, was never a problem. I made a point of only visiting the small, local places to eat, and I soon learned the Golden Rule of eating in the West: The more pick-up trucks in the parking lot of a restaurant or diner, the better the food.

In Idaho, I followed the Snake River. After this huge, winding estuary, I found the final waterway of this trip—the mighty Columbia. From 1846 on, immigrants

had only two options when they reached the river: Sell all their livestock and travel over water, or take the road built by Sam Barlow. I decided on Barlow road, since traveling via river wasn't exactly what the little X7 was designed for.

It took several days to navigate through the Mount Hood wilderness, one of Oregon's biggest off-road playgrounds, but I eventually managed to reach Oregon City. This was the end of the trail, I'd made it in one piece after about a month on the road. And the city marked the end of a fantastic, 2,000-mile journey through this enormous and beautiful country.

I wouldn't call it a life-changing experience, but I did learn a thing or two about being on the road. And, it didn't take long to realize that my fears about safety, or getting stranded in the middle of nowhere, had almost prevented the trip. I met so many kind and friendly people along the way, and I learned that no matter how deserted the land seemed to be, there was always help around the next corner. You have to let go of your fears and anxieties, because no matter what happens, you'll never be able to control or prevent everything. That's all part of the adventure. **ADV**