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196 countries, 196 summits

"Our definition of vacation isn't lying on the beach"

Nov 9, 2022 at 6:32 p.m | Reading time: 5 mins



At 1974 meters, Pico Turquino is the highest peak in Cuba. Eric (left) and Matthew Gilbertson scaled it on June 11, 2015, completing the highest points in North America. (Photo: Jake Osterberg/Gilbertson Brothers)

Eric and Matthew Gilbertson want to climb the highest point in every country in the world. What helps: luck, bribes - and sometimes a packed lunch for hungry police officers. An interview.

Interview by Christian Brüngger



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Notice



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To press

The life goal of twins Eric and Matthew Gilbertson, 36, is to get to the top. 196 high points are on their list, in all 193 member states of the United Nations as well as in the Palestinian Territories, the Vatican and Antarctica. Although height is a relative term and some peaks are just small peaks. The spectrum ranges from Mount Villingili (5.1 meters) in the Maldives to Mount Everest (8848 meters) in China and Nepal. The brothers from the US state of Kentucky have already ticked off 135 highlights, some of them they stood together, some just one of them. What did you experience there?

SZ: Let's start with bribes: You always have to pull out a little money.

Matthew Gilbertson: We only try to bribe when we have no alternative. But in certain regions, earnest money is the lubricant to be let through at border posts - for example in Central America or parts of Africa.

Eric Gilbertson: We often rely on local helpers because they know the situation. Once when I wanted to go from South Africa to Zimbabwe, they said to me: "Put a \$100 bill in your passport and you can cross the border." But I had no more money.



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What happened?

Eric: The woman at the counter looked at me very, very confused. A local helper convinced them over the phone to let me into the country anyway. But that was not the end of the matter.

Why?

Eric: In the car I was stopped by a police officer who said I was speeding. It was clear that he wanted money, but I didn't have any anymore. I told him, "All I have left is this packed lunch." He looked in and said, "Okay, I guess you can go."

So one of your takeaways from traveling is to pack some extra cash for certain countries?

Eric: Exactly. And: Only put a fraction of your money in your wallet. Because if you show the content to the police, it's gone. That's why we like to use local drivers when we travel. They know who needs to be given how much. That saves a lot of money in the end... *(laughs)*

Matthew: ... and yet it doesn't always work. In Sri Lanka there is a military installation at the highest point in the country. They let me through thanks to a bribe. When Eric wanted to go up later, he turned it down. Sometimes it just takes luck.



Green peak: The Gilbertson twins in 2012 on Cerro del Aripo (940 meters) in Trinidad and Tobago. They collect highlights in their free time. Both have doctorates in engineering from the renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Eric works as a university lecturer in Seattle, Matthew as an engineer at the aircraft manufacturer Lockheed Martin in California. (Photo: Gilbertson Brothers)

Do you prefer to travel to so-called safe countries?

Matthew: The benefit is obvious: you know exactly where you stand. In countries where corruption thrives, the situation is not so clear. On the other hand, bribing the right people clears the way as well. These are simply two different approaches. And you have to say: Only in very few countries do we have to resort to money, maybe in five percent of the cases.

Which highest point will be almost impossible to reach despite all the tricks?

Eric: The one in Bhutan. Mountaineering is banned in the country for religious reasons. There are also three or four countries in which the highest point is used by the military - for example in Cyprus or Oman. We got flashed off at the entrance to the facilities.

You declared this in your [list of all climbs](#) .

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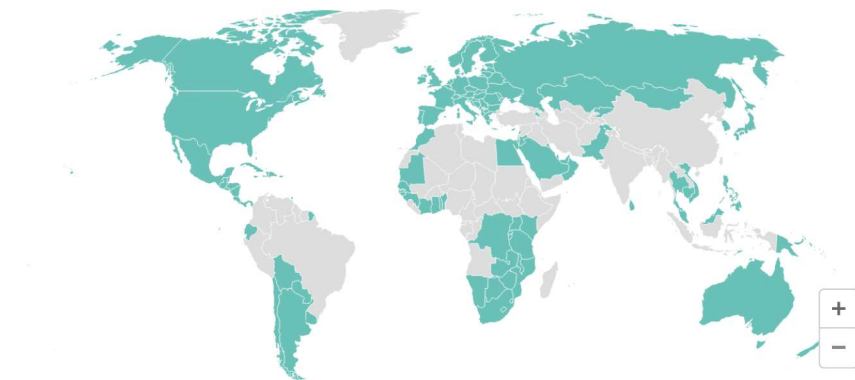
Matthew: We want to be honest, so we really do everything we can to be on the highest point. Accordingly, we often prepare for a trip for weeks. In Saint Kitts and Nevis we thought we had reached the top, then realized we were on the wrong side of the crater. For eight hours we fought our way through the bush to the other side. We were exhausted, our clothes were torn. When we got back to the car, the police were waiting for us. But then she quickly realized that we were actually trekking.

Are you actually always sure that you are standing on the highest point?

Eric: In some countries - West Africa for example - no one has ever climbed the highest point before us. We therefore have some equipment with us to be able to determine the highest point. I had to do that for Togo, Gambia or Guinea-Bissau.

Ganz oben

Länder, in denen Eric und Matthew Gilbertson auf dem höchsten Punkt standen



In the very high mountains, you usually do without additional oxygen.

Why?

Eric: We try to do everything ourselves, only hiring a guide when the law requires it. We taught ourselves how to [climb](#), travel as cheaply as possible, sleep in tents. And it's true, we're trying to get up without artificial oxygen. I was on the K2 in the summer without this help.

Matthew: We want to be as independent as possible. We consider this to be the most honest way of mountaineering. But there are limits. We want to climb Mount Everest next year. To increase my safety, I'll probably go up on artificial oxygen, but Eric won't.

Eric: Because I'm getting a little better at acclimatizing to the altitude.



Denali in Alaska, formerly known as Mount McKinley, is the highest mountain in North America at 6190 meters. The Gilbertson brothers climbed it in 2010. (Photo: Gilbertson Brothers)

Eric, you were at the highest point in 131 countries, Matthew in 97. Why the difference?

Matthew: I have two children, Eric none. He teaches and has summer off, I don't.

Eric: I'm a teacher so I can have summer off and get top marks.

How did you actually come up with the idea?

Matthew: We did a lot of camping and trekking with the family. As teenagers we tried to climb all the local highest points, then those in the US states came along and with that came the idea of going out into the world.

Eric: That's why we loved going to international conferences as students. We could travel for free and collect the highest points. That's how it all started. After our engineering master's degree and before our doctoral studies, we took the summer off and toured Europe by bike, climbing one highest point after the other.

Matthew: I don't have that much time with my job and family anymore. That's why I make trips of a maximum of one week, in which I try to reach as many highest points as possible.

Sounds like stress.

Matthew: Our definition of a vacation isn't lying on the beach. Our vacations were successful when we were at the highest point. *(laughs)*

WEITERLESEN NACH DIESER ANZEIGE



Auf ein G Neureuth

Eisplatten, Steilhä
Skifahrer klingt da
Neureuther ist da:
wie er ein schöne

Do you only see the highest point or also the land around it?

Eric: We always schedule some extra time because things often don't go according to plan. And especially on large expeditions with long acclimatization times, there is always room for improvement.

How much risk are you taking?

Eric: We're preparing as diligently as possible to minimize risk. In 2019 I was in Afghanistan, the region was mined and the Taliban were there. Thanks to the help of local people, I was able to avoid mines and the Taliban. On the very high mountains I work together with a meteorologist. I then know the best time windows for the ascent. This has paid off several times.

Matthew: My priority from the beginning of the project was getting home safely. Nothing changed about that. Incidentally, I'm usually the most relaxed when we've arrived on the mountain. I often find traveling there to be more risky.

Have you ever feared for your life on the mountain?

Matthew: When we were standing on the Dufourspitze in Switzerland, there was a lot of lightning. That was scary...

Eric: ... but we haven't had a really serious accident yet, apart from frozen fingers in Kyrgyzstan, but fortunately they recovered.

How do the locals actually react to your adventures?

Matthew: Not everyone shares our fascination. I remember the taxi driver in the West Bank. He just couldn't understand why I wanted to get to that point because he didn't think there was anything to see.

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To press

SZPlus Mountaineer Kristin Harila

"Women are much less trusted on the mountain"



Norwegian Kristin Harila wanted to climb all eight-thousanders within six months and break the men's record. A conversation about her failure - and why she still doesn't give up.

Read more on the topic

life and society

mountains and hiking

Climb

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travel pioneers

More on the topic: life and society



On the trail of the secret

Battle of the giants

The Irish mythical hero Fionn is said to have built a bridge to Scotland to defeat a giant. Their remains can still be seen today.



SZPlus climate activism

Is this still a peaceful protest?

After the mashed potatoes attack on a painting and the delayed rescue of a cyclist who has since died, an icy wind is blowing against the activists of the "Last Generation". Even other climate protectors doubt the sense of such actions.



Morbid obesity in children is increasing

More and more children and young people are overweight - even morbidly overweight. This is probably not even surprising: those who sat at

home during the lockdown and reached for chocolate and soft drinks gained weight.



SZ.Plus [SZ magazine](#) **Neighbors**

The Lives of Others

When the trees go bare, they often reveal the neighbors in the house across the street. That can be enlightening - for your own life and the course of things.



SZ.Plus **On the trail of the secret**

The Sadist of New Orleans

There are many spooky stories about the cruelty of slave master Delphine LaLaurie.



"I really have everything"

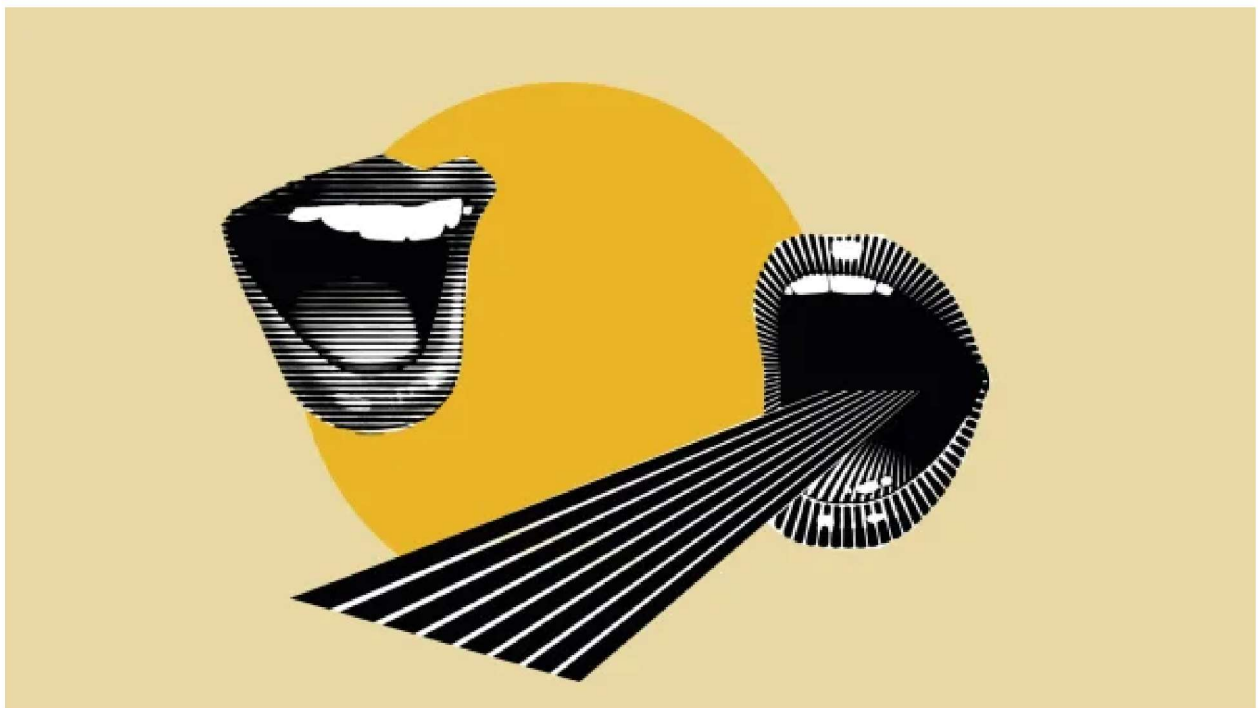
Dishes, knives, pasta machines, shoes, tin toys, cars: there is almost nothing that TV chef Johann Lafer does not collect. A look into Germany's most diverse pantry. And one question: What do you need all this for?



SZPlus comedy

"An incredible number of people think what I do is funny"

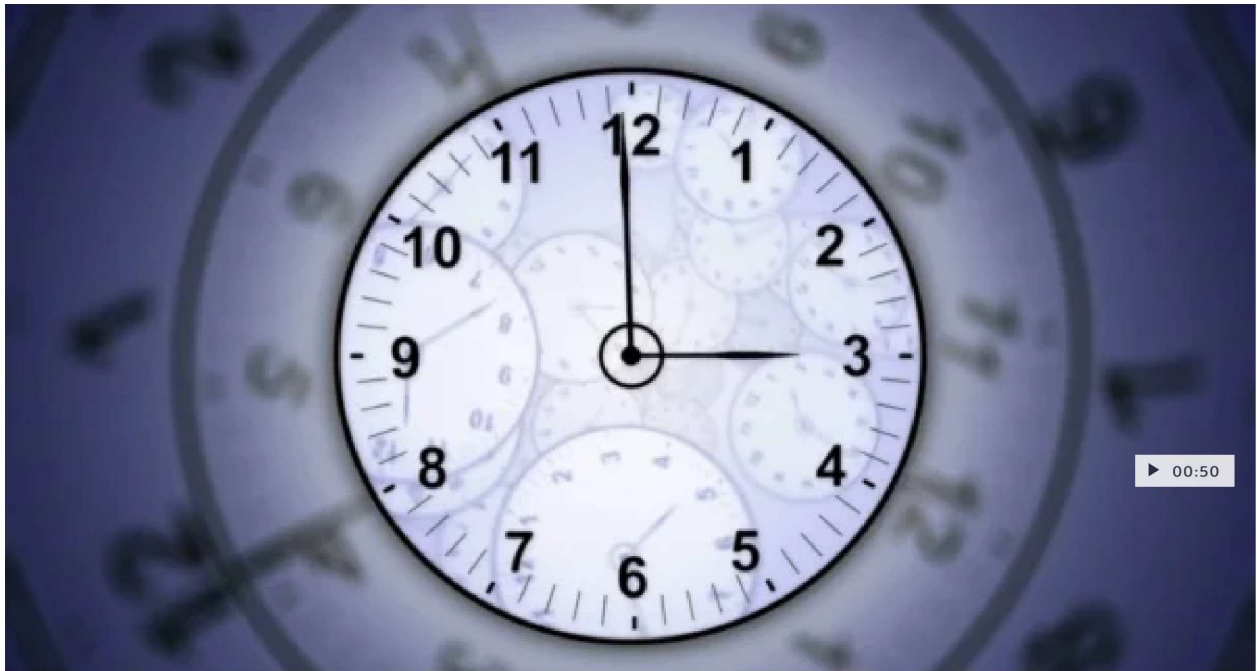
For 20 years, Mario Barth has made the same gags with great success: men, women, clichés. Lately he's also been gossip about vegans and gender. Can this kind of humor still work today?



greetings

Hello Stranger!

Hikers always greet you in a friendly manner, while customers in the supermarket pass each other without saying a word. Why is that? And when is a "Grüß Gott" mandatory? A little behavior and social history.



SZ

symposium

Identify crises early

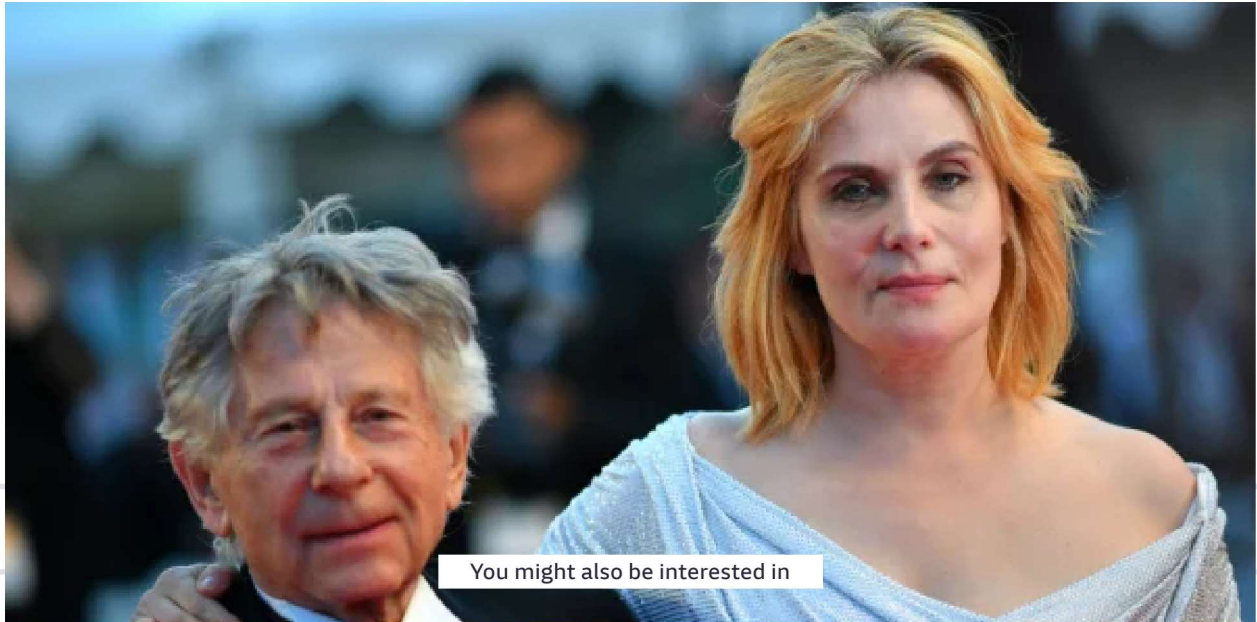
Political scientist Carlo Masala opens expert conference at Bundeswehr University



SZ.Plus On the trail of the secret

The Unknown from the Seine

The death mask of a drowned Parisian inspired many writers and musicians. But who was this mysterious woman?



SZPlus Opinion war in Ukraine

The taste of defeat

The Russian army evacuates the city of Kherson. It may be a tactical retreat, perhaps even an attempt to set a trap. Either way, it's very bad news for Vladimir Putin.



Iran

Iran threatens Germany

Foreign Minister Baerbock had announced that she would bring the crackdown on the protests to the UN Human Rights Council. Tehran wants to answer "decidedly".



SZPlus Ukraine war

Russia plunges Moldova into the energy crisis

EU Commission President von der Leyen is visiting the Republic of Moldova, which is threatened with catastrophe: Russia is reducing gas supplies, Transnistria is cutting off electricity supplies altogether. Now the EU wants to help.



SZPlus bus and train

Bayern questions the 49-euro ticket

According to Transport Minister Bernreiter, the new offer could only apply to regional trains if the municipal transport companies do not participate. Is the project actually in danger - or is the Free State playing poker again?



Farewell to Hartz IV

From citizen money and the wages of work

The Bundestag votes on the most important social reform of the traffic light, the Union goes on the barricades. What is being argued about and what do affected citizens say about it?



SZPlus Kevin McCarthy

He wants to be everything and could get nothing

The Republican leader in the House of Representatives had such good prospects of becoming leader of the whole house. But he reckoned without Trump.



Munich

"Querdenker" demonstration stopped early

Ironically, on the anniversary of November 9, 1928, around 250 conspiracy believers and vaccination opponents held a rally for "political

monically, on the anniversary of November 9, 1938, around 500 conspiracy believers and vaccination opponents held a rally for "political prisoners". Then comes the surprising twist.



people

"The train has now left"

Jennifer Aniston talks about her unfulfilled desire to have children. Nina Gummich does not want to talk about her desire to have children. And Snoop Dogg has a wish that's about to come true.



Ladies & gentlemen

In bed with Billie

Silk lingerie and a blanket: Billie Eilish and her new boyfriend Jesse Rutherford celebrate their first appearance together with an intimate wardrobe.



Live Liveblog on the war in Ukraine

Russian troops withdraw

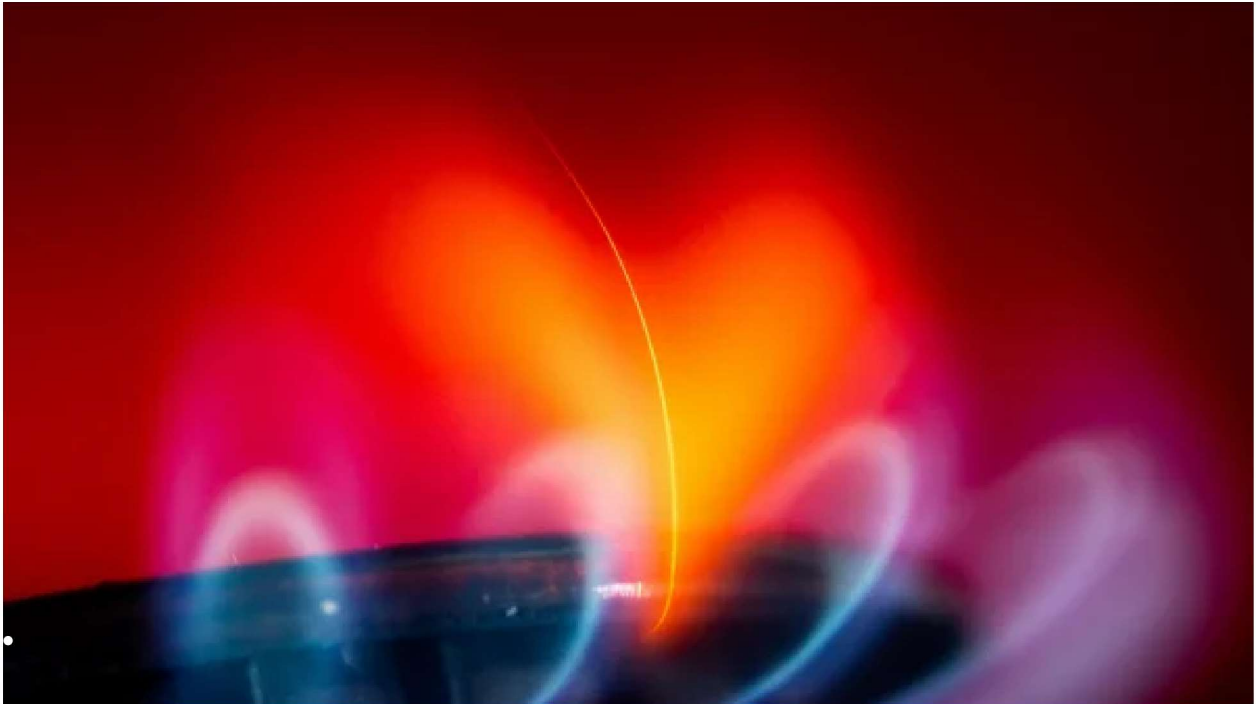
According to Ukrainian sources, the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Kherson district will take at least a week. Ukrainian soldiers reach the first suburbs of the city.



United States

How the abortion debate helped decide the midterms

After the Supreme Court overturned the landmark ruling on abortion, many Democrats made it the number one issue. Why this helped them - and where.



Parliament has approved the first stage of the gas price brake. Meanwhile, FDP boss Lindner no longer rules out a speed limit.



SZPlus "Only The Strong Survive" by Bruce Springsteen

Time to tell the stories of others

Bruce Springsteen covers old soul songs on his new, very enjoyable album - and crushes them with his power.



process in willows

Almost three years in prison for brutal animal abusers

The 32-year-old killed more than 20 rats and birds in a cruel way - and was amused about it in front of the camera. His prison sentence is now final.



SZPlus Midterms in the US

These are the most exciting races and this is how they have turned out so far

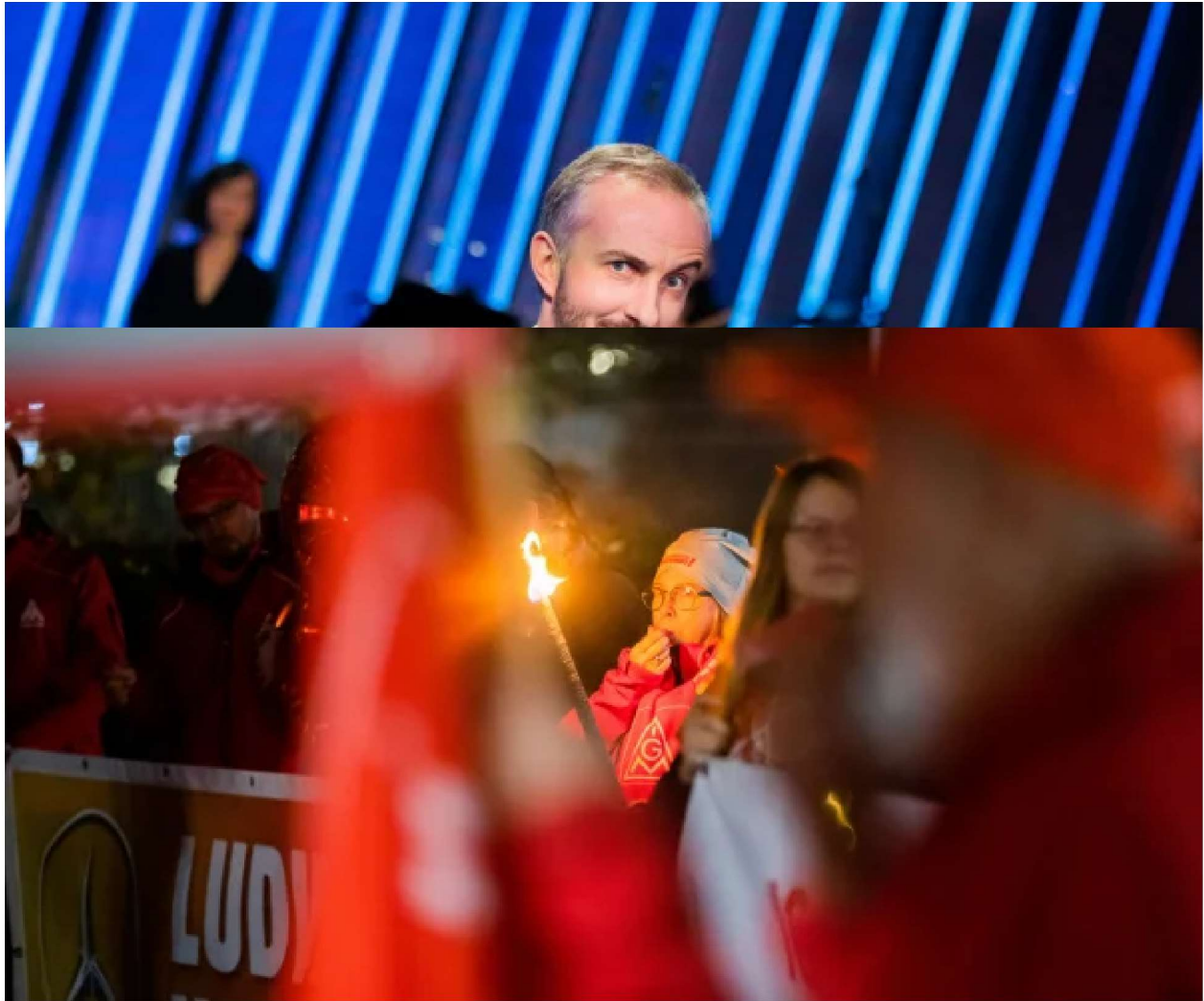
In some places it was a neck-and-neck race in the midterm elections. Some have already been decided. Jen Kiggans and JD Vance, for example, have achieved their goal. An overview of the current status.



SZPlus Sadio Mané at Bayern Munich

Farewell with the socks rolled down

Sadio Mané was substituted early in FC Bayern's 6-1 win against Werder Bremen due to an injury - and now threatens to miss the World Cup. The Senegal team would be missing the most important player.



SZPlus Exclusively metal and electrical industry

The most important bargaining round threatens to escalate

IG Metall is angry because the employers are not moving. The "folklore" strikes may soon turn into a 24-hour strike - or even an unlimited strike with a ballot.



SZPlus local transport

The new 49-euro ticket is not worth it for everyone

When an Isarcard subscription from the Munich transport association is the better choice and why families in particular need to think twice about the decision. An overview.



SZPlus Opinion Twitter and our future

Stop Elon Musk

Twitter is in the hands of someone who struggles to tell true from false. It is up to all of us to prevent the worst from happening now.



Live Liveblog on the US Midterms

Capitol Forward elected to Parliament

In Wisconsin, Derrick Van Orden is getting a seat in the House of Representatives - he was there in January 2021 when Trump supporters occupied the Capitol. Several Republicans are urging the ex-president not to announce a new candidacy. All developments in the live blog.



SZPlus Exclusive property on Pettenkoferstrasse

House sale below market value - so that "the tenants are in good hands"

The owners are offering the city a residential building in the center below market value. For some time it has been more common for sellers to seek real estate deals with the town hall - not without reason.



SZPlus German World Cup squad

A collective for all cases

With Götze, Füllkrug and Moukoko, without Hummels, Arnold and Gosens: National coach Hansi Flick has nominated a squad for the World Cup in Qatar that will not cause any major controversy. He still has to have some uncomfortable conversations.

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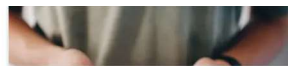
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