

HAZY DAYS

When a hungover New Zealand freeskier needed a swift exit from a dinner party, an opportunity for a road trip to snow-struck Italy, in the raddest campervan ever created, answered his prayers

WORDS **PETE OSWALD**

WORKING AS A JUDGE at a Dutch freeride competition in the Salzburg province of Austria, which was in fact four days of straight partying, has compounded in my head to form heightened anxiety, mental exhaustion and an inability to conduct social situations. In a quaint Tyrolean restaurant, moments after enduring the nauseous drive back to Innsbruck, I sit at a long table, backed against a wall and surrounded by irritatingly chatty, happy people whose names I should know but I just can't remember.

It's a farewell dinner for a friend of mine leaving town. The massive and terrifyingly angry waitress scorns at me for ordering an elderflower soda instead of beer and even the nicest and most polite of these inquisitive semi-strangers are scaring me into sweats. While I clutch my temples, the friendly guy to my right talks at me with something about being at university together, but I just lust for an unconscious state of mind... sleep. If I slam my head hard enough on the table will I knock myself out?

My phone rings. I stop pretending to listen and answer. "Markus, what's up?" Markus Ascher is a softly-spoken bearded Austrian hippy freeskier, with shoulder-length dreads and the sickest custom-converted campervan I have ever seen.

"Heeey Pete, we are going on a road trip for some powder skiing in Italy, you want to join us?" he asks in broken English.

"Yeah man, that sounds cool", I say in a croaky voice. "When are you going?"

"Well, we are ready to go now, but we can wait for you for 30 minutes, or a little longer if you need."

"Really?" I sigh. "It's 8.30pm. How far is it?"

"Six hours away." He pauses. "But they have half a metre of powder and more coming."

Driving for six hours is completely unfathomable to me right now. But in my fuzzy mental state I can't actually think of a reason NOT to go – no work, no prior engagements for the next few days, plus it would get me out of this horrific social hell of a dinner. "I can be ready in one hour." Crap. What have I committed to?

One hour later, Markus is late and I am nowhere near packed and ready.

As the clock strikes 11pm, Markus and the third member of the road trip, Tyrolean freeskier Hannes Schneider, pick me up.

I spend the first hour of the drive mounting my skis in the back of the van, since before agreeing to join this trip I forgot that my skis had no bindings on them. I spend the second hour stressing about what to say to the police at the Italian boarder since I have also forgotten my passport. Luckily, there is no one occupying the boarder at 1am and we sail through. It's my shift at the wheel, so I attempt to drive this 30-year-old, top-heavy Mercedes beast that was once a fire engine and handles like a shopping cart full of bricks.

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At 3am, strange hallucinations from my sleep deprivation tell me I should hand over the driving to someone else and try to sleep.

High in the ceiling bed space of the brick-filled shopping cart, which now sways around the corners at the hands of Hannes, I drift in and out of nightmares about the next corner being the very corner that the shopping cart finally tips over and the red bricks (me asleep in the ceiling bed) splatter all over the road.

Six hours into our 'six-hour drive', Markus taps my foot.

"Heeey Pete, I need to sleep, can you help Hannes with navigating?"

Around an hour later we are officially lost. I didn't know Hannes before this trip, but he seems nice as he patiently waits while I figure out where it was that I sent us in the wrong direction in a very Italian rural area with very few road signs that all manage to contradict one another.

We joke about the abandoned buildings and broken down machinery and realise it is daylight. Where are we going again? Oh yeah, skiing in metres of powder apparently... and there is not a snowflake in sight.

Around nine hours into our 'six-hour drive' it starts dumping.

Hannes and I are back on track climbing into mountainous terrain as fast as the powder bus will go. Two feet of fresh snow lines the roadside. Finally, an hour later, I tap Markus who is fast asleep in the ceiling bed. "Bro, I think we are here." Prato Nevoso. A tiny mountain village that is part of the Mondolè Ski area, which has, apparently, 34 ski lifts in all. So far

Storm chasing:
Pete hits the trees



PHOTOS: MARKUS ASCHER



IN SEARCH OF POWDER

PRATO NEVOSO/ITALY

we can only see one. A lone chairlift disappears up the tree-covered slope into the pelting snowy haze.

We are all exhausted and in need of food and a shower, but there is no question about what to do next: there is a metre of fresh snow on the parked cars and not a soul in sight. We're going skiing.

I don't remember much from the next six hours; it's all a blur of powder clouds and relentless falling snow. We lap the one chairlift, which has endless untracked runs off it through sparse trees, our tracks filling in after each lap. Lack of sleep, an extended hangover and a crazy turn of events so far have left everything feeling surreal and confusing.

Some time later I'm content, calm and comfortable, sat with my feet up staring into the flames of the wood-fire stove inside the cosy

cocoon that carried us all the way here from Innsbruck. We summon up the energy to cook dinner (gnocchi with a jar of pasta sauce) before hitting the sack.

The next morning we wake in a more conscious state of mind to find another metre of snow blocking the van from going anywhere and hammering home that everything is real after all.

While we scoff down porridge with raisins and chocolate in the van's galley, a friendly-looking local is intrigued by the powder bus. His name is Gherry (Gianluca 'Gherry' Garberoglio) and he happens to be Prato's snowpark manager, ski instructor and local legend. After discovering that Gherry and I have mutual friends in New Zealand we all have complimentary lifts passes, free coffee and local knowledge of secret stashes. Score!

For a second day we slay storm powder but with fresh heads, fresh terrain and endless fresh tracks. We end up sessioning the same chairlift from yesterday - it's where the best storm tree skiing seems to be and Gherry has told us about some rock features here that are perfect for airing. I've never had so many face shots in one morning. Where is everyone? The place is empty.

That afternoon we go exploring, making our way down the valley below the base of the resort. Gherry has pointed the vague route out to us; after that we just follow our noses knowing that we will hit the road at some point (it is the road we arrived on and the only way in and out of Prato Nevoso).

The terrain is a mix of sparse and dense trees on a medium pitch with nice undulating rollers. We ➤

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Après-ski. Opposite: Markus in action, soft landing guaranteed

IN SEARCH OF POWDER

PRATO NEVOSO/ITALY

keep following it down, down, until sure enough we reach the road. We high five, click off our skis and get our thumbs poised ready to hitch hike back to the resort base. No such luck. Not one car passes us, so we end up having to walk all the way back up – an hour-long slog.

Day three and the weather cracks blue to reveal Prato Nevoso in its entirety. What a beautiful place to freeride. We throw the camera between us, bagging a few shots in the upper open alpine terrain, where a handful of drag lifts give way to cruisey reds and blues, untracked powder linking them all.

We stick to the mellow lift-accessed terrain, airing nice big rollers that make for perfect kickers, but there is some epic potential for big mountain gnar if you are prepared to walk for it – think big cliffs laden with steep chutes and couloirs. Next time.

Before long the snow turns to cement under the sun's southern fury. It is done, the dream is over. But we have conquered what we came for.

We load our skis on the rack, pack up our gear and head on a route to the south. There is one last little luxury close within our reach that is not possible in our land-locked winter base of Austria – the sea.



Three hours later, the powder bus pulls up to the beach in the Mediterranean coastal town of Arenzano. We swim, eat *gelato* and watch the day fade under the Mediterranean sunset, before getting back onboard the powder bus for home.

Thirteen-hundred kilometres of ridiculous, sleep-deprived, last-minute road-trip adventure

slaying pow, beaches and Italy in general with two new friends in the raddest wagon to ever grace a road.

An extravagant way to escape small talk at a dinner party but a bloody good adventure. **FL**

Pete is sponsored by K2 Skis, Smith Optics, Icebreaker, Planks Ski Clothing, Dalbello Ski Boots, Torpedo7, Dakine, GoPro.

Hannes fuels up from the powder bus. Opposite: a last run before hitting the beach

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PHOTO: MANDUSCHER

PHOTO: PETE OSWALD



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Prato Nevoso ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Turin airport is 90 minutes away by car. For information on trains and shuttle transfers to Prato Nevoso visit pratonevoso.com.

WHERE TO STAY

For information on hotels, b&bs and apartments in the resort visit pratonevoso.com.

LIFT PASSES

A one-day ski pass costs €32.



Worth a 1300km
round trip...

