

Travel Feature. Words & Images by Pete Oswald.

PRATO NEVOSA

A ROADTRIP TO REMEMBER.

In a quaint Tyrolean restaurant, moments after enduring a nauseous drive back to Innsbruck, I sit at a long table, backed against a wall, surrounded by irritatingly chatty, happy people whose names I should know but just can't remember. Working as a judge at a Dutch freeride competition in the Salzburg province of Austria (which was in reality four days of straight partying) had compounded in my head to create a state of heightened anxiety, mental exhaustion and a complete inability to conduct social situations.

It's a farewell dinner for a friend of mine leaving town, who I know well enough to say that I'm rinsed and I can't be arsed with small talk. However explaining this to the bubbly bunch that entrap me at this end of the table will probably not be met with the same understanding chuckle. Small forgotten details like names, where we met, if we have even met before, will inevitably land me in embarrassingly tense situations, where I am left looking like an arrogant prick.

The massive and terrifyingly angry waitress looks at me scornfully for ordering an elderflower soda instead of beer and even the nicest and most polite of these inquisitive semi-strangers are scaring me in to sweats. While I hang my head and clutch my temples, the friendly guy to my right talks at me – 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?

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

"Heeey Pete, we are going to road trip for some powder skiing in Italy, you want to join us?" he says softly 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 mins or a small time longer if you need."

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

"6 hours, but they have half metre powder and more coming."



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“FOR A SECOND DAY WE SLAY STORM POWDER, THIS TIME WITH FRESH HEADS, FRESH TERRAIN AND ENDLESS FRESH TRACKS.”

Driving for 6 hours is completely unfathomable right now, but I have no real reason NOT to go; no work, no prior engagements for the next few days ... it's hard to imagine it now but I know I will regret it later if I decline, plus it would get me out of this horrific social hell of a dinner.

“I can be ready in 1 hour.” Crap. What have I committed to?

9.30pm (1 hour later): Markus is late and I am nowhere near packed and ready.

11pm: Markus and the third member of the road trip, Hannes, pick me up. I spend the first hour of the drive mounting my skis in the back of the van having agreed to join the trip before remembering that my skis had no bindings on them.

I spend the second hour stressing about what to say to the police at the Italian border, since I have forgotten my passport. Luckily there is no one checking the border at 1am and we sail through. It's my shift, so I attempt to drive the 30 year old, top-heavy, Mercedes beast that was once a fire engine and handles like a shopping cart ... full of bricks.

3am: Strange hallucinations from my sleep deprivation tell me I should hand over the driving and try to sleep.

3.30am: High up in the ceiling bed of the brick-filled shopping cart, which sways around the corners at the hands of Hannes, I drift in and out of nightmares about the next corner being the one where the cart finally tips over, and the bricks (me) splatter all over the road.

5 am (6 hours into our '6 hour drive'): Markus taps my foot. “Heeey Pete, I think I need to sleep, can you help Hannes with navigating?”

6am: 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. We are in a very 'Italian' rural area, with very few road signs – all of which seem to contradict each other.

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

8am (9 hours into the '6 hour drive'): Dumping. Hannes and I are back on track, climbing into mountainous terrain as fast as the powder bus will go. With 2 feet of fresh snow on the roadside, the farewell dinner of horror feels like weeks ago and a world away.

9am (10 hours into our '6 hour drive'): We're here. Prado Nevoso, Italy. A tiny mountain village with one small chairlift that disappears up the tree covered slope into a pelting snowy haze. I gently tap Markus, who is fast asleep in the ceiling bed, “Bro, I think we are here”.

None of us are really awake but there is no question among the group about what to do next. There is a metre of fresh snow on the parked cars and the chairlift is turning, with not a soul in sight. We're going skiing.

I don't remember much from the next 24 hours, just a blur of powder clouds, sparse trees and our muffled glee breaking the perfect silence of the tranquil and relentlessly falling snow. Lack of sleep, an extended hang-over and a crazy turn of events so far have left everything feeling surreal and confusing.

Some time later I'm content, calm and comfortable, sitting on a soft seat 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.

The next morning we wake in a more conscious state of mind to find a metre of snow blocking the van from going anywhere, hammering home that everything was real after all. While we scoff breakfast in the galley, a friendly looking local appears, intrigued by the powder bus. His name is Gary and happens to be the resort manager, café owner and local legend. After discovering that Gary and I have mutual friends in NZ, we score complimentary lift passes, delicious free coffee and local knowledge of secret stashes! For a second day we slay storm powder, this time with fresh heads, fresh terrain and endless fresh tracks. 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 alpine terrain. However before long the snow turns to cement under the sun's southern fury. It is done and the dream is over; we have conquered what we came for.

2pm: Skis on the rack, gear packed and en route to the south. There is one last little luxury nearby that has not been available in our land locked winter base of Austria – the sea.

5pm: The powder bus pulls into the beach at the coastal town of Arenzano. We swim, chill, eat gelato and watch the day fade under the endless Mediterranean sunset.

8pm: The powder bus sets course for home.

12am: With Markus asleep in the ceiling bed, Hannes and I pull his beloved campervan into a highway fuel station and put 30 litres of diesel in the petrol-powered bus.

3am: 200 metres from the fuel station, where the wagon spluttered to halt, Hannes, with a light head and burning lungs, selflessly finishes syphoning the last of the diesel out of the fuel tank. We top the tank back up with petrol and set course, again, for Innsbruck, Austria.

6am: Home. The end of 1300 kilometres of ridiculous, sleep deprived, last minute road trip adventuring that had it all - slaying pow, lying on beaches and enjoying Italy in general with two new friends in the raddest wagon to ever grace the road.

An extravagant way to escape small talk at a dinner party, but a bloody good addition to the reel of yarns.