

PORSCHE IT REAL GOOD

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Below Zero Ice Driving

SHARING

It starts with the urine. One evening, sometime in your late 30's, you turn out the light as usual and after a busy night of deep, restful alpha wave slumber you reach your last cycle of REM sleep. You're dreaming, racing across a surreal version of your hometown as designed by Oscar Niemeyer, in a double decker bus fitted with a full service pizzeria and a big messy bed occupied by that client services girl you've never even thought twice about/the ex you are totally over. Eight hours have slid past and you are refreshed.



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Handily, your need to micturate pulls you from the warm womb into the scary cold unloving world. A four minute scratch'n'yawn as you evacuate about two frothy litres – and, ouila, the rest of the day is yours to actively fill as you feel appropriate. The next night, you find it's all gone forever. Turn in the same time, get your head down, drift off. Ah, the bliss of routine. But what's this? You're awake. It's dark. Consult the phone/watch/clock radio. 3am. Errrr. Oh. That weird warm spike. Weeing? Now? Yes. Now. The Power of Piss Compels You! Congratulations and welcome to the rest of your life. This is now you, sir. The Reaper has started to tap and now your tap will drip forever more.

So, yes it grates. You come to realise that turning the light on will change your brain pattern and make it harder to get back to sleep. So you get more acquainted with the torch app on your phone. And then it demands further expense – an ensuite bathroom becomes a necessity. But you're a man. You learn to live with the inevitable risible dribble. The dribble that, as it jabbed you into consciousness, masqueraded as a deluge. When did your bladder turn into a Krups coffee machine.

At least a nice dram at night will put you to sleep long enough to get some decent zeds/zees in. Oh, yeah. That goes, too. One evening you drink down plenty of booze over dinner. You're sleepy. One or two decent fingers of Calvados will remove the necessity for Gavascon. Lovely. Only now, you're at that age. Another few baby steps towards the grave and booze now turns into a stimulant after it's stopped sedating. It's 3am again. Now, you're not going to doze off. Now you have chemically-induced insomnia. You're middle-aged. YAY. Sorry, let me rephrase that. I'm middle-aged. I have chemically-induced insomnia.

Which is a shame. Because in seven hours I will be doing the one thing that any man of any vintage would dream of doing, regardless of the size of his bladder or, indeed, scrotum. I'm at the Kall Auto Lodge, a hotel that hasn't been designed by Oscar Niemeyer. It is slightly surreal, though. Accommodation built for only one purpose –

provide a warm place to sleep/pee/stare at the ceiling – before one gets to do various forms of extreme (and extremely fun) driving.

The clock ticks down. I was really looking forward to this and now I'm angry at myself. I'll be a zombie at 10am and napping in a rally-configured vintage Porsche 911 slaloming on a frozen lake, is not an option. Luckily, this is Sweden and the coffee could be used as an assault weapon. So at 10 am, I'm actually quietly buzzing in a Nordic timber hunting lodge, going for my third cup. That stuffed moose head is looking at me funny though.

Fortunately, Richard Tuthill is a deeply reassuring man. Tall, lean and boyish, he is a walking, driving embodiment of fraternal confidence. Like the bestest older brother in the world, the old Rugbeian explains what we're going to be doing and that, most importantly, it's going to be alright. Here's the topline:

'I want you to thrash it'

'Treat it like a hire car'

'We've given you button-studded tires, not full grip studs. If you don't slide, you don't slalom and then what's the point?'

'Drive it like you stole it'

'If you end up on the roof, we'll all have a good laugh'

And my favourite note:

'If you DO flip and toboggan on the roof, the screen will go first. Start scooping the snow out before you come to a halt. You'll need the airways.'

A former pro rally driver, Richard owns and runs Below Zero, who equip and prepare the 911's we'll be let loose on. Though he'll be tutoring us on the technicalities of driving at speed on a big frozen lake, he routinely employs some of the greatest rally driving talent in the world to do it for him. These include World Championship drivers such as Martin Rowe (former Production Car World Rally Champion), Patrik Sandell (former JWRC Champion and current WRC driver for Team Sweden), Andreas Mikkelsen (current IRC Champion) and Chris Atkinson (WRC driver for Team Mini Portugal).

All have many years of experience driving on all surfaces, particularly ice. As Richard points out, what these guys can't teach you isn't worth knowing.

It's fair to say I'm properly awake now. Out on the lake, if the minus 12 C wind chill doesn't blow away heavy eyelids, the thought of just 60 cm of ice getting pounded will. The surface is regularly sonar scanned to ensure thickness, though Richard says even 30cm is fine for ice driving. But then, Richard would. A snow flurry comes in and the immaculate, unyielding horizon merges into a pinkish sky. Five handsome old school Porsches await us. Four 300 BHP 911's and a very zippy vintage 'pre-impact bumper' four-cylinder 912. Tuthill Porsche have reinforced the bodies, inserted competition wiring looms and marathon engine bay mounted oil tanks. They are the only ice driving operation that just utilise competition vehicles. Richard seems pretty definitive on which I should have – the grey one.

I later realise that since I'm not a motoring journalist or in the trade, like the other guests, I've been given the worst handling model. This is to get me working harder and learning quicker. Good in theory. There follows a brisk demonstration, wherein Richard balletically swings Grey around a line of poles planted every 10 yards in the snow. Achieving reverse lock and steering with the brakes and throttle more than the wheel, I am thrown (literally and metaphorically) as I struggle to work out what he's doing.

He swings round and steers the car back, pulling wide to give the next car attempting the same some clearance. 'There. Got it'. Um...

After an hour of full spins, cone destruction and a few tows of the support van to extricate me from snow banks, I begin to sort of get the hang. One begins to understand why a rear-engined car poses such a challenge. The 911's front wants to lift the moment you give it some real welly on the gas, so it won't steer. If you don't apply any throttle, it'll just aimlessly drift, with no traction. The trick is to lightly balance all the necessary forces so that all four wheels are actually contributing. Returning to join me in the passenger seat, Richard watches me and cries out a chorus of moves, like a pouting ballet choreographer:

'Toe...accelerate...no! brake...turn, turn, wait...WAIT...slowly on the power, feel it go, then turn in...yes, better.'

I'm knackered. And the lack of sleep is beginning to tell. Also, this is not light work.

Arms are whipped and wrenched as you fight to turn into the spin and then in the direction you want to go before the car starts going there. Your thighs and metatarsals are straining to give you the correct amounts of brake and throttle, without getting comfortable. You're always physically doing something. It may be

below zero outside, but in the car, even from my own body temperature, it's steamy. Except my feet. Ice is forming on the pedals. Time for a break.

We retire to the shack for lunch. A chef from the AutoLodge has been preparing all morning.

An absolutely delicious reindeer fricassee, tinged mildly with juniper, alongside the smoothest, creamiest mash in the Northern Hemisphere coos reassuringly into my gob and all the way down. Utterly welcome and comforting.

Inevitably, I feel a snooze coming on. With my boots warming up on the brazier, I take to the bunks in the back room. One power nap and two coffees later, I'm back on the ice, having forgotten my own pitstop. That's another mid-life realisation. Coffee is a diuretic.

If you've eschewed the shack's basic outdoor loo, one is obliged to find an unsullied piece of lake and get scribbling. The word exposure has never been more appropriate. Instead, I spelt 'Ruburl'. That's my name in Swedish yellow snow.

I spend the rest of the day on the lake's main circuit. The sun pokes out and am let loose on Blue, the 911 with studded tyres. Now we're talking. The added grip means what I've learnt being tumbled in the morning finally comes into play. Richard sits next to me barking and chiding and imploring. The revs begin to rise. My speed starts to stay constant.

I hit a big left hander and begin to lose control. 'Turn where you want to go!...Wait...WAIT...Accelerate!' And I do. Blue swings her curvy squat butt out and we three glide and slide like Torvill and Dean apeing Astaire and Rogers. I'm intoxicated with adrenalin, caffeine, pride and mild delirium. Like drumming, it's about learning to spread the rhythm across your limbs. And then forgetting that you did learn anything. Watching Richard on the circuit, he is barely conscious of any decision. He drives on pure instinct.

After two days of tuition, any Below Zero participant will, he insists, be doing the same. They even train track drivers, who aren't always in possession of the counterintuitive skills needed for hardcore rallying. We only get a day and so aren't quite up to speed enough to do the nearby rally stage. Tuthill, ensuring we strap on a cycle helmet ('in case our heads knock together') takes each of the attendant journo's for a taster of the tree-lined, single-laned, snow-encased death run. Again, I'm sad to report my abilities to retain various excretia are not what they once were.

Happily drained, the party head for shelter. Along with Richard's loyal Brit mechanics, including the legend of rally that is Steve From York, we dine at the hotel. Purpose-built and inspired in part by the late rally legend, Colin McRae, the Kall Auto Lodge is, it has to be said, a masculine space, comprising functional, but comfy rooms. Each floor is painted in a solid colour and metal stairs and walkways complete the engineered feel. This harmonizes with the activities it hosts. Below Zero can secure luxury accommodation in the beautiful nearby ski resort of Åre – at 1,270m Sweden's biggest ski destination and voted one of the world's Top Ten.

In the restaurant, chef Jonas Landmark prepares a delicious organic meal, including a reindeer-free pork belly, pan fried Arctic char and a wonderful white chocolate disc that is slowly rendered molten by hot berry sauce. Replete, I decline further imbibing. Two glasses of excellent Gewürtztraminer and I'm done. On two hours of sleep, I've had more stimulation in one day than I've had in the past two years and I've learnt my lesson.

If a need to indulge the desire for excitement (alongside the tiring bladder) is the pillar of a man's mid-life crisis, there can be no finer place to experience it.

I go to bed a better man. And having learnt the lessons of the day, I sleep like a much younger one. Wearing a nappy.

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