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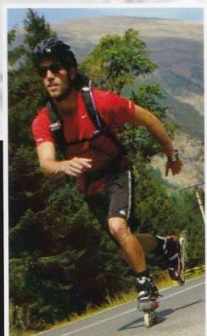
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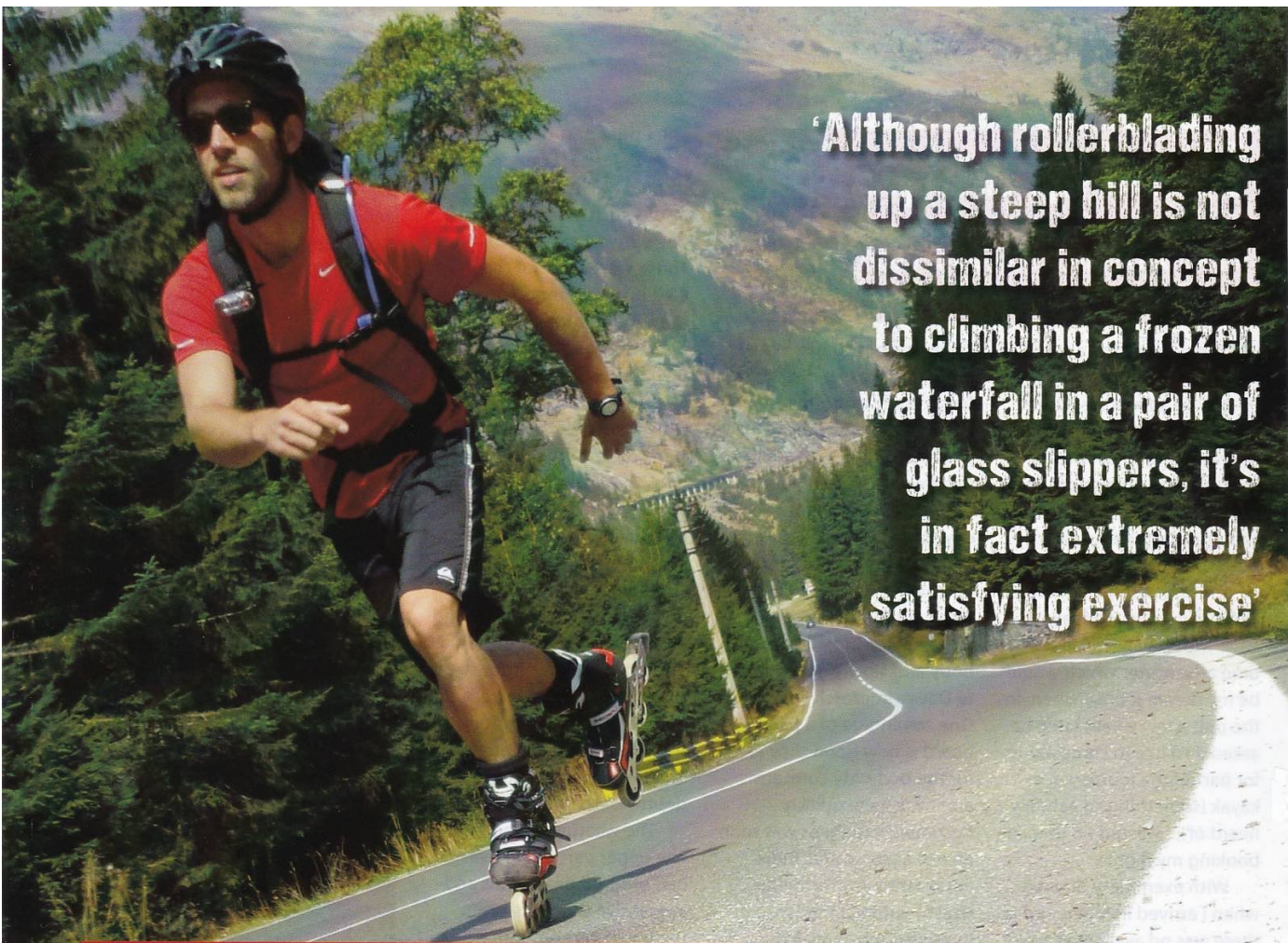


New Year, New Ideas! Romania
by rollerblade, the Mississippi by stand up
paddleboard and Congo on a scooter – *cor!*

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‘Although rollerblading up a steep hill is not dissimilar in concept to climbing a frozen waterfall in a pair of glass slippers, it’s in fact extremely satisfying exercise’

Rollmania in Romania

Missing the 1980s? Maxwell Roche takes on a superb Transylvanian road – by rollerblade

The bear attack survival techniques specified by the Romanian Hunters Association don’t involve the use of a seven-inch bowie knife while travelling at speed on rollerblades, but I packed one, just in case. Whether for use against bears, wolves, vampires or indeed the indigenous population, I wasn’t quite sure. And yes, I did say rollerblades.

Since the 1980s the sport of rollerblading has been in decline, perhaps simply because it’s no longer considered ‘cool’. I, however, am determined to prove the contrary, strongly believing it to be one of the purest and most accessible modes of transportation in existence.

So, where can I set about attesting this theory? Well Romania, a rarely indulged adventure paradise, harbours in its ancient principality of Transylvania an extraordinary road. Built in the 1970s by Romanian soldiers fearing Soviet invasion and

wishing to bridge a retreat across the Carpathian Mountains, the Transfagarasan Highway has been billed by many, including Clarkson, as the Best Road in the World. Made at the cost of 6,000 tonnes of dynamite and 40 human lives it spans 90km across the Carpathian range, climbing up the valley of the river Argea to the pinnacle of the mountain spine.

So, what’s the quest? To journey the entire length of the Transfagarasan in a single day, by power of rollerblade alone. Warned against camping on account of the large brown bears that inhabit the Transylvanian woodland, I’ll only carry food and water sufficient for 24 hours upon my back. I will embark in the dead of night and gods willing arrive at the town of Curtea de Arges before the light of day, and my meagre ration, runs out. So let’s go!

When I reach the town of Cartisoara at the northern head of the Transfagarasan road by hire car, all

fear surrounding wild animals has been overshadowed by a fear of the Romanians themselves, and their inability to drive at less than 130kmph. One memorable part of the drive saw me narrowly avoid four rearing horses at 100kph while being overtaken by two cars simultaneously in the face of oncoming traffic and airborne fruit and veg. Still, there was also the odd moment of calm when I was able to chuckle merrily at the ill-mannered naming of some Romanian towns such as Turdos and Cuntos.

The next morning I rise at 3am. Skating tentatively at first torchlight I swing out on to the road. Ah rollerblading. I’d forgotten how much fun it is. There’s the occasional chirp and flutter from the lowland forest and an aromatic blanket of pine lies all around. I take a moment to gaze up the road to where, between the trees, the mountains rise, their silhouettes engraved upon a web of electric stars.

A crack and a rustle in the wood to my left cuts short my wistful observations and I pick up the pace. The sudden burst of speed brings me back around with a tiny dose of panic. “You’re on your own, rollerblading at

night through a wolf-infested forest in Transylvania!" I say to myself. "Are you crazy?"

Much to my approval the sun soon raises his golden shoulder and to my astonishment there's not a single car to be seen. After a handful of nuts at 7am I begin to enjoy myself. So, 20km down, 70km to go. Although rollerblading up a steep hill is not dissimilar in concept to climbing a frozen waterfall in a pair of glass slippers, it is in fact extremely satisfying exercise, both steady and rhythmical. With little impact on the body, you simply stretch and glide using the weight of the skates as propulsion into the next forward lunge. And it's not so sluggish either; I passed a couple of wheezing cyclists on the ascent.

By 11am I've reached the highest point on the road, 2,134m. The previous four hours have been spectacular. I've revelled in every precipitous hairpin, scooting along the red and white-stripped edges feeling like Lewis Hamilton at some kind of deserted high-altitude Monaco. The road that I've just climbed, when viewed from its zenith, seems less the product of 6,000 tonnes of dynamite and more the carefully considered wanderings of an artist's brush.

Stopping just long enough to devour a sausage and cabbage sandwich from a muddy-walled delicatessen, and to attach some lights to my backpack, I stroke off once again into the darkness – the darkness of the 875m tunnel that dissects the mountain's summit. Just before I enter, bike lights on chest and backside flashing wildly, I wave to an old lady walking barefooted on the sharp gravel roadside. She's carrying an enormous sack of spuds on either shoulder and I consider how ridiculous I must seem to these calm and industrious mountain people.

In the clammy depths of the tunnel, regardless of my lights, I begin to fear the rumble of chasing traffic and squash

myself against the wall. When all is passed I follow along, warily watching the pin-sized light ahead grow into a flaming ball of midday sun. As I'm spat forth from the tunnel's mouth there is an explosion of light and my pupils revolt and shrink. As the blotching in my eyes subsides, the vista becomes visible. The road ahead skirts the mountain and descends, not in a series of wiggles like the north side, but in a long arch stretching for mile upon mile to the valley below.

The next 50km is gone in an instant, along with two spare brake pads and the last morsel from my little bag of bravery; the depletion of the latter being on account of some cavernous and cunningly concealed pot-holes. Unable to apply sufficient force through my heel brake to stop on some of the steepest sections I often have no choice but to bend my knees, hold my breath and keep going.

How to... go long distance rollerblading



1. Buy and get used to a comfy set of skates with a supportive boot and plenty of room in the toe. The larger the wheels on your skates the faster you go; 90mm would be the

minimum size I'd recommend. The bigger the wheels the less manoeuvrable they are though, so don't go crazy. Rollerblade Speed Machines or K2 Radicals are among the best for the job.

2. Find a quiet road where you can scoot around without risking your life. Try and do an hour twice a week to bed-in the skates and build appropriate muscles. As long as your body recognises the movement things won't hurt too badly when the miles rack up. To build up cardio fitness just do whatever you normally do; I found running makes the most sense.

3. Learn to stop! This is an invaluable skill and far more useful than learning to skate backwards on one leg while sending a text.

4. Practise with a backpack as they make a huge difference to your skating stance.

5. Phone a friend and bribe him/her to come with you; that way there's safety in numbers.

Watch out though: some of my friends wanted as much as £15,000 per mile.

The final 5km are the longest but my pins cooperate for the final push. I roll into Curtea de Arges just ahead of sunset and stop below a neon sign flashing the word 'Bere'. Guessing what that might mean I trip over a dog and collapse in a wobbly plastic chair. "Big one please," I say beaming and gesticulating at the waitress who, with a suspicious glance at my feet and a quizzical glance back up the road, mercifully obliges.

A journey along the Transfagarasan road would be a pleasure aboard any vessel, but on a (not particularly expensive) set of rollerblades, with large wheels and a long frame, it's utterly superb. The road is quiet during the week and the surface, on the whole, is decent. Going it alone is not something I'd recommend, but with a willing cohort, a superior scene, setting or sight, not to mention reward, is hard to come by. ■

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