

WORDS & PICS: NIK

TRANSYLVANIAN TRAVELS

PART THREE Riding the best bike road in the world!

Of all the days of the trip, today was the day I knew I would make the fewest notes and take the least pictures because today was the day that we'd all really been looking forward to ... well, those of us who'd seen 'Top Gear' anyway. Today was the day of the Transfagarasan Pass.



Paddy doing the scenic photo bit...

Actually, speaking of 'Top Gear', it was a bit surreal that almost everywhere we stopped in Romania and mentioned the Transfagarasan, everyone, not matter how sketchy their English, smiled and said, 'Ah, Top Gear!' The power of the BBC, eh?

But enough of this, you want to know about the Pass, don't you? The road that Jeremy 'dick'ead' Clarkson rates as being even better than the legendary Stelvio Pass in Italy. Well, the Transfagarasan, or DN7C as it's also called, was constructed between 1970 and 1974, during the rule of the famous dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu. It came to be as a response to the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union - Ceauşescu wanted to ensure quick military access across the mountains in the event the Soviets attempted a similar move into Romania and so the road was built at a very high cost, both financially and from a human standpoint. Roughly six million kilograms of dynamite were used on the northern face, and the official records mention that about 40 soldiers lost their lives in building accidents. It's ninety kilometers (sixty miles) of twists

Yes, it was as much fun as it looks, trust me!



On what other potential race track do you have to dodge wild donkeys?



Just be thankful the show's still white and that I used me finger...

At the bottom of the Transfagarasan, ready to begin the long climb.



and turns that run north to south across the tallest sections of the Carpathian Mountains between the highest peak in the country, Moldoveanu, and the second highest, Negoiu, and the road connects the historic regions of Transylvania and Wallachia, and the cities of Sibiu and Piteşti. It climbs to 2034 metres (6671 feet) and, due to the topography, the average speed is around 40 km/h - it really is that twisty. It's usually closed from late October until late June because of snow but, depending on the weather, it may remain open until as late as November and it may also be closed in the Summer because of weather conditions (it occasionally snows even in August), and near the highest point, at Balea Lake, it passes through the longest road tunnel in Romania (884m) which isn't lit. Do you know, I wish I'd known that fact before we set out ...

Our plan was only to ride to the top of the Pass, rather than do the whole thing as that would've taken

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us far out of our way, but even so that meant we got to ride the best bit - the route north. Now before setting off I'd not seen the Top Gear vid and so didn't know quite what to expect, but I've done a fair bit of mountain road riding in Scotland and the Lakes and used to use the Cat & Fiddle twice a day to get to and from work so, I figured, how much more could it be? The answer is more - much, much more. Looking back through me notes, I seem to have written 'wow! Just fucking wow!' about eight times in a page and **O**



They'd only cut the road through to the top the day before we got there...

a half of scrawl and that's pretty much the best description there is of the road. It starts on the plains below and climbs up through a series of hairpins that hug the edge of some fairly serious drop-offs through heavily-wooded valleys much like the road does up to, say, the Mont Blanc tunnel, and then it goes on ... and on ... and on. Soon you've broken through the tree line and are out onto the mountain proper, and the road kind of straightens out a bit to almost lull you into a false sense of security. You're starting to pass the odd patch of snow now too so you know you're climbing

DONE THE ZAFRA ROAD ON THE WAY TO FARO? IT'S SHIT COMPARED WITH THE TRANSFAGARASAN. REALLY. SHIT



Snow banks and 38 degree C heat - just doesn't seem right, does it?

and the road's lined with huge boulders and rushing mountain streams, and then you spot up ahead of you the first of the proper bends. From that point on, it's just full on motorcycling heaven - mile after mile after mile of hairpin bends and loops that go back on themselves and flow into each other in an almost continuous sweep. You don't seem to ever be totally upright for long stretches of time as one corner just flows into another and I can now see why the bikes Transylvania Live use have no chicken strips on their tyres whatsoever! Done the Zafra road on the way to Faro? It's shit compared with the Transfagarasan. Really. Shit.

There's also something utterly surreal about riding between towering snow banks in heat that we later find out was up in the 38 degrees Centigrade range. The Pass had actually only opened the day before we got there - they'd finally been able to get to the top where the tunnel is and bulldoze/cut a single lane through to it so that you could get to the other side. And going through the tunnel is an experience in itself too - there's a corner at the opposite end of the tunnel to where we entered and so it is completely and utterly pitch black (it's not lit, remember?). In fact, so much so that I wasn't sure that the headlight on the big GS was actually working as I rode into the inky blackness (it was, it was just that my eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness from the brightness outside). Oh yeah, and there are very few crash barriers to stop you going over the edge if you fuck up too, so don't crash, okay?

A quick lunch stop, a few photos and a bit of wild donkey dodging and we were heading back down again. I'm not going to try to describe it because, frankly, words are capable of doing so - it's something

Fook me, that's a long way down!

LOOKING BACK THROUGH ME NOTES, I SEEM TO HAVE WRITTEN 'WOW! JUST FUCKING WOW!' ABOUT EIGHT TIMES IN A PAGE AND A HALF OF SCRAWL

you just have to experience for yourself to understand but, suffice to say, by the time we got back to the flatlands of the plains not one of us could keep the big, silly shit-eating grins off our faces and most of us were just completely blown away by the experience.

After that, the quick visit to Bran Castle, the utterly stunning, almost fairytale traditional palace set up on a hill, seemed but a minor distraction and all of us were so blown away that we didn't even bother to go in (which I now regret). We just pushed on for the night's stop at Brasov (with its Hollywood-style sign overlooking a medieval city ... weird) and managed to get there just before the mother of all hailstorms hit (they were about the size of grapes - bloody glad I wasn't out riding in that!). A shower to relieve you of the day's sweat and adrenaline, beer, food and more beer in the old town square watching the lightning crackle off the mountains - the perfect end to a perfect day. ☘



And a slightly more human-scaled one near the top...

Massive and very picturesque waterfall near the bottom of the valley.



Glacial melt water falling down into the valley - so cold and fresh it almost hurt!

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