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# FOREVER MX-5

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## NORTH TO NEWFOUNDLAND!



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Gordon Sleigh - <http://spoon.org>





Photo: Ralph Saulnier

# TARGA MIATA MADNESS

THE CENTERLINE WEAVED back and forth between our wheels as we howled along the road beside the water towards town. The suspension was working hard, keeping the car settled over the broken pavement as I concentrated on maintaining as much speed as possible. We passed a 30 km/h speed limit sign with the digital speedometer reading around 140. A few moments later, Janel's voice came over the intercom, "400 meters, square right over wooden bridge. 200."

The high-compression engine barked as I dropped two gears and laid into the brakes. I could see the turn on to the bridge was fairly open with no surprises on the inside, so I used the whole road and curled on to the bridge with the tires giving a squeak of protest, then it was

back on the gas again. There were miles of empty roads ahead of us, and the clock was running.

Ten minutes earlier, we had been parked on the side of the road along a deserted coast, watching the waves crash into the rocks as we waited for the stage to start. It was 5:30 pm. We'd left our hotel at 6 am to start the day with a long drive, and had been racing since 9:30. More importantly, it was Thursday, we'd started racing on Sunday and there were another 8 stages tomorrow. We still had two stages to go tonight and we were exhausted. But that didn't matter, because we'd discovered that the sides of the road were covered in wild blueberries and I was feeding them to Janel. Let me tell you, if there's one thing you don't get enough of in motor racing,

it's picking wild blueberries in a driver's suit. But the Targa Newfoundland just isn't like other races.

The Targa is a week-long, 2200 mile long race around the small Canadian province of Newfoundland. Since its beginning in 2002, it's become one of the world's premier motor races and attracts competitors and cars from all over the world. Including us, a husband and wife team in a car we built ourselves, racing in our first performance rally 3400 miles from home.

The race takes place on public roads all over the island. The timed sections take place on closed roads, both fast ones

STORY & PHOTOS BY  
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through the woods and along the ocean and tight village streets and lanes. The teams are provided with route books that give precise distances between turns, descriptions of the turns and warnings of particularly hazardous spots. In between the stages are transit sections that are open to the public and range from a couple of miles to as many as 120. The total mileage covered in the event is around 1400 miles.

The Targa is split into two main categories: Grand Touring and Targa. Grand Touring is a Time-Speed-Distance (TSD) race, where the teams have to maintain a specific average speed given in the route books. Depending on the skill of the navigator, the condition of the roads and the ability of the car, this could be fairly straightforward or very challenging. Grand Touring cars are basically pure street cars.

We were running in the Targa class. For each stage, we were given a minimum

average speed. To avoid penalties, we had to go that fast or faster. The speeds were fairly aggressive so this basically boils down to "drive as fast as you can." In fact, it's impossible to run the whole race without picking up some penalties. Why not simply race for the fastest time? Because the different classes of cars are given different minimum speeds, allowing a 1959 Mini to compete with a Group B Audi rally monster. Due to the speeds, the cars have extensive safety equipment to protect the occupants in case something goes wrong.

Our race started nearly two years ago, when the plan to take on the roads of Newfoundland began. I took the opportunity to build a special car just for the race. You've seen it here in *Forever MX-5* before. A long two years of planning, wrenching and testing had turned it into a great little car. Finally, I loaded it into the trailer and with the help of my long-time friend Trevor Holt, towed it across the US and Canada to get to the docks in Nova Scotia.

Waiting for the ferry, we came across our first batch of fellow Targa racers. It's also where we met our first taste of maritime province hospitality. The competitors have an informal tradition of a champagne toast to all new and returning teams, right there on the docks waiting for the ferry. We hadn't even hit Newfoundland yet and

we were already being welcomed with open arms.

Once we'd rolled off the ferry and run an hour down the road to St. John's, it was time to present ourselves at scrutineering. I was a bit worried about this and had devoured the regulations, trying to avoid spoiling my event with a last-minute scramble. It was worthwhile, however, as we breezed through without a hitch. We picked up all of our paperwork, registered, and spent some time cruising around and looking at the other cars in the race.

And what cars! If your taste was for the classic, there were Minis, a stunning E-Type, an Alfa GTV, a 1953 Austin-Healey 100, an NSU TT and the like. High performance street cars were represented by a supercharged Lotus, a Roush Mustang, a number of Porsches and various Subaru and Mitsubishi. Various factory teams included a hybrid Lexus sedan, a bright green Challenger, current Mitsubishi and Subaru rally cars and a Group B Audi Quattro that sounded as if it was about to eat anything in the vicinity and/or self-destruct. It was a feast for anyone at all interested in cars.

The race was a family affair for us. My parents came along on the trip to act as our support crew and cheer us on. Some sort of support is almost required for the Targa, even if it's someone to meet you at a checkpoint with some hot tea to soothe tired throats, or to set up an emergency ride height adjustment station at the side of the road in front of a century-old wooden church. Their race was a different one from ours, running from service point to service point in the pickup in case we needed something. I think they made friends with every other crew in the race, and there was obviously a lot of camaraderie amongst those supporting the cars.

My aunt Brenda and uncle Rob were also at the race, working on a timing crew. Again, they had a different experience as they moved from stage to stage, leapfrogging the racers to make sure everything was set up when we got there. It was a real pleasure to roll up to the starting line and get a super enthusiastic cheer from the starters!

After the easy start of the first day, we had to face the Prologue. This is a trio of



# SPORTS

stages that aren't given base times and don't count towards the results, but which are used to seed the cars for the race proper. It's also a chance for novice teams to get a feel for Targa stages without too much pressure, but with the opportunity to drive at speed. Carefully. You can't win the Targa on the Prologue, but you can lose it by crashing. It was exactly what we needed.

Those first few stages were overwhelming at first. Janel and I hadn't developed a rhythm yet. She was having trouble keeping up with the speed of the notes, especially in the city stages. I was learning just how much commitment and trust was required to keep my foot pinned to the floor down narrow laneways, knowing that there were no nasty surprises over the next crest. By the end of the day, though, we were getting more comfortable.

At the end of the last stage, one of the timekeepers stuck his hand through the window and welcomed me. It was Derek Churchill, a Miata fan who had contacted me a long time ago when I first announced

I was taking part in the race. It was good to put a name to the face – and even better to realize that we had fans of our own rooting us on. Miata owners came up to talk to us



over the course of the race, giving us another chance to meet new folks as part of the race. It didn't matter if we were waiting for the start of a stage, grabbing a bite to eat or filling up at a small service station in the middle of nowhere, someone would always recognize what the car was and come up to share the enthusiasm.

The next day was the beginning of the five days of full-on racing. It started off with

a bit of confusion as we continued to work out the bugs between Janel and I, but it all came together quickly. A rally like this isn't like other forms of motorsports, as it really does require two people. Many think of the navigator as simply someone who ensures that the driver doesn't get lost, but it's a far closer connection than that. Janel was my guardian angel through the race. She not only knew which way to go at intersections, but when there was an out-of-character turn coming up or what was over a blind crest. As one of our instructors said, it was her job to paint a "clear, accurate and unambiguous picture" in the driver's head of what the road was doing. There's a huge amount of trust on both sides – I had to trust that what I heard over the intercom was exactly what the road was going to do, while she had to trust me not to toss the car off into the woods or park it in someone's living room. The end result was intoxicating.

Imagine driving a road you've never seen before. Perhaps it's one that rolls and curves through a forest, or perhaps it's a



Photo: Gordon Sleigh - <http://spoon.org>

series of city streets. It might be smooth and wide or it could be cratered, narrow and battered. You're free to use the entire road and your job is to drive as fast as you can. That's thrilling enough. But then add the navigator's voice into the mix, and suddenly you have a guardian angel. You know about corners before they even come into sight. You have the confidence to keep the throttle pinned when cresting a rise at over 100 mph or rocketing through a narrow alley, and you know when there's a blind corner with gravel on the inside coming up. It's almost a sense of omniscience and it means you can keep a level of commitment that would be suicidal otherwise. Meanwhile, you have people on the side of the road cheering you on as you hammer through their town. It's a constant adrenaline rush – and we had five days of it. It's no wonder rallying gets into people's blood.

For us, it was a fantastic experience to bond like this. Janel is very organized, cool under pressure and pays a lot of attention to detail, which makes her a great navigator. Every night, she had to go through the route books for the next day and work out how she was going to describe each turn, as well as check the instructions against the map to make sure they were accurate and complete. She's spent enough time in the car with me to trust my driving. What could have been an incredibly stressful experience turned out to be wonderful.

The car helped as well. It did exactly what I asked and never once surprised me. This isn't a surprise, as the car is a Miata and I've been racing them for over a decade. But it was a very effective tool, allowing me to concentrate on the road and my driving instead of having to deal with handling quirks. The car was almost flawless over the course of the week thanks to all the prep. Our only problems were some damaged bumpstops from the really big hits (we once hit a speed bump at 80 mph) and a misfire at high RPM on the last day that was later traced to a broken air temperature sensor wire. Given the amount of abuse the car took, that's nothing. Even the tires barely looked scuffed in after a week of racing.

But the Targa is more than just racing. The transit stages gave us the chance to pull off the helmets and look around, and



they gave us some of the best memories of the week. One morning, we were running across a desolate landscape that looked like it belonged above the Arctic circle. It was barely light as we had an early start to make.

Newfoundland's nickname is "The Rock" and it was obvious why. Stunted trees huddled behind rocks covered in moss and an enormous moody sky kept watch over it all. Other than the fact that

someone had laid a road through this wilderness, there wasn't a sign of life until a bull moose came into view standing in the road. It was just us and him, and we were the intruders. It was a magical moment as we looked at each other – a native of the landscape who's been there forever and a brightly colored, noisy little racecar that was seemingly visiting from another planet. He wandered off in no particular hurry and we kept going towards our appoint-





ment with speed.

What really makes Newfoundland special, though, is the people. It's not an easy place to live, and everyone compensates by being very friendly and helpful. Every day, our lunch stop was in a school gym or Legion hall and catered by the locals. It was if every grandmother in range had been challenged to a dessert-making contest! The race would not be possible at all without the willingness of the communities to shut down part or all of their villages to let us race on the streets or on the only road in and out of town. 2200 volunteers lined the course to make sure they were safe and free of problems. Think about that for a moment. 2200 people, all working to make sure a race happens. There's nowhere else in North America that could host an event like this.

The towns themselves were neat and tidy, with wooden houses painted in varying pastel colors and often right on the edge of the water. Every night, we parked the cars in an ice rink or curling arena for a car show, and spent an hour or two chatting with hundreds of people. The Targa's a big event for many of the communities we visited, and not just because we shut down their roads to race. In some places, the kids get a day off school. Nobody would have gone to class that day, anyhow. Even the towns that were simply on our transit routes were lined with people cheering and waving as the Targa parade passed

through. They all wanted us to stop, give out some pictures of the car and hopefully burn a little rubber on the way out. One group had appropriated a Stop sign, trying to get special attention – and surprisingly enough, the police car just down the street didn't seem to care! Another group of kids was calling out, "Burn out, mister! We're all playing hookey for this, and we're going to be in detention tomorrow!" Really, how can you resist that sort of line?



The friendliness extended to the competitors as well. Rallying boils down to one car against the road and the clock. Fellow racers are helpful, trying to keep everyone in the hunt. When I drove into the arena for that first day, I hadn't even made it out of the car before Jim Kenzie, a previous winner and one of the instigators of the event, had his hand through the window introducing himself. In fact, he and his navigator Brian Bourbonniere were a huge help to us, giving Janel all sorts of tips and hints on how to keep us out of trouble. All

through the week, we'd make friends on the other crews, chatting by the side of the road as we waited to start a stage.

As the week went on, the bond between Janel and I got stronger as the base times got more aggressive and the race started to take its toll. Everyone was running low on sleep, but some more than others. If a car broke, it had to be fixed, which meant late nights in the arena. One of the classic Minis was having a wide range of problems, and the entire Little British Car support community descended upon it. They changed engines, head gaskets, differentials, gearboxes and untold other parts to keep the car in the race – and they did stay in the race, to the cheers of all the other teams.

Other teams didn't fare so well. On the second stage of the first day, we came across a little Mini stuffed into a ditch with the navigator stuck inside. Since we were the first on the scene, we stopped and rendered assistance until the pros could arrive. He and the driver were fine, but it was a bit of a chilling start to the race. The next day, Jim Kenzie balled his new Mini up on a very fast stage through the woods. A number of other cars went off over the course of the race as well, finishing with a rolled Nissan Pulsar on the last stage. There were no injuries for anyone thanks to the required safety gear, but it underlined the risk involved in the sport.

For us, the goal was simply to get to the finish line. Oh, we were racing hard. But the most important thing was to finish without drama. The roads varied from beautifully smooth to astoundingly rough. My favorites were the fast, moderately rough roads that had the suspension working hard where I could really dance with the car. At times, it was difficult not to get distracted by the scenery as we tore past wooden churches and along the coast.

Our secondary goal was to get a "Targa plate," which is an award for consistency. You have to finish every stage within a certain time. You can't spin, or have a mechanical problem, or get lost even once over the course of 35 stages. And when we crossed the finish line on the last day, we'd managed to do just that. Not only had we managed to get our Targa plate, we'd also won our class and come in 16th overall out of

50-odd starters. It was an excellent run for a pair of novices, and we were overjoyed. It was an emotional end to a very intense week, and having the whole family there to celebrate made it even better.

After the race, I stopped by to meet up with the Newfoundland Sports Cars Tours club before they left on a tour. They'd invited us to come along, but we were happy to be out of the car for a while. Still, it was good to meet some local enthusiasts. This is a group that's organized enough to be able to print up business cards with their annual schedule on it at the beginning of the year - most other clubs could learn a lesson from this! It turns out we'd run across a number of them over the course of the race. With an event the size of Targa, every car nut on the island gets involved somehow. Derek Churchill was there with his Miata as were a number of others. It's not a Miata-only club, but they do make up the bulk of membership.

I also dropped in on the Underground Miata Network on the way back to Colorado. I was involved with this Ottawa, Canada club back at their inception and had kept in touch over the years. They'd surprised me with an unexpected donation towards the race budget - a very generous touch from the club! We gathered at a local Mazda dealer so they could see the car, talk Miatas and take a trip down memory lane. It's always good to be welcomed back after a long time away, especially if you can bring along some good stories and a cool car! It's a shame I wasn't able to let them see it in full song, but now that the race was over we did have to pay attention to traffic laws.

Leaving Newfoundland on the ferry was a surprisingly sad occasion. Janel and I had come to the island to take part in a race, but we'd discovered much more than that. The Rock had managed to get under our skin. The scenery, the ocean, the roads and most of all the people were unforgettable, and we vowed to get back someday, whether it was part of a race or for a visit. It's been several months since the finish, hard to believe! We're still both running on the buzz from our Targa experience. ■



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