

It's COOL Because IT IS

Electric transportation is changing the American commute, replacing cars, trains, buses—even Uber!

We wanted to see...

just how far it could go.

BY JAMES LYNCH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY HUNG

I'M IN CROYDON, PENNSYLVANIA, where I would never be if I weren't doing what I'm doing. It's a sleepy Pennsylvania burb, hard by I-95, unremarkable, nice. The traffic thins and I have this winding back road to myself. I zoom over a quiet two-lane bridge, and I'm gazing down at the small creek passing beneath it.

I lift my head up again, but it's too late. Fifteen feet in front of me is a crack in the bridge deck that could swallow a Miata. I can't stop, can't swerve. A few miles back, the skateboard I'm riding handled a railroad crossing no problem. This is much worse.

Also, it's not really a skateboard. Or it is, but it's one of the new motorized kind—the Boosted Stealth, one of the highest-end electric boards you can buy, at a cost of \$1,600. I'm riding one from New York to Philadelphia, for the ostensible reason of consuming a cheesesteak at the place where my parents used to go before I was born, but also for other reasons I'll try to explain if I survive this bridge.

I jump, trying to make myself light enough for the board to clear the other side. It doesn't work. The front wheels bury themselves and the board stops dead and I keep going, my body retaining the approximately 12-mph velocity at which the board was carrying me until a nano-second ago. One step, two, three, but my feet can't keep up. My torso pendulums until my shoulder and hip connect

with the pavement. My backpack twists underneath me and I slide for a good ten feet. The board shoots across the street, thankfully stopped from meeting the creek by a low concrete barrier. I hop up and look around, brushing myself off. All good, I was just trying to get a closer look at the road! A woman in an Oldsmobile with mismatched door panels pulls up.

"You all right?"

My pack is covered with holes. In one torn pocket, the abraded metal and paint of a water bottle catches the sun, showing where it saved my skin. The board looks intact.

My skin burns, but considering this is mile 70 of a 90-mile trip and

it's the first time I've taken a digger, I'm feeling pretty lucky. "Yes, thanks," I say. "I'm all right."

Boosted is the company that made electric skateboarding a thing back in 2014 when its first board, the Dual+ but known simply as the Boosted Board, became a fast success. I grew up riding the kind of skateboard that is powered by the human leg. I remember the first time I saw a kid riding a motorized Boosted Board: a squash bro in a Vineyard Vines shirt blasting uphill on College Street, his face showing no signs of exertion, his body just standing on the thing. I remember not liking that kid. His board seemed nothing more than an expression of wealth trying to claim the counterculture of skateboarding, but exempting him from the difficult parts—the coordination, the road rash, the sweat.

Four years later, it's harder to ignore the beehive whirl of electric transportation. I was seeing more and more of these smiling people on skateboards, hoverboards, or crazy one-wheeled contraptions, all of them passing me while I sat in the front seat of a traffic jam. Even if these futuristic commuters were out-maneuvering me, I still couldn't shake the feeling that this was the kind of toy Tom Hanks would ride if *Big* came out in 2018. These were the illogical conclusion of Bluetooth, Tony Hawk video games, and lots of money. The Google Glass of personal transportation: functional, novel, and sold to people who couldn't notice their own indignity. But! There were customers everywhere. Boosted doesn't release sales figures, but from 2017 to 2018, it went from selling in two countries to 34, and the company had grown 450 percent. Well. Maybe these people weren't idiots. If the future of transportation costs \$1,600, I thought, it should be able to handle something more than a trip to biology class or Whole Foods. So I packed 35 pounds' worth of backup batteries, chargers, and a change of clothes, and set out. If this was just a \$1,600 toy, this trip would prove it. And if it wasn't, I would go find that dude I saw in college and apologize to him, maybe.

ON THE HENRY HUDSON TRAIL, which runs for 24 miles from Highlands to Freehold, New Jersey, I carve a wide turn around a man walking a golden retriever. It's a beautiful day. I alternate between green tunnels of overhanging trees and views of the ocean and a hazy New York City in the distance. I have the path to myself and slalom unnecessarily across the pavement. The Stealth will go 14 miles on a full charge and hit a top speed of 24 mph, though I'd be staying closer to 12 mph to save battery. It moves smoothly, normally, despite its powered wheels and heavy load.

Like impeachment and recreational drone-flying, riding an electric skateboard on public paths is one of America's current legal gray areas. New York City ordinances seem to ban them, though it's loosely enforced at best. The state of California requires that they have headlights, and Michigan recently passed the same law, and many municipalities, like Dallas, have begun warning



To swap batteries: Remove bolts, disconnect cable, repeat in reverse. Six minutes.

riders, saying tickets could be the next step. But the slow burn of legislation hasn't kept up with new technology. I see a police SUV as I round a blind corner on the trail, and I feign a few kicks on the ground, trying to make it look like it's a regular skateboard. I give the officer a quick, confident nod, hoping to be ignored. Whether or not he buys it, he decides not to waste his time and stays parked. I keep up the leg pumps until I'm out of sight, then power back up.

Ninety minutes later, I'm near the end of my second battery when I find my first stop, the Marlboro Free Public Library. Recharging the batteries to full takes about an hour and a half. The librarian's eyes follow me as I drag my board between the stacks as quietly as possible, but she says a bright "Hello!"

I find a corner with an outlet for my two chargers, refill my water bottles, and use the bathroom, confident that neither the librarian, the retiree in the armchair, nor the fourth grader and her tutor will steal my board. I return to my station and sit on the floor; the exposed gray brick grabs my sweaty shirt as I lean against the wall. I consider the rest of the route. I double-check the location of Jim's Steaks in Philadelphia, my ultimate goal. I email, I stare out the window in contemplation—the idle time that people spend recharging electric cars starts to make sense. There are plenty of constructive ways to fill 90 minutes.

From here on out, I'm riding on the shoulder. I try to keep a predictable path for the passing motorists,

To use the Boosted Board's hand remote, depress the trigger and tilt the thumb wheel to speed up or slow down. I rode at around 12 mph for maximum range.

but they're as confused as I am about where I fit in the road's hierarchy of wheeled transport. After 45 minutes of avoiding sewer grates, broken bottles, and lug nuts, I start to ache. My calves are tight from the constant turns, and my left shoulder is cramping from supporting the pack. It's only 2 o'clock, but I keep yawning. I did, after all, board the Manhattan-to-Jersey ferry at 7 this morning. Cars line up behind me. Some honk, some tap the gas, revving their engines. My mind floats to obituaries, not of great adventurers, but of history's forgotten idiots.

OUTSIDE TULLYTOWN, the shoulder disappears into little more than the width of the white line. Cars whipping past spit gravel at my ankles as I try to weight my back foot to anchor the wheels, which are spinning for grip on the loose pavement. The board keeps fishtailing. Ahead, the white line disappears beneath even more gravel spilling out from a driveway. A semi thunders past, less than an arm's length from me. I lean away, inadvertently turning the board into the driveway. I jump off, stumbling through ten enormous steps as my board bounces into the rocks. I stand there, huffing. For at least another mile, I had avoided being smeared

New York City ORDINANCES SEEM TO BAN THEM... though it's LOOSELY ENFORCED AT BEST.

across 100 feet of North Radcliffe Street. My mother wasn't going to be placing sun-bleached flowers on my white cross.

I'm getting close. Twelve hours, 71 miles skated. Water supply: three liters. Food supply: I'll be needing that cheesesteak. Fatigue: manageable.

I search my phone for a restaurant, one last bit of fuel for the final push, and find the Bridesburg Pub, 13 miles away. It's almost sundown. I click on the red light I attached to my pack, and strap a headlight to my chest. Three quarters of a mile from the bar, the Boosted's battery dies. It seems silly to stop when I'm so close, so I kick and kick, pushing against the resistance of the wheezing motors and belts, until I arrive.

It's a locals bar, tucked, if you can tuck on a corner, at the end of a line of row houses on a narrow street. I open the door. If they had been playing a record, it would have scratched. I'm dripping sweat, my hair, conspicuously long, sticks to my forehead, my pants still have chunks of gravel stuck to them, and the GoPro on my helmet won't stop flashing. Squares of incandescent and neon light shine through the windows onto the street, two

Lotto machines glimmer in the corner, memorabilia from all of Philly's teams cover the walls. I look at the beer list, then reconsider, I'm not safe yet. I'll have to make this a quick stop. "What are you up to?"

This turns out to be the bar's owner, a warm-faced guy named Brian who speaks loudly even though it's clear he's not trying to. I turn off the GoPro on my helmet and explain what I'm doing, wincing as the words come out of my mouth. A guy down the bar overhears and says loudly, "You came all the way from New York? Why'd you come to Bridesburg?"

But then: One by one, the regulars at the Bridesburg Pub start to take an interest. They seem curious—impressed, even. Everyone watches, shouting out references to

SAFETY FIRST

GOPRO HERO5
4K and wireless transfer. Only pros need the more expensive models. (\$300)

ANKER POWERCORE 20100 BATTERY
Massive recharging capacity for the camera and phone. (\$50)



TRIPLE 8 SWEATSAVER HELMET
The liner works. I should've been drenched, but wasn't. (\$75)

DEUTER FUTURA VARIO 50 + 10 BACKPACK
Mesh between the pack and your spine prevents a sweaty back. (\$230)

BLACKBURN DAYBLAZER 1100 AND 65 LIGHTS
Bright enough for daylight, and batteries that last long enough to turn them on and forget. (\$115)



At a library in Marlboro, New Jersey, recharging each battery to full from a 120-volt wall outlet takes an hour and a half.

THE NEW PEOPLE MOVERS

The names to know in the new era of motorized, legally ambiguous, kinda cool, kinda lame, but totally intriguing people movers you want for some reason.



BOOSTED BOARD
There are lots of imitations, but the originator brand's build quality and power make this the Tesla of electric skateboards. 7 miles range; \$750 (Mini S)



ELECTRIC SCOOTERS
If Bird, Lime, Skip, or Spin aren't renting scooters via app in your town, you can buy a Ninebot KickScooter. 15 miles range; \$600



LITHIUM CYCLES SUPER73
The closest thing to an electric moped. Laws about license and registration vary by state and mood of the officer. 25 to 30 miles range; \$2,800 (Original 2018)



SOLOWHEEL GLIDE 3
The smallest method of transport is a gyroscopically stabilized unicycle that folds up to the size of a large pizza. 30 miles range; \$900



After 90 miles and 15 hours: sore arches from the board's concave deck, aching calves from turning.

most of the guys shake my hand. They offer encouragement and wish me luck.

FIVE MILES, then four, then three. I can't see much in the dark as I slow for a stop sign, conscious of the bus a block behind me. I pass a group of middle school girls. One of them lets out a "What the...?" Maybe she felt the same as I did, seeing that guy on my college campus moving uphill with \$1,600 of magic. This time, I'm the one silently gliding by, knowing better. I give half a wave, all I can muster.

I walk the board into Jim's, and again get looks—the flashing lights, the board, the GoPro. My Casio that beeps as it strikes 10 o'clock. Beary, I power through a cheesesteak, telling myself I'll get another one tomorrow for breakfast so I can actually enjoy it. The board is still half-full, but I'm too tired to ride. I walk to the Airbnb, find the bed, and fall asleep with my clothes on.

'80s sci-fi movies the board reminds them of as I change its battery. They ask to hold and examine the spare, and they're surprised at how heavy the batteries are, the thickness of the charging cable. They examine the board, and nod in approval at how good it looks after my day abusing it. These guys—one's a contractor, another works the docks—they get it. I'm challenging a piece of equipment, the way you might push a car to its limits, or scrape a canoe through shallow water, or fly across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. I notice after a while that not one of them asks me why I'm doing this.

The conversation turns (inevitably) to cheesesteaks: chopped or sliced, wid or without, Whiz or provolone. They stop observing me and instead start whipping off Philadelphia street corners. It's what I need after 13 hours. As I get up to leave,

THE BOOSTED BOARD outlasted me, like an inexhaustible dog. When my eyes open the next morning, there it is, sitting on the floor, waiting. I feel a weird pride in it. It's a machine, a pickup truck, and a Porsche. It's a bit goofy, and not cool because it's trying hard to be cool. But it works. If people laugh, I get it, but I'll laugh too, because now I know this thing is sturdy and powerful and capable, and fun as hell to boot. People told me before the trip that it was a stupid idea, and I'm not sure they were wrong. But you can get from New York City to Philadelphia on a Boosted Board. You can tell me you don't think it's the future if you want, but you can't deny this: It works.