

# **Jacobites Mountaineering Club**



**Journal 2022-2023**

Front cover – View from Ben Nevis on a winter's day by Stuart McLeod

## Committee

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Journal	Stuart McLeod

## Journal Editor's Comment

Many thanks to all those who contributed articles for this year's journal. It was looking a bit spartan until late in the year but the Jacobites came good with a variety of articles on walking, running, climbing, cycling, skiing, sailing, mule riding and painting. Thank you also to the Jacobites who provided photographs to remind everyone of their escapades over the past year!

The next Journal will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jacobites, so hopefully it can be a testament to the great history of the club.

Stuart

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Bonaly Dam Oil Painting - Euan Cameron



# Annual Summary

## Autumn 2022

The new club year got off to a good start at the Kintail Outdoor Centre on 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> October where Jacobites enjoyed the beautiful ridges of Kintail under light snow on the highest peaks. There followed a trip south of the border to the Coppermines Cottage in the Lake District on 28<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> October, where the weather was grim but the pub was good!

On the trip to the Raeburn Hut on 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> November the Jacobites encountered atmospheric mist and light on a walk into Creag Pitraidh and Geal Charn.

Then, as November drew to a close, the Jacobites stayed at Inverardran Cottage in Crianlarich on the 25<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup>, where they were treated to beautiful Autumn light on Beinn Dorain.



Beinn Dorain – Blanca's photo

## Winter 2022-2023



Rob Truswell's photo

The Winter got off to a great start with the Inver Xmas Dinner meet on 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> December, with excellent weather and posing in the club hut. A blanket of fresh snow combined with clear skies made for a winter wonderland in the northwest. The same weekend saw the Jacobite winter climbing get under way as Stuart and Tim Elson underwent a 16 hour wade through deep powder in the Cairngorms followed by some stiff climbing in the Grey Corries the following day.



Posing - Cathy Scheib's photos



The Jacobites brought in the New Year at Inver with similar ground conditions to the Christmas meet, along with some good weather and a broken spectre for Ken and co on Sgurr na Feartaig. Former Jacobite Dan Moore made a cameo appearance on the meet to help out with the pie eating and whisky drinking.

There was then a marked thaw in conditions in January and the only Jacobite meet to the Little Houses in Roybridge on the 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>th</sup> required the Jacobites to persevere in variable visibility.

Robbie Hewitt, Zoe Strong, Martin Bagshaw and Will Broad attended the Jacobites CIC meet on 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> February. As for much of the winter, ice routes high on Ben Nevis were the winter routes in best condition. Ascents of Green Gully, Number Three Gully Buttress and Indicator Wall made for an enjoyable and productive CIC meet.

The same weekend some Jacobite stalwarts attended Saddle Mountain meet in Kintail at which attendance was decimated by Caroline Watt's rival meet – for which she was recognised at the annual dinner!

Ken, Sara and Graham tagged a trip to the Far North on the front of the Saddle Mountain trip, where they were rewarded with beautiful views from Ben Loyal, Ben Stack and Ben Klibreck.



Ben Stack

## Spring 2022

At the onset of Spring there was a rare and sustained period of high pressure over Scotland, which gave over a week of beautiful weather and cloud inversions. Only the highest ice routes on Ben Nevis were in winter condition and they were enjoyed by the Jacobites: Smith's Route, Cascade and The Gutter among them.

On 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> March the Jacobites enjoyed the picturesque surroundings of Inveraray whilst at the Inveraray Hostel. Pleasant spring hill walking on Beinn an Lochain, Beinn Chochill and Beinn Eunich and a cycle tour over to Loch Awe made for a great weekend.



Beinn an Lochain – Richard Chandler's photo

In contrast to Inveraray, the Muir of Inverey meet on the weekend of 31<sup>st</sup> March saw some stoic trudging from the Jacobites on Beinn Brochain, Carn a'Mhaim and Ben Macdui in poor visibility.

However, the excellent weather returned for the Inver Easter Meet on 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> April and full advantage was taken. Classic Torridon traverses of Liathach via Northern Pinnacles and Beinn Eighe via the Black Carls were among the itineraries. Rock climbing as also appreciated at Diabeg and Ardmail.





Alex on the Northern Pinnacles of Liathach



Climbing on the Mull trip

Mull showed all its splendour for the May bank holiday trip to Creich Hall, with Jacobites enjoying hill walking on Ben More and some beautiful cragging with Mull's serene coastline never far away.

A trip south of the border to the George Starkey Hut in the Lake District on 12<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> provided good weather and opportunity for both hillwalking and skinny dipping!



A Jacobite picnic on Sgurr Dubh Mor

Some Jacobites were feeling creative at the Old Inn Bunkhouse, Carbost on 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> May, where Euan captured the mood in Glen Brittle with a fine sketch. Graham, Katherine, Ros, Ken, Blanca and Glo had a fine day up Sgur Dubh Mhor and Sgurr Dubh an Da Bheinn with beautiful views across the Small Isles, which Graham has immortalised in verse.



## Summer 2022

Early summer was marked by a sustained period of dry weather that lasted for several weeks. The Jacobites made best use of this by fully enjoying the hills and especially the rarely dry mountain rock routes including: Apparition and Yo-Yo in Glen Coe, The Bat on Ben Nevis, The Pin, Haystack and Stone Bastion on Shelterstone, Angel Face and Sumo on Tripple Buttress.

The first official meet of Summer was to the Glen Coe Ski Lodge at Bridge of Orchy on 9th-11<sup>th</sup> June where a fine traverse of the Aonach Eagach Ridge was undertaken.

The highlight of the summer was the trip to Achmelvich Beach Hostel on 23rd-25<sup>th</sup> June. This was an outstanding summer meet where the Jacobites took part in a smorgasbord of activities in beautiful surroundings. Amanda and Alex climbed the Old Man of Stoer and everyone enjoyed the distinctive peaks of the far North West including Suilven. Miles and co also came across Jamie Aarons on Ben Hope whilst she was on the way to breaking the Munro round speed record.



Al Fresco dining at the Beach Hostel



Suilven

The weather became more unstable mid-summer but the Jacobites were lucky with largely good weather on the Inver Summer Meet on 21<sup>st</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> July for some classic walking and climbing in Torridon including Slioch. Anna, Alex and Sean also enjoyed the magnificent Groovin' High climb on the Tripple Buttress.





Beautiful Falls on the way to Slioch



Alex on Groovin High – Beinn Eighe.

## Autumn 2022

A foray to the Alan Walker's cottage near Llanberis on 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> September was enjoyed by Scott, Fiona S, Amanda, Robyn, Ken and Steph. Steph made sure the Welsh heard her presence whilst undertaking an emotional climb on Tryfan.

To round off the year, Richard organised a great annual dinner at the Glenmore Youth Hostel on 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> October which coincided with a monumental amount of rain. Most were content with some local walks in the beautiful surroundings of Loch Morlich and Rothiemurchus. Catherine and Chris were the most adventurous with a trip up Lairig Ghru to Chalamain. Martin and Stuart encountered some geordies in Ryvoan cooking cheese toasties on a stove, but this was as nothing compared with the culinary delights that were to come. The caterers did us proud with a bountiful meal and the Jacobite efforts on the cake front were outstanding.



Cathy's Bakeoff winning cake!



Everyone looking dapper (especially Martin)

## Congratulations

On Saturday 28th October 2023, Robyn Huggins completed a round of the Munros on Shiehallion. She was supported by Jacobite friends on a damp outing that was followed by afternoon tea. Many congratulations on your fine achievement Robyn!



Sarah presents Robyn with an apt beer.



Paul and Munro the dog.

Paul Harris completed a round of Munros in September 2020 on Meall a'Chrasgaidh. This achievement was not recorded in the Jacobite journal of that year, so it is in this one! Paul's first Munro was Ben Nevis in February 2016: a relatively swift completion due to unwavering focus and companionship of his dog - Munro. In the run up to his completion, Paul raised money for the Walking with the wounded charity. A belated congratulations on your achievement Paul!

## Dave McHugh Award

The Dave McHugh award honours the memory of Jacobite member Dave McHugh who was tragically killed in a road accident on the way to ski in Glencoe in 1987, along with his travelling companion, Lin Merritt. His parents donated an original painting of the Aonach Eagach Ridge to his club in his memory to be given as an award for special achievement, endeavour or enhancing the reputation of the club.

This year the Dave McHugh award was presented to Amanda McKay for her dedication to climbing within the club, both in summer and in winter, and for acting as an inspiration to others. This year Amanda also branched into Alpine climbing and summited her first 4000m peak in the Alps. Many congratulations to Amanda as a very worthy recipient of this year's Dave McHugh award!



## **President's Report, AGM September 2023**

by Katherine Ross

Overall, 2022-23 seems to have been a successful year for the club, albeit with a slight sense, to me at least, that the post-Covid rebound has perhaps mellowed slightly. On re-reading this report, I realise that it has a bit of an 'evening' theme to it, as I'll let others speak for themselves on other aspects of the club's activities.

We started off the year with a very successful winter slide show series and it was pleasing that they drew so many to the pub. The largest audiences numbered over 40 people including some new members, and it was a great opportunity to socialise afterwards. Thanks to all who presented slides; there was fantastic variety and each week I was inspired to think about escaping for an adventure, only to remember that it was winter and wild camping would probably be quite miserable. Thanks also to those who supported through attending and contributing to the Mountain Rescue donations. Attendance did tail off towards the end of the programme, however I can confirm that this was not a result of poor content, but some other factors must have been at play!

While attendance at the early slide shows was very good, pub attendance has generally been on the low side. We would be keen to understand why this has been - whether it's that pub, the location, or anything else. The upstairs room has been fantastic for us to use free of charge and especially for slide shows. The only real downside is that, for the last year, we have only been able to book the space two weeks ahead which has created extra work for those of us having to keep re-booking it (thanks Ken and Richard for helping me with this) and extra jeopardy when trying to coordinate numerous people's diaries to put a slide show programme together and get publicity out with enough notice. This is likely to be an ongoing issue if we choose to keep using the Old Bell; going forward I think we need to recruit a few more pub regulars, not necessarily committee members, to help with this.

In terms of evening activities, we ran a well attended night orienteering series in and around Edinburgh, mainly using the MapRun app which uses GPS location on users' smart phones rather than traditional markers on the ground. I think a particular low point for me was the Dreghorn course in mid-March, when it was hovering around freezing with sleet, and there seemed to be impenetrable gorse in all the least helpful places. That said, we were generally lucky with the weather and the other evenings were dry as far as I can recall. Hopefully we can organise some more of these this winter, since they are a great way to learn and practice navigation and all are welcome. Thanks to those who coordinated and attended the sessions.

Evening walks were less successful with only one taking place (coordinated by me) at the beginning of last winter and no further walks since then. Unable to do it all, I was hoping that a few others would be keen enough to take the lead and organise some walks. However, despite regular reminders and route suggestions in the newsletter, nobody volunteered. Perhaps all our lovely local walks were a victim of their own success during Covid.

We also ran monthly social bouldering events at Eden Rock and Alien Block over the winter with the aim of making us easy to find for new members and to get people together as a group rather than dispersed in pairs or threes at roped walls. Eden Rock was notably better attended than Alien

Block. The summer cragging season seemed to be well attended, although the weather wasn't always kind. I only managed to attend a couple this summer, but from what I've seen and heard, the club's climbing scene is thriving with experienced members and newbies alike. Thanks to Robbie Hewitt for coordinating both the winter social bouldering and summer cragging programmes.

One thing I would have liked to have to have looked at organising is more of the Mountaineering Scotland skills courses that were so popular last year. Perhaps demand for these can be assessed in the coming months with a view to making some enquiries. It is worth noting that Mountaineering Scotland's winter skills courses are open for booking on an individual basis, however.

Finally, I'd like to close by thanking the outgoing committee for putting so much of their spare time and effort into fulfilling their various roles as best they could. Without the committee we wouldn't have the club, so thanks for taking a turn at it!

## Climbing New Routes

by Mike Barnard

Hell's Lum Devils: Alternative Direct Finish, 15m E1 5a \*\*\*

Mike Barnard and Martin Bagshaw, May 2023

Mike, Lucy, Shauna, Martin and former Jacobite Franklin also enjoyed some new routing on the Isle of Muck – see Lucy's article!

Rare Repeats:

If you're going to fly to another continent for a route, best make it a good one. That I imagine is probably what Martin was thinking when he suggested 'The Orgasmatron' on Assldrar Thumb for him and Stuart to try on our November Morocco trip. Plans change however, and the new objective became the more prosaically named 'Eagles and Doves' on learning that the coveted potential third ascent of this Robert Durrant route was up for grabs. They had been reliably informed (by Robert) that this was a world classic and in need of further attention.

At almost 300m high, any route on the Thumb is a major undertaking, but the line was despatched without incident. I am told it entirely lived up to expectation, with Martin reportedly "astonished at the quality", though afterwards, when Robert was far enough away to be deemed almost out of earshot, the suggestion was made that the best bit of climbing was when Stuart went briefly off route.



A view over Buttermere by Euan Cameron

## Adventures in the Kamnik Alps

By Catherine Jones

If you stand in the railway station in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and look north you can see some pointy, limestone mountains: the Kamnik Alps. They are lower than the Julian Alps (the highest, Grintovec is 2558m to Triglav's 2864 m), and fit into a geographical area of about 100 km<sup>2</sup>. They are very pointy, with lots and lots of scrambling to be done.



Skuta in the Kamnik Alps

We started in the rain at Velika Planina. We cheated up 800 m of ascent, by getting the cable car. The lady in the ticket office was showing everyone a webcam of the zero visibility and rain at the top station. Did we really want to go up? Yes, a one way ticket please. It had taken us 11 years to get back to Slovenia, a broken leg and global pandemic getting in the way. A bit of rain was not going to stop us.

We stayed in the alpine hut amongst the shepherd huts at Velika Planina. The weather was so bad that we could not see the hut until we arrived at it. Thankfully the weather was better the next morning, and went over Konj ("the horse") to the Kamnik Saddle hut. We were lucky: a week earlier we would not have got along the path under Planjava due to snow. We did some mildly sketchy snow crossing, and the weather closed in: again we did not see the hut until we were at the front door. There used to be a hut between Velika Planina and the saddle, but it was "burnt down by a Polish lady" a few years ago.

At the Kamnik Saddle, the hut warden told us we would not get up any hills. He then asked where we had come from, and we gained credibility by traversing the path round Planjava, and deemed sufficiently competent to be told how to navigate the dodgy patch of snow at the first pass on the way to Skuta. Skuta was a classic Kamnik day out: 1300m of ascent, 8km distance where only about 2 km of that was walking. The dodgy patch of snow was navigated by chimneying down between snow and rock/choss. There was quite a drop below it. We spoke to a Czech the next day in the hut who said he'd done it a few years before when there was no snow, just a broken cable and loose stones on a rocky slab, and as he put it, "super sketchy"). From there we went over Turkska Gora (super scrambly) and onto Skuta. To get up Skuta was a 400 m vertical scramble.



We had a second day from the Saddle, going up Brana in the morning and Planjava in the mist in the afternoon. After our trip up Skuta, the hut warden was pointing anyone that asked about the path over to Turkska Gora in our direction. In return, the hut warden told us about the “unofficial” path onto the higher top on Planjava: nothing technical, but a lot of loose rock.

We then went round to the north side of the Kamnik Alps. The hut down below the Saddle, Frischov Dom, had burnt down due to a fire caused by an electrical fault. There are 2 huts to the north of Skuta and Grintovec: Kranjska Koca and Ceska Koca. As the crow flies they are barely 1km apart, but 2 hrs on foot as there is either a technical klettersteig (with fixed rope, which in Kamnik means you need it) or quite a long walk down and back up. Kranjska Koca was being refurbished, so we were limited to Ceska Koca, a very pretty, traditional wooden hut. The Saddle hut had hot water on tap, due to a solar water heating system, and free (!) hot showers. Ceska Koca did not have such luxury, but did have a cold shower.

As always the huts were great for meeting interesting people from other places. Most of those in the huts were either Slovene or eastern European: Polish, Czech and Slovak. There was a guided party of about 8 Hungarians, who liked their beer and schnapps. Despite us having walked through the most southerly part of Austria to get to the Czech hut, it was very noticeable that the Austrians did not go across the border.



Chris outdoor caving

From the Czech hut we went up Kocna (Jezerska and Kokrska), which after a short walk up into the coire, was several hundred metres of continuous scrambling. This included a section where you had to wriggle on your stomach, pushing with your feet on the ceiling (like caving, but outside). We were lucky with the conditions: a couple of weeks earlier, lingering snow patches (which the German language guide book did warn about) had led to several accidents and rescues. Before we set out in the morning, we had promised the hut warden we would turn around if needs be. Unfortunately the route from Kocna to Grintovec was closed due to rockfall. If it re-opens, this would be a very good reason to return.



Catherine on the route up Kocna

Instead, we went up Grintovec on a second day from the Czech hut, and also bagged Dolgi Hrbet, which is at the other end of the ridge from Skuta, on the way back. The route up Dolgi Hrbet had the most technical bit of scrambling all holiday, where we were very grateful for a tight metal cable to clip onto, with a 1000m drop straight back down to the hut between your feet. Grintovec, being the highest top, was the only place where we encountered significant numbers of people, as there is an easy walking route up from the Kokrsko Saddle hut.

From the Czech hut we went up and over to the Kokrsko Saddle hut. We arrived as a huge amount of wood was being taken off the luggage lift to the hut. The hut warden's grandson (aged ~9) was running the bar: he happily served us alcoholic drinks but had clearly been told not to take money. We had been able to book and pay for the Kokrsko and Kamnik Saddle huts over the internet. This is great if the internet is working. Not so great if the internet is down. It was all a bit chaotic, but we got there in the end, speaking a mix of German and English (Germglish) with the hut warden seemed to be the best option. There were some interesting translations on the breakfast menu: "Cold sores with milk" turned out to be semolina, which was much more delicious than it sounded.





Kocna from Zdolska

At this stage of the holiday we finally encountered obstacles which stopped us from what we wanted to do. Our ascent of the Rinkas was stopped by a very sketchy patch of snow. So we cut our losses and went up Skuta again, by a different way from before. On the final day the weather finally closed in properly, and we had to abandon going up Kalski Greben because of wind that was strong enough to blow us off our feet. That night we were woken up by a massive thunderstorm at 3am. In the morning, the lights in the hut were not working, and then we saw the wind turbine (which had been installed only 5 days earlier) was missing all of its blades. We walked out in the rain (finding a wind turbine blade on the path a few hundred metres below the hut) and down to Kamiska Bistrica, which conveniently had a cafe and a bus stop. A bus out to Kamnik, where we stayed in the monastery (there is not much accommodation), and ate pizza. Then a bus ride to Ljubljana, went to see the skeleton of the mammoth that was found in the Kamnik valley in the museum, and home the next day, escaping just as the heat wave was arriving.



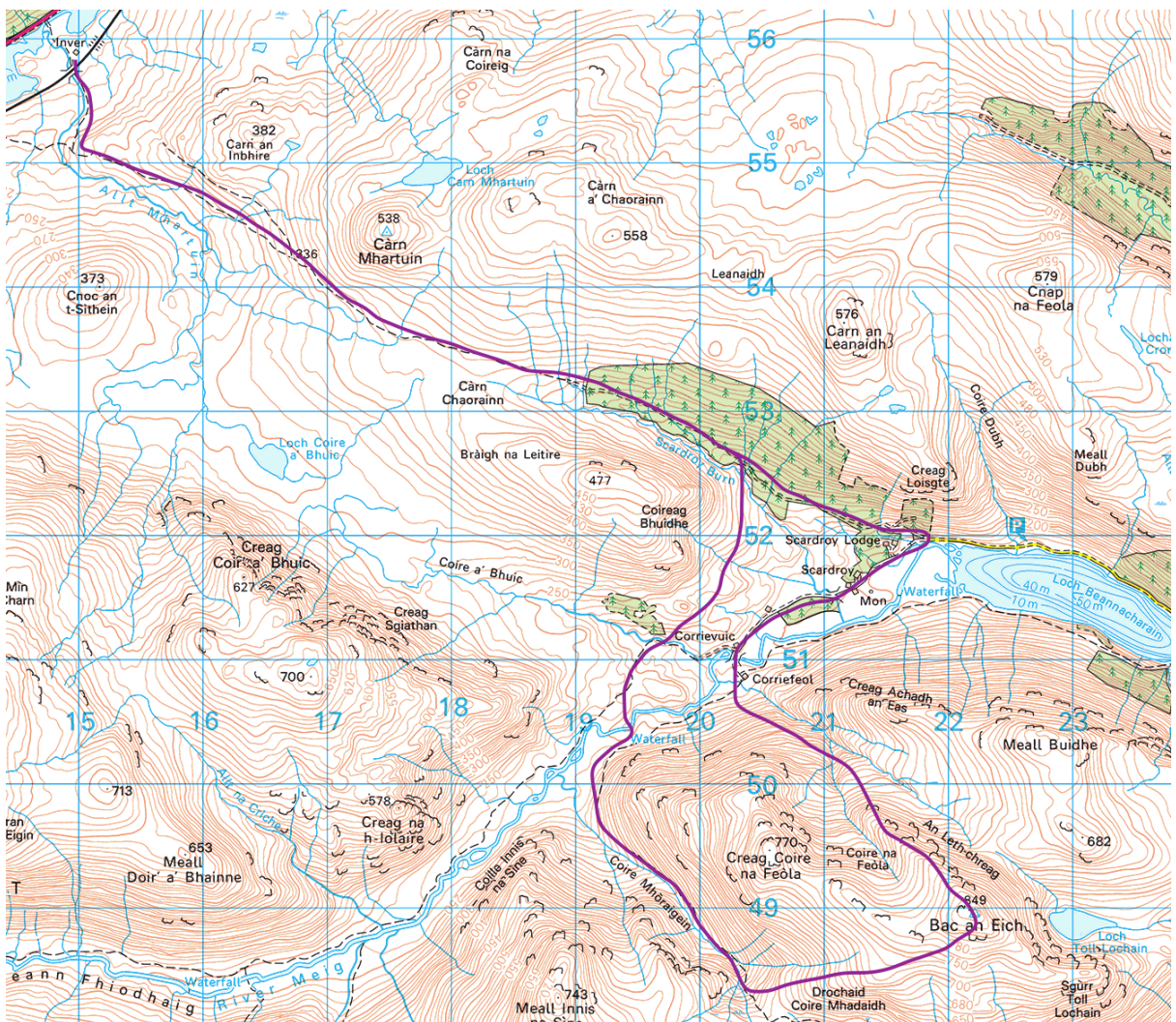
## Bac an Eich from Inver

By Stephanie Droop

Time: 7-8 hours part-jogging. c.30km, c.960m ascent

Late to Inver for easter, arriving after 11pm in Ross's electric car, wired on tiredness and range anxiety (although we did see what may have been a polecat, a tawny rolypoly at the side of the road). Everyone else had already done Liathach and was sunburnt, exalted and merry.

I was itching for a big day so I made my own route. First bare arms run of the season, with a blast of winter on the top. It was a boost of confidence to know I can plan a route just by looking at a map: I think I could get up there and I think I could get down there.



No blue line or walk report to follow, only open your instinct and let your feet guide you. Feet follow the lie of the land and you know you've got it right when every little re-entry is pocked with hoofprints. I came back part deer. Part deer... part experiencing the miracle of bipedalism from the inside.





Off the main hill I joined a path beside a small burn. The second that gets big enough, I'm getting in. Trotting along, half an eye on the biggening pools until suddenly --- that one. I chuck off my grimy clothes and slide in like a ravioli off a chef's ladle. Mind dissolves in yellow brown blue light and sensation. Mind in all my cells.

Dressed again, loping onwards. River crossing at a 'ford'. Hah, it's not really a ford. It might be impassible in spate. River crossings are such a buzz on your own. I never have yet messed it up, but still, what if.

More deer tracks, another small crossing, and home on the track and boggy path.

If you go, look out for the muffin-top rock a few km out of Inver!



## Mountain Marathoning

By Lisa Ferrero

*"So are you up to anything this week?"*

*"I'm off down to Wales to catch up with my dad and to do a mountain marathon...which isn't really a marathon- its just called that!..."*

This hurried add-on is pretty much always my starting point when trying to explain what a mountain marathon is...to make clear I'm not some superhuman who would choose to run 26 miles in the mountains!

For the uninitiated, a mountain marathon is a cross between a hill-walk (or hill-run if you are keen) and orienteering, with no GPS use allowed. Most of the classic events require you to be self-sufficient over two days, so add a decent size rucksack and a night of camping in as well. There's a variety of course lengths/durations, almost all of which are run in teams of two. Courses are either 'line', where you visit a series of checkpoints in a set order as fast as you can, or 'score' where you try and collect as many checkpoints as you can within a set time. Score checkpoints are worth different amounts depending how easy they are to get to, and you lose points for every minute you are late in to the finish. This is all done on open mountainside, often away from paths, so the ability to navigate and route-find on rough ground is generally more important than being super-fit; after all, walking in the right direction gets you there faster than running in the wrong one! There's also many different categories, and the reason I like these events is that it caters for a broad range of people- you can walk round one of the shorter classes no bother. How seriously people take it is very variable- as a contrast to the 'Elite' (seriously fast runners who suffer at the midway camp as they brought the world's smallest sleeping bag and are lying on some glorified bubble-wrap), I've known people stop to make a bacon buttie or go swimming in a lochan part way round the 'race'. There was a guy wondering around midway camp in pyjamas this year.

For the first time (I think!), this year I did two mountain marathons. The 'Saunders' is run in early July in the Lakes, and has been Claire (usual partner in crime) and my go-to event for the past few years, being not too big, held at a nice time of year, and being a reasonable travel distance for both of us. You can also buy beer at midway camp! Its also particularly friendly feeling, in part due to the 'parent and teen' class, resulting in a lot of families taking part. We were both slightly nervous starting this year's Saunders, as we had entered a harder line class than we normally would, but our navigation held up, as did my knees. I was for once at least as fit as Claire, and we came away very happy.

For a bit of contrast, the second event was the OMM (Original Mountain Marathon, previously known as the Karrimor). This event is held in a different area every year, always the last weekend of October, and last year seemed to be trying to market itself as the 'hardcore MM' (Now do we think there may be a link between this and the more unequal than usual male-female ratio at the OMM this year? I note they've changed the wording for next year's event!). Their definition of 'mountain' can be somewhat variable- they've been held in Dartmoor, Ayrshire and Mid-Wales, as well as places you would associate with mountains.

I first did the OMM (or KIMM at the time) when I was at uni and a friend from the mountaineering club was looking for a partner after theirs dropped out. Although my mum had done it many

times, that was before I was born, and I really had no idea what I'd just agreed to. I think this was the first time I'd ran without a teacher telling me I had to! My memory of it includes a lot of waterlogged ground, and I just tried to keep up with my partner Tom, who was doing all the navigation and could move way faster than me.



Me and Claire in Summer MM attire at the Saunders

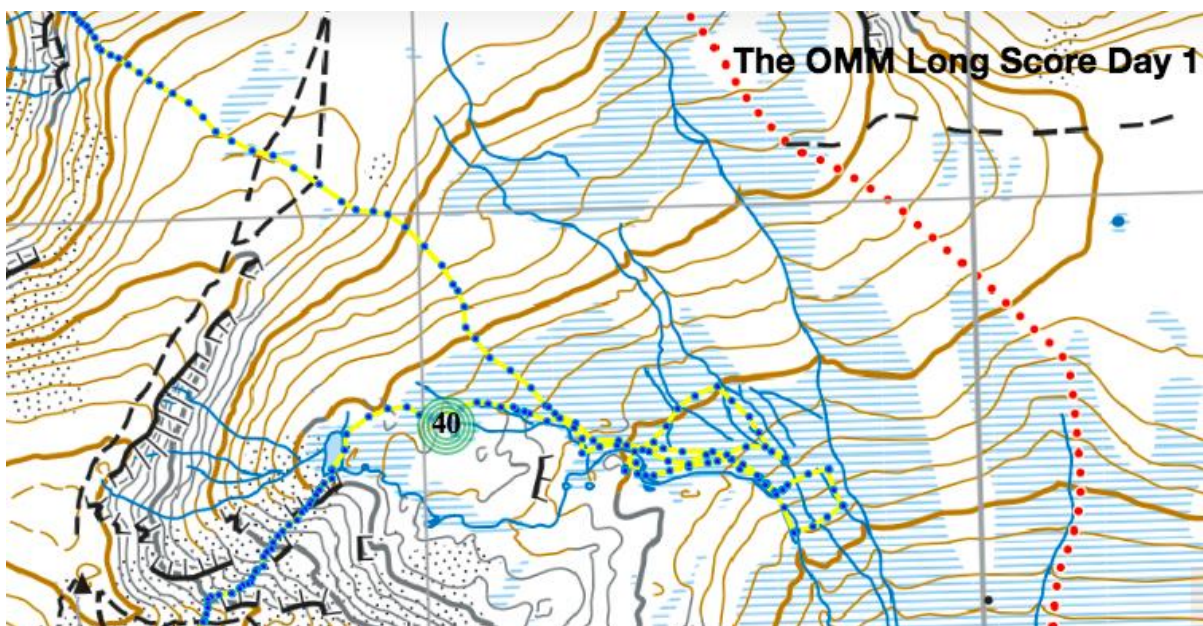
This year, after a long break from the OMM (often too southern, non-mountainy and busy for my liking), the prospect of a MM on the (real) mountains I grew up near tempted me in, and so we signed up to the 'Long Score' class, which is 7 hrs on day 1, and 6 hrs on day 2. Stu McLeod and Rob Truswell were also taking part, Stu doing 'B' (a line course), and Rob going for Medium Score as his first MM experience. The Event Centre was up on the edge of the Carneddau (NE Snowdonia), and those who were camping there on the Friday night got down to some serious pre-race fuelling by sampling the local beers. We were staying elsewhere, so just popped in to registration- me getting the 'dibber' (worn on the wrist), and Claire getting a tracker firmly taped to her rucksack.

~~Bright and~~ Early on Saturday morning, me and Claire 'dibbed' through the starting gates, were handed our race maps, and carried out a traditional MM 'racing start' (move 20m, then sit down to work out where your checkpoints are- or for score, which checkpoints you're going to try and visit).

Collecting various checkpoints (marked by an orienteering flag and an electronic 'dibber' box), we headed deeper into the Carneddau, passing rather confused looking Carneddau ponies who are



used to having the hills to themselves. Considering I wasn't feeling very fit, it was all going rather well until heading to our 4<sup>th</sup> checkpoint. First, I realised that my map had escaped my pocket...200m back down the hill (Claire, who was fitter than me this time, kindly went and got it before it blew away), then we somehow miscalculated our altitude, not helped by there being no height numbers on the map at all (Never seen that at a MM before!). This resulted in a good half an hour trying to find the right small pond in the mist [see comedy tracker trace!]. On our last attempt (*"If its not here we'll have to just swallow our pride and carry on"*) we got it, and salvaged some of our pride by finding a very efficient line out of the corrie. The rest of day 1 included bumping into Stu on the descent down to Ogwen, and doing some steep heather scrambling to get a possibly unwise checkpoint above Llyn Idwal, before joining the inevitable line of MM-ers, as everyone converged towards midway camp, which was this year in a farmer's field in Nant Ffrancon, looking up at Tryfan and the Glyderau. We finished on time, niggles and blister free, but somewhat disappointed by what was probably the worst MM nav F-ups we've ever had as a pair.



GPS trace of a carry on looking for a small pond

Midway camp is a field with an organiser's marquee, a water source, a long row of portaloos, and a lot of near-identical small tents. There's usually a good atmosphere, particularly at the summer MMs, with long warm evenings allowing for more socialising. Evening attire varies from what you were wearing all day + 1 top (brrrr!), to a lovely warm and dry change of clothes and toasty jacket (my choice). What almost everyone has in common though is the odd footwear choice. Take shoes and disgusting socks off, dry feet, put dry socks on, put a plastic bag on each foot, then step back into your sopping wet shoes...and now you look like a real Mountain Marathoner!

The forecasted rain only set in after darkness fell, so we managed to dry our leggings, eat lots and then retreat in time into our tent, where the crosswords and puzzles printed on the back of the map kept Claire amused, while I corrected the poorly translated 'Useful (ahem!) Welsh phrases'. After all, if you think you're saying "My hovercraft is full of eels\*", but actually are saying "My hovercraft IS eels", the local farmer will look at you like you are an idiot!

I drifted off to sleep to the traditional MM evening calls of *"Fred- where are you? I can't tell which one is our tent!"*.

\*I'm guessing the perpetrator was of a similar era to my dad. Its from a Monty Python sketch apparently.

Waking up to the traditional MM morning sounds of bagpipes played in close proximity to our tent, day 2 dawned dry (much better than forecast), and with tired legs we headed up to our first 3 checkpoints which involved some nice gentle steep grassy traversing to warm the legs up- thank goodness for fell-shoes! On the descent, Claire developed a business plan for selling kevlar reinforced running trousers, and carried out a brief market survey of our fellow competitors, many of which had resorted (intentionally or otherwise) to a sledging descent. Day 2 had better visibility, more wind, more ponies, and no nav mess-ups therefore more points. The extra points pushed us up to 4/13 ladies, which was a pleasant and unexpected surprise. Rob T got a very impressive 10<sup>th</sup> out of over 200 pairs in his class, and Stu had had a very pleasant 2 days hill-walking and catching up with an old friend. Everyone was happy :-)



The OMM bar where serious competitors prepare for the race.

Why do one?

There's so many reasons. If you want to take it somewhat seriously, its to challenge your own fitness, teamwork and navigation skills...or if really serious, to try and win! For others its just an interesting way to explore a new area, catch up with friends, or just to do something a bit different.

Could I do it?

If you are a regular(ish) Scottish hill-goer that's used to pathless sections, then yes, there's a course for you. So long as you can do 5 hours on the hill for 2 days in a row, and know how to use

a map and compass in poor visibility (or can find a partner that can!). The shorter courses have easier checkpoints and terrain, with more time on paths. Most events ask that at least one of you has previous MM experience for the harder courses, but the easier ones are open to anyone.

Do I need special kit?

If walking, your usual hill-kit will do, noting that footwear must have good grip. Altimeters are very useful, and seriously consider using fell-shoes if you are used to them. The main differences if wanting to run sections are a running-stable rucksack, lighter kit, and fell-shoes. For your camping kit, obviously the lighter the better as you have to carry it for 2 days. In most cases it is compulsory to share a tent with your partner. You see a range from lightweight kit that fits into a <20L running rucksack, to people with winter-hillwalking size sacks. Around 50L between 2 people is typical. In all cases, check the compulsory kit list for the event!

Do I need a special partner?

Obviously, its handy to pair up with someone who's done it before, but not at all essential. More importantly, pick someone who you will work well with and has similar goals. A hyper-competitive person who's way faster than you is probably a bad idea. Are you both wanting and able to navigate (and can agree/compromise on route choice!), or is one far more experienced and you're both happy for them to lead on that? Probably most importantly, will you enjoy their company for 2 days, and not annoy each other when tired and in a small tent?

There are also a few events such as the Lakeland 3-day which do allow solo entrants.

What events are there?

May: Great Lakeland 3-day. An extra day but apparently very laid back- and they carry your overnight bag.

July: Saunders (SLMM)- Always in/near the Lake District, and a good chance of nice weather. Generally, more time on paths and with an accessible range of line course lengths. Lots of useful info on their website too.

August: Hopefully the Kong MM will return. Always in Scotland, location tbc.

September: Mourne MM. Mourne Mountains, N Ireland. Smaller event.

October: OMM- The original and biggest. In the Southern Highlands for 2024. They advise doing 'short score' for your first go (9 hrs over 2 days)



## Make Haystack when the Sun Shines

By Martin Bagshaw

The fine, dry weather of the spring and early summer feels a long time ago as I write this article on a cold October day, one that has dropped into single figures.

May and June proved a highly productive time of year for me, as I'm sure it did for many fellow Jacobites. The Scottish mountain cragging itch I failed to scratch last year got scratched good and proper, so much so that I was beginning to wish for a rainy weekend so that I didn't have to (and yes, I absolutely did) go to the effort of climbing again at the weekend.

So, rather than babble on about an assortment of great mountain routes, and new places I finally got to that had been on the radar for years, I thought this time I would focus in on one particular route – and a very rambling backstory to babble on about instead. How could I not, when I came up with such a good pun? (and if you disagree you are wrong!)

I first learned about the Shelterstone crag in the autumn of 2012, from former Jacobite member, Daniel Moore. We met on the annual American Alpine Club's International Climbers Meet, in which the AAC invites climbers from all over the world to spend a week in one of their national parks. This particular meet was in Yosemite Valley, an opportunity I figured I had to jump on when I saw it. I was living at my grandmother's house in Minnesota at the time, doing an internship in letterpress print making (the year after I finished a uni graphic design course), alongside working at a YMCA camp part time. I recall the advert for the AAC meet requiring participants to be able to lead 5.7 (about VS), presumably in order to have enough routes to go at there, so I figured that's a bit of me, and booked flights from Minneapolis to Fresno.



*Some letter press stuff I once did*



*Stuart Mcleod's best Facebook friend, aka my Grandma never thinking she would end up in the Jacobites Journal*

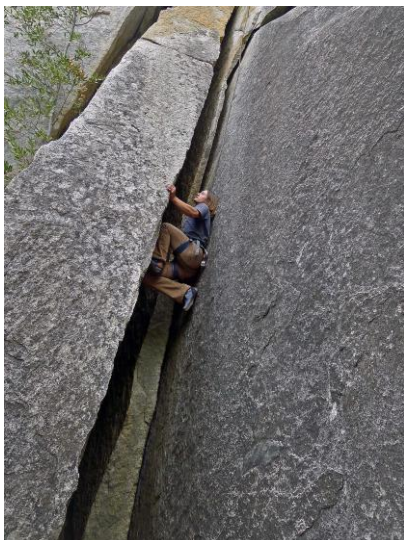


At the time I was a relatively inexperienced trad climber, having served around a year's apprenticeship with the somewhat oxymoronic sounding Chelmsford Mountaineering Club (in Essex), and sport climbing and bouldering with my university group prior to that. Being based in the flatlands, the CMC was (and still is) mainly focused on cragging, with outcrops closer to home than hills. Seeing getting into 'trad' as passport to better adventures, I signed up to every trip I could. The gritstone outcrops of the Peak District, limestone of the Dorset coast, local sandstone of Kent and East Sussex, and rhyolite of the Lakes and North Wales became regular venues, and by the time I left for America in the summer of 2012, I had a good handful of VS leads under my belt, as well as seconding a couple harder routes.

The format of AAC meet had a very laissez-faire vibe to it. On the first day I recall doing some casual top roping with the whole group, alongside a crack climbing 'clinic', but after that, the organisers seemed quite happy to chill out and let attendees pair off and climb what they fancied together. I think I must have fooled the aforementioned Daniel Moore with my top roping prowess that first day, for he agreed to climb the eleven pitch route, the East Buttress of Middle Cathedral Rock with me the following day. I had not dealt with anything near that sort of length of route or exposure before, and by around halfway or so, I needed to take the passenger seat. Needless to say, he found someone else to climb the next long route with a couple of days later! Anyway, Dan must have thought I was alright, for he invited me to join himself and a group to Mingulay in 2014, Fair Head in 2015, and numerous trips since. It would be fair to attribute (or blame!) my current residence in Scotland to/on Dan.



*One of the event hosts, Rob Pizem, demonstrating a 'butterfly jam' as part of one of the crack climbing clinics*



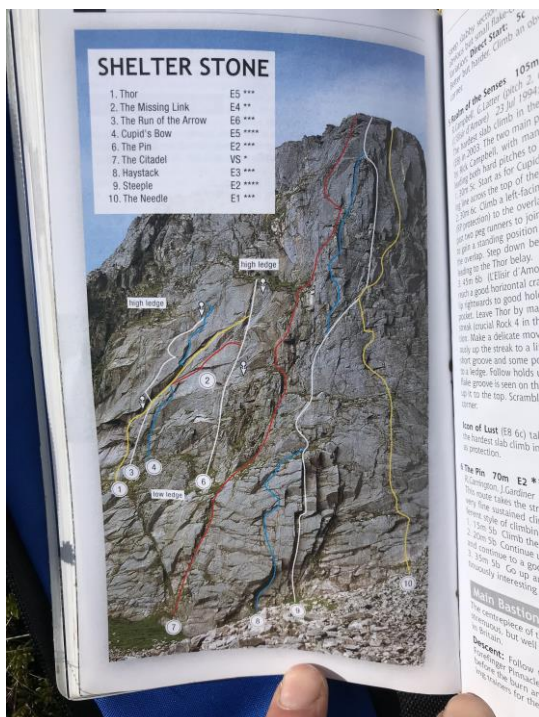
*Top rope tough guy at Pat and Jack Pinnacle, a shorter crag in the Valley*



*Daniel Moore on the Fifty crowded variation of East Buttress of Middle Cathedral Rock. The original involves a pitch of aid*

Fast forward to May 2023 (with climbing now having become my drug of choice / swallowed me whole / taken me all over the place etc. etc.), I hatch a plan with my new friend Guy to do our first route on the Shelterstone together. Introduced via a mutual friend called Murray, and a WhatsApp group for Dunkeld sport climbing sessions, we were both growing a bit weary of falling off Marlena together. We figured climbing a different piece of rock, on trad, and (theoretically) onsighting would be good for the soul and help develop the partnership or something like that.

In comparison to other people in our party, we had quite a relaxing day (for a couple of guys doing an eight pitch route that is a bit tricky for them). Katrin (Guy's wife) ran a marathon through the Cairngorms with their dog in tow, while Murray and his friend Rob raced in to the Loch Avon basin ahead of us, managing to bash out Stone Bastion, followed by the Heelstone, and somehow get back to camp at Loch Morlich at least an hour before midnight.



*The sunny topo*



*The shady reality*

As the right hand photo suggests, as one makes their way up the crag the steepness increases, arcing upward like a half pipe, Scotland's answer to El Cap! In that regard, perhaps one needs to get benighted to truly savour the Shelterstone... One thing that I didn't expect to encounter on the route were all of the grassy belay ledges which formed ideal comfy seats at the end of most pitches, from which to enjoy views of the Loch Avon basin. Surely this must be an upgrade from cramped stances and hanging belays on many other celebrated mountain crags? After the initial four slabby pitches, we arrived at the first crux pitch, Guy's lead. I did feel a little nervous seconding this, with it's odd wobbly hold, a little dampness, and steepness thrown in, but I pulled through ok in the end, glad it was Guy's lead. With cracks being more my forte than Guy's, it was decided that I would lead the second crux pitch, up a slightly awkward and overhanging wideish crack, after which a 5a pitch or two leads to the 'summit'. I started off,

finding a large spike to place a thin sling on before the crack kicked back, and the crag dropped away underneath me, with a couple of hundred metres of air below me. Ignoring that, I proceeded to wiggle between jams involving various bodily parts, followed by a grope around to find the



combination of best and driest holds on the cruxier feeling bit, soon finding myself at the stance, content that the difficulties were over.



*The first crux, Guy's lead*



*Pre second crux apprehensions*

After the final pitches, the crag comes to an abrupt halt, no gradual tapering off, no scrambly sections required. Ideal. We sat soaking in the sun we had deprived ourselves of for the last few hours, enjoying the vast open views and gentle breeze, an ambition over a decade old finally realised. Then we sorted gear. "Hey Guy, do you have that thin white sling of mine? I placed it on the crack pitch". "Oh, I thought it was tat." "It didn't look that old, did it?" "Erm... Maybe it's a sign. I'll get you a new one". As I looked at the rounded off edges of my nuts and lobes of my cams, the thought that my rack is now becoming an old man rack crossed my mind. Heh, it'll do a while longer, Michael Barnard could well have lost his entire rack there!



*Loch Avon. You don't get that at the base of El Cap*

## Fontainebleau – utterly wasted on teenagers

By Nikki Dunn

Anyone who takes up bouldering will, sooner or later, hear about Fontainebleau. I have heard it said that it's proof that a) God exists and b) he's a climber. I don't believe in God and Wikipedia says that in fact the forest is littered with thousands of sandstone boulders due to the erosion of an ancient sea-bed.

My teenage son spent most of lockdown attached to his PlayStation becoming gradually more and more monosyllabic and etiolated. As a doctor I was getting concerned that he was becoming so wasted that one day he would accidentally snap. In desperation I dragged him to Eden Rock and suggested that he could try some bouldering. Something clicked and within weeks the wretched PlayStation was gathering dust and my son became irritatingly good at climbing. And ripped into the bargain. Bloody kids. Naturally an immersion into all things bouldering meant that Fontainebleau entered into the family consciousness. Handily, my middle sister has a holiday house about an hour's drive from Nemours, the most southerly Font bouldering area. When my son found out about this proximity he asked if we could take him and his mate there for a bouldering holiday.

Being a glass half empty person (or as I would say, a realist) I spent some time trying to anticipate all the things that could go wrong. Taking someone else's child away on holiday to do a potentially dangerous sport gave me plenty of nightmare scenarios to contemplate in addition to concerns about our less than reliable camper van breaking down. Fortunately, despite the best efforts of a hideously aggressive French lorry driver we all got there and back in one piece.

It's a long drive from Edinburgh to Chatillon-sur-Loire. The price one pays for smug environmentalism is sitting at a standstill on the A1 then being driven off the road by French lorry drivers. We'd put a couple of saltire stickers on the van but they clearly weren't obvious enough to give the full "leave us alone we're SCOTTISH!!" effect.

Once we'd arrived and settled in, we decided to head for an area called Petit Bois near Nemours. Having done some practice bouldering on Northumbrian sandstone at least we weren't completely taken aback by the nature of the climbing and outrageous grades given to the routes. Unsurprisingly I spent the first couple of days getting completely spanked by really easy climbs, as much due to fear of falling as anything else. The boys managed rather better and as they got stuck in on our first afternoon we became aware of a commotion coming from nearby.

"Allez! Allez!"

"Allez.....ALLEZ ALLEZ ALL...."

<THUD>

Then commiserating and "merde" and "shit" before the "Allez" would build to a crescendo again, usually following by the sickening thud of a body hitting the deck from a great height but occasionally by cries of triumph and a round of applause.



The boys wandered over to find a group in front of a very large boulder that goes by the name of Big Jim. After offering their mats up to help cushion the landing they were welcomed into this sweaty little group to try their luck.

“Allez allez ALLEZ!”

<thud>

It was time to leave for the day but the boys were determined – the entire focus of the holiday from that moment revolved around topping out Big Jim.

Now obviously I don't want to be sexist but there does seem to be a tendency for males in particular to embark on heroic yet futile endeavours. Like Mallory and Irvine, the two teenagers threw everything at Big Jim. Time after time they went up, getting further each day but ultimately thwarted by the last couple of, frankly terrifying, moves. You basically had to use a tiny pocket big enough for one finger then launch yourself up to grab the top – and at this point the floor was a LONG way down, mats or no mats. I had recurring nightmares where I had to phone Jonny's friend's parents and explain to them why their precious son was unconscious in a French hospital.

One of the great things about bouldering in Font is that groups of boulders have been made into circuits, all marked up & colour coded for each grade. I had been reliably informed that it can be enormous fun to go around lots of circuits and that you can get into a proper state of flow. Apparently, one's climbing ability can improve dramatically after just a few days there. Apparently, there are loads and loads of different areas each with their own characteristics, all set in stunning forest locations swarming with butterflies.



Thanks to bloody Big Jim I didn't get to experience any of that. I spend most of my time being asked to video the boys' doomed attempts while my husband was on spotting duty. Every so often they would tear themselves away for long enough to allow me to try some climbs myself. They

were even quite helpful if you don't mind being talked up a route by two slightly patronising 16 year olds. You do quickly get used to the exposure and get a feel for how to move on the sandstone so by the end I even managed up an easy blue route, but I was a bit cheesed off at not having had much of a chance to explore. I went for a run at one point and after 20 minutes or so came across a whole boulder area all marked up with routes in a particularly lovely tranquil part of the woodland. It was completely deserted (apart from hundreds of butterflies) and not even mentioned in the guidebook. I told Jonny about it. "Oh really?" he said without any great enthusiasm, then "Lyll just got up to that finger pocket. I really think we're going to top out today, tomorrow at the latest!"

After the holiday I asked Jonny what he thought about the experience. "I liked the food but to be honest, Eden Rock is better" he said, after some deliberation.

Next time I am going by myself.

## Climbing on Eigg and Muck, July 2023

By Lucy Spark

With an unsettled forecast for our Mingulay trip, plan B was needed. Two of our team bought plane tickets to the Alps, others opted for Caithness and the rest of us, drawn to the islands, decided to explore the climbing on Eigg and Muck. Careful deciphering of the Calmac timetable took us first to Eigg, a thriving community owned island with a young, enterprising population.

The Sgurr of Eigg must be one of the most prominent lines in the Hebrides and we were drawn to it. One team tackled "Psycho," E2 5b and the other headed for "Line your Pockets" E1 5b. Despite vegetated approaches and very loose rock, there was success for both, although definitely not to be recommended. We found much better climbing on the beautiful, solid pitchstone of Ocean Wall.



A brave lead by Shauna





Our next stop was the tiny island of Muck, smallest of the small isles with the highest point Beinn Airein at 137m. We found the best climbing to be on North Atlantic Wall, Camus Mor, in the south of the island which has long, steep, challenging single pitch routes on mostly solid gabbro. One of the best was "Trident, E2 5c" which Martin despatched efficiently with half an hour to spare before his ferry. Michael was in his element with several unclimbed lines to be done including these two:



Franklin on "Discovery," E2 5c



Michael on "Dover Patrol," E3 6a

Muck is well worth a visit for climbing, walking and sea swimming but take food supplies with you to avoid a shopping trip on Calmac back to Eigg. If you are there on a Wednesday evening enjoy the amazing pizzas cooked by cafe owner Bruce in his pizza oven!



# Bernese Oberland Ski Touring

By Walt Robison

## Aims of the expedition:

Ski some epic pow, survive the hazards of accessing Swiss mountain huts, return to eat cake, in that order!

## The team

Lisa Ferrero, Welsh

Skier, mountaineer, ski-mountaineer. Notable previous experience includes ski ascent and descent of the north face of Caerketton Hill.

Clair Wilshaw, English

Extremely competent ski mountaineer; particularly in consideration of the double disadvantage of being English and living in Cambridge.

Walter Robison, Scottish.

Almost a decade of ski mountaineering experience, previously trained in the high ranges of Polmont Hill.

## Introduction

Ski touring in the Bernese Oberland is not controlled by any formal system of permits, although adequate financial backing is necessary to be allowed entry to Switzerland. For UK nationals a 90 day duration stay is automatic on arrival; to remain longer is only available to those with dual EU citizenship, or the Irish.

## History

All the highest peaks of the region (insert list here / google it) have previously been climbed, and the descents skid by everyone and their dog. First ascents and descents were done by someone, whenever.

## Preparation

Logistical information for our objective, or variations thereof, are described in various publications. Most notably this area is covered in: Alpine ski mountaineering Volume 2 – western alps, B O'Connor, Cicerone press, 2003, (informally known as "Bob's book of lies"). This book was out of date when it was new, and the information in it should be treated with suspicion, distrust and mild disdain. Up to date information is available from "the internet", and accurate scalable and printable electronic maps are available free of charge courtesy of the Swiss federal government: <https://map.geo.admin.ch/>

## Travel

It is possible to travel to Switzerland by rail from all over Europe and the UK. Rail travel within country is efficient and straightforward to navigate, which combined with an integrated bus service, means that almost anywhere can be reached by public transport. Federal government mandate and subsidise a minimum level of service depending on the local population; thus, minimum transport services are offered to all hamlets and rural areas with more than one hundred inhabitants.

Not part of the public transport system, but for 107 CHF it's possible to take the train to the Jungfrauoch Station (elevation 3454m, complete with Lindt tourist trap tat shop) from which a ski descent can be made to various huts in the Aletsch Glacier area.

## Approach

For this tour we based our travel around the city of Bern; here we were able to leave our street clothes and travel bags in a secure locker in the hotel and travel 1:45 hr by train to reach the Oberland at Fiesch. Taking public transport wearing ski attire, touring boots and carrying skis is commonplace in country. Obviously, we were unwilling to pay the CF 107 to take the train up to the Jungfrauoch; part of our reasoning was it would help acclimatisation to skin in from the south.

## The Tour

**Day 1:** Start point Fiesch (1050m): gondola to Fiescharalp, ski over the Talliggrat on the NE flank of the Eggishorn (2611m), descend to the Aletsch glacier (2220m), and skin 7 km up the glacier to Konkordiahut (2848m), piece of cake, then dinner.

The first day transpired to be quite typical of the entire tour: cold, overcast, tiring, and with a hut perched high on a steep flank that requires a mountaineering approach from the glacier. Hill-cloud was blanketing the upper slopes above about 2000m and the initial part of the day was slow. We lost a fair bit of time in the cloud, first looking for the traverse path to take us from the ski area across the col and over the ridge, then on the descent down to the glacier in low visibility. By the time we had then skinned 7 km up the glacier it was getting very late. The last test of the day was to ascend from the glacier up to the hut in the freezing cold and wind to arrive late for dinner at a near empty hut at 6pm.

The Konkordia is positioned central to the highest part of the Bernese alps at the confluence of the three major glaciers, the Grosser Aletschfirn (greater Aletsch [old]snow), Jungfrau firn (virgin [old]snow) and Ewigschneefeld (eternal snow-field), that merge to form the Grosser Aletschgletscher (greater Aletsch glacier). Typical of the region, the hut is perched high on a rock promontory above the glacier. Global warming having taken its toll, the now 110 m vertical height difference between the glacier and the hut is ascended via the "stairs of death"™: a combination of path, roped and chained scrambling, ground-ladder, and a 70 m high multi-stage steel stair system. Obviously, being in the mountains, the idea of a handrail only goes so far as a single rail (no mid-rail) on one side only. Made even more precarious if your ski-boots are about twice the width of the steps.

Epic pow: ❄️ \_ \_ \_ \_

Hut hazard: ☠️ ☠️ ☠️ ☠️ ☠️



**Day 2:** Start point Konkordiahutte (2848), skin 8km up the Grosser Aletschfirn glacier to Hollandiahutte (3245).

Still acclimatising to the altitude and 8km of relentless skinning, none of us were too bothered to ascend further to Mittaghorn or Abni Flue. In their typical sense of justice, the gods had decided that our transfer-day would be blue sky and sunshine. On the plus side we were well rested compared to other parties that arrived in dribs and drabs late into the afternoon having skinned 10 km and 1400 m ascent up from the Fafleralp.

Access to the Hollandiahutte is much less treacherous than the Konkordia, but they still don't make things too accommodatingly straightforward in that the door is accessed from above, descending snow-cut steps with a death-drop to one side and below. The hut wardens having the generous foresight to have strung out a length of cord as a handrail.

Epic pow: ❄️ \_ \_ \_ \_

Hut hazard: ☠️ ☠️ ☠️ \_ \_

**Day 3:** Start point Hollandiahutte (3245), skin over the Louwitor col (3658) on the flank of the Louwihorn (3778), ski descent, then traverse to the Monchsjoehutte (3624).

Beautiful morning sunshine didn't last, the visibility deteriorated considerably as we reached the broad flat col obscuring the descent. We opted not to bother ascending the additional (100 m) to the summit of the Louwihorn and began the steep descent down the glacier in whiteout conditions. We only managed to descend about 100 m before we were forced to stop, the slope convex was steepening further into the whiteout the only landforms visible being the enormous



man-eating crevasses on either side. The party of Spaniards immediately behind and up-slope from us were of no help and seemed to be quite content to let us test the way forward. After a short wait a very brief gap in the clouds gave us just enough vis to see a bunch of well-worn ski-tracks leading off horizontally right between two enormous crevasses. The Spaniards bolted off through the gap and immediately bombed down the open slope beyond the crevasses. Being furthest downhill we ended up at the back of the whole mob. Luckily, I was only a couple of meters below the traverse level and managed to stay within site of the others. This was our first proper ski descent, on fresh soft snow and in reasonable visibility once you have people ahead of you.

We parted ways from the Spaniards to skin the final 4 km to the Monchsjoehutte, what felt like another interminably long flat skin. This one made slightly more unusual by skinning past various groups of people in their street clothes walking to and fro between the Jungfrauoch train station and the hut, some of them might even have been wearing jeans.

The Monchsjoeh, being accommodating to tourists and day trippers from the valley, is much more obliging in that this hut is accesses by nothing more treacherous than a snow covered path.

Epic pow: ❄❄❄ \_\_

Hut hazard: \_ \_ \_ \_ \_

**Day 4:** Start point Monchsjoehutte (3624), ski descent to the Konkordiahut (2848).

Another blue sky day had arrived, but with a definite forecast of heavy cloud to come on the following day. We cut short our stay at the Monchsjoeh and descended to back the Konkordia via the Trugberg and an excellent skiing down its SSW flank.

The ascent back up to the hut via the stairs of death™ felt much less frightening because the snow had melted off from the lower approach path to the steps, and some altitude acclimatisation and familiarity lessened the shock of the experience. Still frikin hazardous tho.

Epic pow: ❄❄❄❄ \_

Hut hazard: ☠☠☠☠ -



**Day 5:** Start point Konkordiahutte (2848), skin over the Grunhornlucke (3270) descend to the Finsteraarhornhutte (3051).

As predicted, the clouds rolled in thick as a bag. The short hop over to the Grunhornlucke hut was all that was on the agenda for the day which turned out to be a mini adventure all on its own. Ascending the relatively narrow valley was straightforward, the rockfaces and ridges could still be seen through the mist and gave some visual definition, and the overall landscape and our position within it discernible with other parties ahead. A well-worn skin track led us easily to the broad col. Once again, the cloud base was considerably lower and the murk noticeably thicker on the E side of the hill. With the valley broadening out to a wide flat glacier the total whiteout gave us a marvellous snowplough descent, roped together, using GPS waymarks to guide us down and across the flat expanse of the Fiescher glacier.

The guided mob of Americans that had also crossed the col ahead of us, had made a courageous ascent (at least part way up) of the Wyssnollen. This would normally be a fine skiable summit with fantastic open E facing skiable descent, but their lack of whooping and high fiving gave us the impression that we hadn't lost out on much.

The Finsteraarhornhutte has recently been completely refurbished and was immaculately clean. Final ascent to the hut itself is via a single ladder with rope handrail. The hut kindly show the local TV weather forecast just after dinner, however unless you have a good grasp of the local dialect it's essentially useless.

Epic pow: \_ \_ \_ \_ \_

Hut hazard: ☠ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_

**Day 6:** Start point Finsteraarhornhutte (3051), skin over to the Oberaarjochhutte (3255).

Still thick as a bag. Ourselves and the EU team (two Englishmen, two Frenchmen, and their tame German, all of whom work at the European parliament in Brussels.) are headed in the direction of the Finsteraarhornhutte. We get a complimentary transceiver check from the German guy as he's stood outside, ready to go, patiently waiting for his mates to get their shit together. The Englishers are also living up to their national stereotype: faffing around holding the whole show up.

Another short glacier descent and whiteout approach to the hut follows. This hut is approached by another steep and exposed scramble path, with a sequence of ropes and chains before emerging onto a narrow walkway outside the boot room door.

This hut is much smaller and was only staffed by a single guardian. He told us that he had been staffer for 5 years, then Gardien for 5 more years, and was looking forward to selling up in the summer and moving on. In his words, to live a normal life where one can take a bath.

Epic pow: \_ \_ \_ \_ \_

Hut hazard: ☠ ☠ ☠ \_ \_



**Day 7:** Start point Oberaarjochhutte (3255), Ski out via the Minstigergletscher and take the train back to Bern.

Bluebird day, pity it's our last, but we make the most of it and enjoy a fantastic descent down the Minstigergletscher; everyone who was in the hut the previous night (all 18 of us) are going the



same way: 6 Swiss, the EU team and ourselves. The Swiss break us a nice trail to follow, free of charge, and after a short 15m abseil of the Galmilicke we get a whole valley of untouched snow to ourselves.

Arrived at the village at the bottom of the valley not long after midday and jumped on the first train to Brig for a late lunch before taking the train back to Bern and our non-hazardous hotel.

Epic pow: ❄️❄️❄️❄️❄️

Hut hazard: \_ \_ \_ \_ \_



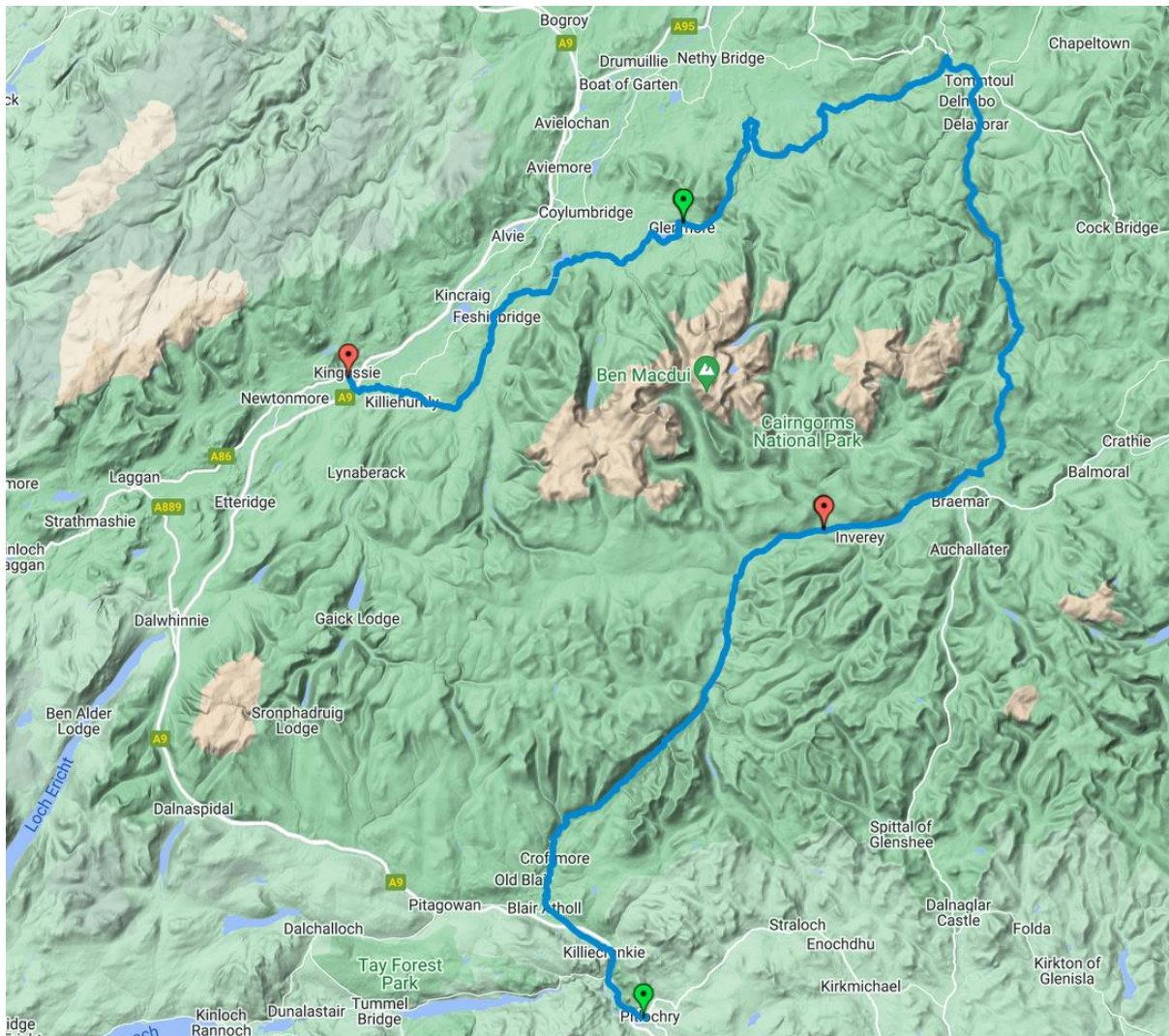
### **Lessons learned:**

Get physically fit before going ski-touring, wear suncream on overcast days, don't ski in via the Fafleralp.

## Cycling in the Cairngorms

By Alex Borodenzov

Outer Cairngorms Loop is a popular 190 km cycling route around the Cairngorms suited for gravel bikes. The classic way to do it is clockwise starting in Blair Atholl and spending a night in Tomintoul dividing the route into two roughly equal days. I had a free weekend in the middle of April and decided to give it go.



### The Route

It did not go exactly as planned for various reasons. I started late in the afternoon from Linn of Dee (had to retrieve the things I'd left in the Muir hut 2 weeks prior) with a bed booked in the Cairngorms Lodge in Glenmore. The plan was to get to Tomintoul before dark and then quickly cycle via nice smooth paths to Glenmore with the lights. It went fairly well till Tomintoul – there were some patches of snow at the higher grounds (you either get stuck in the snow on the road or ride over the heather until the first hidden dip sends you over the bars) but almost everything was cyclable.





However some bits after Tomintoul appeared to be far from smooth and at some point I found myself trying to find a nearly non-existent land rover track meandering along a stream, followed by another hike-a-bike somewhere in the dark with the lights battery indicator turning red... I started to get slightly worried whether the hostel would still be open and if I could find any other warm place to spend the night. In an attempt to go light (or lucky?) the only clothes I took were cycling tights, a jersey, arm warmers and a thin windproof vest. Eventually I got to the hostel slightly after midnight, the reception was shut and there was not a single soul around. But at least the front door was open and it was warm inside. I was about to settle on a couch in the common room when someone came down to the kitchen for a cup of tea at 1 a.m. - that was a hostel staff member who gave me a key to the room!





Next morning I wasn't so keen to have another very late finish and a night drive back to Edinburgh. So, I cycled the bit to Kingussie and got a train lift to Pitlochry (Blair Atholl would be better, but not every train stops there) avoiding the Gaick pass section - I've done it before linking it with Glen Feshie and Glen Tilt. Long gentle climb up Glen Tilt followed by an hour of hike-a-bike to the new Red bothy and I got back to the car park to River Dee. Not everything went as planned, but it was a nice wee adventure!

## **A Cycle tour adventure in Chile and Argentina**

By Joanne Thin

Well Stuart asked if I could write something for the journal about the adventures I have had during my 5 months off work this year, so here goes!

Well, I have had a few adventures over my time off on home soil and further afield. At home my Mountain Leader assessment was a challenge and fun too in a weird way. I had a lovely slightly damp, 4 week 2000km, Scandi cycle camping tour with Jamie and an exciting hot few days gravel cycling (with a 47 hairpin climb!) with my daughter Oonagh north of Nice. I did manage 1 day rock-climbing after a long absence due to my shoulder and knee problems. This was at Bowden in September where it was almost too hot to climb!! Here I will tell you a bit about my cycle tour during my 6 week's in Chile & Argentina. This will hopefully give you a more exotic winter read.

### **The Plan**

The plan came about as I managed to persuade my 23 year old daughter Sinead to join me on an adventure before she would start her first post-University degree job in Norway. Her employers agreed a 2 month delay to the usual new intake start date as she told them she wanted to do a trip to Chile with her Mum. Sinead seemed to think they thought this was cute!

Jamie's New Zealand cousin Elspeth had done the 4 week classic Chilean one way cycle trip the 'Carretera Austral' with her daughter a few years back. She hired bikes from a bike hire guy 'Carlos' in Santiago. From this a seed of an idea was born. Cycling seemed a better option than a multi-week hiking trip as I thought Sinead and I's paces might be better matched plus it's tricky for me to reliably commit to any lengthy hiking trip due to foot pain problems. So rather than do the Carretera Austral, we decided on a 2 week cycling circuit to be followed by up to 2 weeks hiking and exploring.

Then I thought, well Sinead only has 4 weeks to spend with me but it would be rude of me to go home without seeing a bit of Patagonia. So I threw some money at the 'traveling alone' problem. (travelling solo kind of seemed a challenge I should consider, as I am not so used to travelling alone far from home these days). So I decided to support my friend Kathy's business (Andean trails) & I paid for a 4 day all-in Torres del Paine trip. A bit of chat with Kathy and a bit of research and I added on a visit to El Chalten. The plan was born!!

Our 2 week cycling adventure started with collecting our hired bikes in Santiago, cycling to the bus station and taking the overnight bus south to the city of Temuco with the bikes. Simple! We hired solid old fashioned touring bikes with easy to fix rim brakes and mountain bike tyres suited to the gravel. My bike had bar ends which were great as I was recovering from prolonged shoulder rotator cuff problems and the bike hire guy Carlos had paid attention to getting the bikes comfy for us both. Carlos advised us to take the cycle path in daylight for safety and wait at the bus station till our 10pm bus. Unfortunately we googled the route and failed to find the cycle path resulting in a nightmare cycle in traffic and then when I refused to cycle further (much to Sinead's annoyance) we walked and pushed the bikes on the pavements and ending up arriving in the dark. Oh dear! Carlos advised us to negotiate putting the bikes on the bus with bus companies. This was tricky in our limited Spanish but Sinead was a star and managed this feat. The bikes were then

unfortunately shoved on the bus any old way which caused us a lot of mechanical issues on our first few days or so.



We arrived in Temuco bright and early to a beautiful morning! After putting the front wheels and panniers etc on we went to seek coffee and some sort of breakfast and eventually found a Panaderia with sickly sweet coffee, interesting empanadas and cakes. We were a bit tired from the overnight bus but excited to start our adventure! Our plan was probably 2 days to get to Carlos' holiday house where we would leave our rucksacks and hiking kit. The only thing was he failed to tell us that it was a 16km detour up a valley with 10km of gravel! The first day cycling brought us exciting glimpses of volcanoes but a lot of traffic, bike adjustment stops and a scary dog incident. We found a cute 'Cabana' to stay in and made Carlos place the next evening on now lovely quiet roads. That was a hard day as I had an accident when the front bar of my front bike panier rack slipped causing the bike to stop suddenly, resulting in a badly cut up face and knees. Needless to say I was pretty shaken and removed the offending rack which I didn't actually need. Sinead also had 3 punctures that day! It was a Sunday and shops were closed, so the next day we had to detour back to town to search out more bike inner tubes before we could go on. After asking google, and in coffee shops, and the town hall, we eventually found a random guy who had a backyard full of bike and car parts who sold us some tubes! Sinead was so delighted as we were getting desperate that she paid him £10 per tube! He was some happy man!

Finally we could start our tour proper and we set off for our big day up the Icalma pass towards Argentina in light rain and cloud. It was exciting and a big relief to make it up the pass in tough conditions with gravel and a bit of snow! An old guy stopped to offer us a lift in his Pick up truck when we were half way up the pass. We were stopped for a drink of water but he perhaps thought we were struggling. Not all all, ahem! During the whole trip it really stood out that the people in Chile and Argentina were so lovely, friendly and helpful. Our bike loads were now a bit lighter but we still had camping gear including good down 3 season sleeping bags. I generously



carried the tent and made the bairn (fit fresh from alpine climbing trips) carry the heavy cycle repair kit, lock, cooking kit and most of the food. Aw bless! Descending to Argentina the next day after a night in a cold cabin was fabulous with views across lochs to snowy mountains. The border was interesting and we were allowed to eat our tomatoes rather than have them confiscated, phew! We tried to get Argentinian pesos in the first wee town. We had been advised to take US dollars and exchange them on the street corner for pesos. But how do you do this in a random wee town? So we went to the bank and spent a long time puzzled as the bank machine would only allow us to take out the equivalent of £5. Money in Argentina is weird!



Argentina was otherwise great. We loved our 2 campsites, the first where we lifted our bikes over a 'camping closed' fence but we were too tired to cycle another 15km to the next option. We also stayed in 2 town hostels, one which provided us lovely fresh bread for breakfast. It was early season and during our trip campsites were all closed. This meant we wild camped, or asked the owner, if they lived beside the camping area if we could stay. They usually gave us a strange look as we asked to stay in our poor Spanish. We interpreted the strange looks as 'are you mad? but ok you can stay'. Hostels were good throughout our tour but few other tourists were there instead they often had workers staying and owners were sometimes doing some repair work pre-main season.

In Argentina we had beautiful mostly gravel cycling along a river valley with bright turquoise water and almost fluorescent orange vegetation. We had a great easily graded tarmac road climb up a pass which I loved but Sinead was less enamoured with the cold windy descent after our traditional avocado, tomato and cheese sandwich lunch. We had some lovely sunshine where Sinead actually put on her shorts for a few hours! We had a wonderful easy graded gravel ascent and descent from San Martin de los Andes back in the Chile direction. This ended in a great coffee and cake stop with a 'lago' view and lots of day trippers arriving by boat where we both ate cake and sketched the view! Cake stops were quite important especially to Sinead! Cakes were high quality but sometimes cafes were sparse due to it being early season but we always managed to find something. We only had one bit of cycling we didn't enjoy which was a stretch of busy road

with strong winds. It was a short cycle but not much fun as although most drivers were considerate there were 1 or 2 close passing idiots. Much like the UK driver behaviour really.



Argentina was definitely drier in appearance to the Chilean side with open spaces and ranches and thankfully far fewer mad barking dogs to chase your bike and snap at your toes. Sadly we got all our vegetables for our dinner confiscated at the border control on the way back into Chile! The border officials were very friendly but put our panniers through the scanning machine and wouldn't even let us eat our bananas, damn!

Back in Chile we had fun trying to light a campfire with only twigs. I hadn't realised Sinead's talents in this area nor her camping cooking skills which were great! A very well brought up young lady?!. Sinead needed her dinner on time so often started to cook dinner while I set up camp. As trade, in the mornings, I made breakfast while she read her book ('a short history of Europe' on Kindle!). I managed to persuade Sinead to eat porridge with cocoa, banana and sometimes raisins and she won me over to big scrambled egg breakfasts when we were in hostels. Camping was relaxing. Campsites were peaceful as we were alone. Early bedtime was necessary as it got too cold (2 mornings we had frost outside the tent in the mornings), and we cooked breakfast and ate whilst we stayed inside our sleeping bags. Hostels were also quiet and mostly we had rooms to ourselves.





We enjoyed a lovely ferry trip back in Chile, it was nice and warm with great views from inside the boat on a cold day! We started to get lovely loch views on our journey (it is the Chilean Lake District) and even stayed on a lovely closed lochside campsite with a beach and wifi! Unfortunately I started to have more bike problems and noticed I had broken spokes... we taped the broken ones to the good ones as per You tube advice (thanks free campsite wifi!) and made a 20km detour to the nearest bike shop. We had to wait a day as it was a spring holiday and the bike shop was closed but we got a good repair and we got advice from Carlos too. The wait gave us an enforced nice rest! After our rest we had our most challenging climb which was over to the town of Pucon. This was a lovely spot, a very popular touristy and beautiful town set on a lake with an active volcano view. We broke the climb to Pucon into 2 stages which was a good decision and we high camped after the first stage. Luckily the weather was lovely for stage 2 but we still had to push our bikes through deep snow for the final climb! Sinead was kind and helped me out by taking my panniers as she was ahead and I was starting to get a 'sense of humour' failure! In Pucon we stayed in a cool hostel with a lovely garden and it was our first time to stay somewhere with other english speaking guests and hostel owner. Sinead was amused at the 'gap year backpackers' and her chatty mother enjoying being understood and understanding what people were saying!



Our return to our starting point in Melipeuco and Carlos house was lovely as we had sun and views that we didn't get first time round. We sat outside in the late afternoon at our french owned hostel (again what a relief to not have to try and speak spanish!) and sketched the volcano. After we left our bikes at Carlos house and collected our rucksacks, we had a fun hitch in the back of a local farmers pick up truck back to town where we could get a bus back to Temuco. The local dogs chased us down the road for quite a few miles but we were safe from them this time!

We had a really fun, adventurous and interesting 2 week tour but I admit to some relief to depositing the bikes and being back to 2 legs only for the next part of our trip. Tales of that are perhaps for another time! Highlights included some fab camping and hiking in the Cochamo valley (a climbing mecca), beaches and waterfalls, a walk near Volcano Osorno, the beach view on our run along the Chiloe island west coast and of course the peaks, glaciers and turquoise loch colours at Torres del Paine and El Chalten.

The stats (see my Strava and Instagram for more and photos if interested)

15 days (plus a wee cycle in Santiago the day before)

No of km = 810km

Most km in a day 75km (day 4)

Most climbing in a day 1124m (day 11)

5 Hostels, 2 cabanas, 1 house, 2 wildcamps, 4 closed campsites

1 ferry, 1 overnight bus

## **My Mule don't like people laughing**

By John sanders

Before I started climbing in my mid-forties, I spent a lot of my time outdoors on horseback. By the early eighties I had my own stables and loved to compete in cross country competitions.

It was always a surprise to me that in the UK, none of the stables would breed mules. They are surer footed on rough, steep terrain than a horse, have a natural tendency to find the best path through overgrown, forested areas, and are far less skittish. A mule isn't going to shy away from potential danger; he/she will assess the situation before taking any action, and usually will err on the side of aggression.

During our recent visit to the US in 2023, I took the opportunity to go into the northern Cascade mountains in Washington State for a day's ride. Sadly, the group outing for the day I wanted was fully booked, but after a chat with the head wrangler, he suggested I go along to the stables for an assessment, and if this proved to be OK, then they would rent me horse. Not ideal as I would be navigating myself through rough, high, mountain terrain, but given I had to meet Al at a trail head the following day, it was my only chance, so I jumped at the opportunity.

On arrival, there was some confusion going on, as four of the prebooked party for the group outing had failed to turn up, leaving just one person ready to go. The wrangler was reluctant to send a guide out for just one person, so I suggested that it would make sense for me to join the lady in question. It helped the stable financially and gave me the opportunity to go much further and higher than I otherwise would be able to if I was doing my own navigation.

As we walked past the stables, I spotted a large mule grazing.

"Can I take the mule?" I enquired.

The wrangler looked at me a bit strangely, then said. "He's very head strong. Are you used to riding mules?"

I smiled, "If we're going into the mountains, then he'll be a lot better than any of your horses."

Right there it was decided. I was going up on Billy the mule.

The guide, a young lady by the name of Devon, looked a wee bit surprised when I turned up on Billy. Dianne, the other rider on the trip laughed.

I suddenly had an image flash through my mind of 'The Man with No Name' from the film A Fistful of Dollars, who said, quote "I don't think it's nice, you laughin'. You see, my mule don't like people laughing. He gets the crazy idea you're laughin' at him."



In the Northern Cascades with my new pal, Billy the mule

As it turned out we had a stunning ride through some spectacular countryside on the eastern side of the Cascades. As I expected, Billy was always trying to get out in front. He didn't shy away like the horses did when we came across fresh mountain lion tracks. Our animals could obviously still smell the lion's aroma. Billy didn't care. I suspect it would have been a bad day for that lion if it was still around.

Where the horses stumbled on tree routes or slipped on loose stones, Billy simply picked his way through. There is no doubt that I had the easiest ride because of him.

So, if you're going into the mountains, and you get a chance to ride a mule, then take it.

And remember, mules don't like people laughin' - they get the crazy idea you're laughin' at them...



## Sailing on the West Coast

By Stephanie Droop

There's a saying in Russian *letny den' god kormit'*; a summer's day feeds the year. We came across it in class once. "Can anyone guess what it means?" asked the teacher. My hand shot up smug and confident: it's those blissful days that carry you when the winter is dark and grim. "Well..." she demurred, "I meant the obvious literal meaning of growing vegetables... Yours is already somewhat metaphorical".

I'm reminded of the saying while writing in the depths of December when it hasn't got light all day, reminded of the definition of true joy: *Scotland in late May*. Greener than green, bluer than blue. Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but Scotland was very heaven! Not only that: I was going to the west coast to go sailing with childhood friends. My heart was singing every song in the world at once.

Buses and ferries took most of the day. Port Askaig was full of sunburnt refugees from the whisky festival. Big happy groups of Dutch and American, frayed around the edges. Gradually the ferry took them all away as I snoozed on the grass and waited for my ship to come in.

The boat had been at the whisky festival and now was doing a changeover for the wilder portion of the trip. Most who'd been on it were leaving. A small crew was bringing the boat round from Port Ellen to grab me at Port Askaig, and then we'd be off for Jura, Scarba and Erraid.

There was no one left at the harbour to watch when the comfortable 40 foot yacht swung alongside the quay and I hopped on, the boat barely breaking stride.

I hugged my dudes and we sat back grinning as the boat hit the open water. I hadn't even had a cup of tea or put my stuff below, when skipper Andy, bubbling over with boyish delight, held up a fender on a rope.

"You wanna ride the wake like dolphins?"

Err... The low sun was no longer warm and the breeze was fresh.

"I need five minutes," I said, "I've barely arrived".

"You've got two," he said, grinning.

This was a theme. I adjusted my wavelength to spontaneity setting.

"Right then".



So there we were astride big slippery plastic fenders on twin ropes getting towed off the back, plowing through a big sparkly wave of yellow and blue, arms pulled sore tight and fingers going numb in minutes, shrieking, 35 years deleted.

"We spent the first years of our lives together, Steph. No one can ever take that away", he said twelve years ago when he came to visit me out the blue in Moscow. I always thought he'd come for me and we'd be together! Shortly after that he shouted that he didn't recognise me and stormed out into the snowy night. Later he told me he thinks of me like a sister (only). And so I readjusted, and travelled on alone. But the power of his statement remained, no matter what else he said. He was right: through all our different development, trajectories, partners, choices and values, the fact remains we chose each other as adventure buddies at the age of 3 and nothing can ever change that. And sometimes when the stars align we step into a world outside time and it is enough, it is plenty.



Red sunset on the rocks of Jura as we motored slowly up the calm and eerie loch. Buttresses and formations look like walls and castles. Too many right angles and straight lines to be natural. But they are far from any settlement. Just us and the dolphins.

Scanning the land for people, hoping both to see and not see anybody. We'd planned to sleep at the bothy but it was midgy as hell across the seaweed (said the scouts) so we slept on the boat. But first we went to a low rock exposed by the tide and had a fire and whisky hijinks.



Andy had wanted a beat-the-boat race across Jura. I vetoed it at planning: the contours screamed of scrambled bogfest. All the same we gazed wistfully at the land over rolls and sausage as we motored out again next morning, big placid Simon at the helm.

"All the same... It doesn't look *that* bad..."

"If we were gonna do it, we'd have to go now..."

I was still in PJs, still having coffee.

"Ok let's do it! But I need five minutes. I need to get dressed."

"You've got two! Let's go! Tim get the tender!"

Other (Italian) Andy didn't come with us, he didn't want to run right after a great greasy breakfast. Banging on about correct nutrition and hydration. Bollocks, we said, ready for anything. We wanna be able to run when we're full, run when we're hungry. When the lion attacked, you think your ancestors worried about correct nutrition? Are you really gonna miss this landscape and this opportunity?



By this time I had my vest and shorts on, and we hopped in the tender and onto the rocks. We explored a bothy and scrambled on some rocks and then we were off trotting faster as the exhilaration took us, just us kids again together adventuring but now with all the agility and power of adults and the luck to be in this place in these bodies in this world just us. Adam and Eve sponsored by Salomon.

Too many highlights... Was it really just five days... Heaven in earth and water. Very little sailing (no wind) but that's ok. Endless staring at ripples, till my eyelids rippled when I closed my eyes. Hanging my head upside down any chance I could, to see the sea as sky ripple above the horizon, another world hidden inside this world.

Corryvreckan at slack water was beyond eerie. Eddies and whorls spoke of horrifying pinnacles with unimaginable volumes of water sucking past at speed. Tim's sure hand couldn't stop the boat wiggling and wobbling as we snuck through. I heard of people planning to swim it. You're welcome; that's not for me. Nothing could induce me to get in that water.

More adventure highlights... Phil the dad went in a bog up to his chest on Scarba. Golden sunset marinas and lobster. Pootling along the south coast of Mull to the arches.



Andy got me leading the final great beat-the-boat run to the far side of Erraid, to natural harbour Tinkers hole. The tender fuel cut out on the way to drop us on a beach so we improvised on a rough inhospitable peninsula, Tim the stoic rowing back to the boat. Eventually we set off chasing the sun through bog, heather and bracken till we hit a path, near where I'd climbed with Robbie and Richard on the Jacobites meet a few weeks earlier. Onto Erraid over

the sand bridge, the sky blazing pink and yellow. I could tell Andy was sad the tide was out enough we didn't have to swim. Ground rough and it was Amanda's first off-road run and she was game but still unsteady even after I gave her my trail shoes. We were taking longer than expected and the sun was away, and the ground was rough.

I worried we hadn't coordinated properly with the boat: the maps were all different scales. From the high point we could see a mast but the ground was so scrambled it was hard to choose a line, and the rocks and coves were too small for the contours to help. I ran ahead routefinding, hiding my rising nerves, calling back encouragement. The boys were vying to look after Amanda. I saw now why Andy had delegated: I was the fall guy. The sun was long gone and we didn't have a light. Apart from the responsibility I was having the time of my life. This landscape feels like it's never been set foot on. Until there it was, slack water guarded by steepside granite and we were on the boat for dinner and glory.

By the time we streamed into Oban harbour we were a slick team, proudly swinging the boat around with everyone on shore gazing in admiration at our big white swan (we fancied, fondly). Clean down and hand the boat back. The sun was still blazing, chips on the harbour, iconic. You couldn't make it up how perfect it was.

True, most of us had met our shadow at one point or another on the trip and on a boat there is nowhere to hide. Ultimately you cannot play at being kids again in adult bodies without complex emotion intruding. A boat is a crucible. But there's no better environment to practice being real with each other and we were safe company for each other to play out our complications. And we always kept the rope off the back for anyone who wanted a tow to leave their hot mammalian troubles in the tumbling blue wake.



## Some walks in Austria

By Stuart Mitchell

*(photos by the author except where stated)*

The fortnight holiday plans for 2023 presented several considerations. We wanted to do a hut-to-hut trek in a high alpine environment but without glacier travel. It had to be in July, reachable by train and somewhere neither of us knew. Neither Sally nor myself had spent time in Austria during the summer. I'd had a long November weekend from Regensburg in the Rofengebirge during 2004, but this is well north of the high Alpine frontier ranges. We'd also been on skiing holidays there, but intimacy with the local mountain environment is largely unattainable in a ski resort.

Planning was fraught, there was far too much choice and Cicerone did well from us. Initially we decided on the Stubaier Höhenweg but many of the huts were fully booked. The next option was further west; the Rätikon Höhenweg. We made a spreadsheet of dates and huts and checked availability, trying to link up a continuous tour with accommodation for each night like an infuriating version of Connect Four. Weekends and Mondays were fully booked which frustrated our schedule. Adding a detour down to a valley to sit out the busy days didn't help, there was always one night which torpedoed our plan for the circuit.

We decided that we could do three days of the north side of the Rätikon Höhenweg, drop down to the valley for the comforts of civilization and then move somewhere else. The lack of hut accommodation allowing multi-day routes led us to book an apartment in the Stubaital, south of Innsbruck for the second week. We reasoned that we could do a variety of day walks as well as enjoying some much needed down time.

The next adventure came with the train travel. Cancelled trains, fallen trees and missed connections might make for a good pub story but not for a mountaineering club journal so we'll skip forward a day to Bludenz in Vorarlberg where our train journey ended.

We spent a couple of days winding down from the journey, having short walks in the foothills interspersed with visits to Bludenz to sample the local beers and pork dishes which were invariably cooked on the blue side of rare and all the better for it. The coincidence of the Föhn with a heatwave meant the atmosphere was stifling and walking was slow and laborious. I hoped that the air would be lighter and cooler once we were up in the mountains proper.



The Lünensee Dam from the Douglass Hütte

Our first night was to be spent in the large Douglass Hütte, named after Scottish aristocrat John Sholto Douglass, 14<sup>th</sup> Laird of Tilquhille, Deeside, eminent Austrian palaeontologist and erstwhile member of the Austrian Alpine Club. He was also the grandfather of Norman Douglas, a highly



regarded writer, mentor to Elizabeth David and prolific sex offender whose dying words were, "Get those fucking nuns away from me."



En route to the Totalp Hütte

The hut is accessed by a cable car which leaves the road end at 1560m and deposits you a few minutes later at 2000m. It is situated at the end of a large winding dam which forms the Lünensee, a deep trout-filled lake c. 2.5km long and 1.5km wide. The lake has a constructed path all the way around and this coupled with the accessibility of the hut means that this corner of Vorarlberg is busy with non-mountaineering tourists. We arrived mid-morning and the forecast was good until late afternoon with thunderstorms not scheduled until early evening. This gave us ample time to walk up to the Totalp Hütte at 2400m for lunch and return by a more scenic high-level route. The walk up to the hut was a lovely steady slog with a hint of altitude induced effort on winding stony paths and intricate wiggles through craggier ground. The hut was busy with a huge mix of people, some coming down from the white limestone wedge of Schesaplana. A tiny excuse for a glacier sat in a hollow above the hut, a once mighty field of ice reduced to the kind of snow patch that used to survive all year in the Cairngorms. The hut staff were a cheerful lot despite clearly being run off their feet carrying endless bowls of germknödelsuppe, beers and coffees to the many diners.



The Totalp Hütte



After lunch we descended by a longer and less steep route which took the flank of the Kanzelköpfe and down to the head of the Lünersee. The bare lunar stonescape gave way to grasses and heathers, densely carpeted with a huge variety of spectacularly colourful flowers and animated by an equally wide variety of dancing butterflies. Almost every alpine and Pyrenean trip I have undertaken has been during September and October, a season I prefer because of more stable weather, slightly lower temperatures and the colours and clear air of early autumn. But autumn is not floral and this was a major highlight and advantage of this time of year.



View from below the Totalp Hütte. Our route follows the green valley to the col at the top-left of the picture.



Flowers at the edge of the vegetation zone

We wandered anti-clockwise around to the Lünense Alpe at the south end of the lake, which was busy serving coffee and beer. The Lünensee Alpe provides no accommodation but instead functions as a small farm and café. We discussed stopping but a look upwards showed rapidly building clouds and we didn't fancy a soaking.

Now I have a severe aversion to lightning. I can break speed records if a flash and a bang go off anywhere near me and I have a good if slightly paranoid sense of when a thunderstorm is going to kick off. I'm well attuned to that particular quality in the air, a restless stillness and change of light out of keeping with the time of day. All of this was apparent but I wasn't concerned as we were well down from the pointy summits and ridges. Big pre-storm raindrops were starting to fall so we stopped to put our kags on and I put my camera away. Suddenly the rain got much heavier, the wind whipped up urgently and it became ominously dark as if in a second the clock had been wound forward to dusk yet it was only 1500. A lot of people were now on the path, walking fast or running in the direction of the hut including several small children dressed for the beach and an elderly man being led along by two younger women.



Storm building behind the dam. Photo by Sally McNaught, moments before it went dark and got serious.

A deep, loud boom. Not from above but in front of us. The dam ahead was illuminated by the sun, its brightness exaggerated by the gigantic black wall of cloud rising behind it. The storm was building up from the valley and we were walking towards it. It was a stunning moment of real drama. The final approach to the dam involved the only steep section of path, a series of rocky switchbacks climbing over an exposed outcrop 200m above the lake before dropping to the dam. The windblast when cresting the top of the outcrop was like a punch in the face. We had to fight against it, the violence and noise of the wind, rain and hailstones were desperate. We overtook several people on their way down who really shouldn't have been there. I asked if they were OK but they were like us, faces screwed up, eyes nearly closed and keeping going at whatever pace they could manage.

The path terminated at the east end of the dam where a small concrete control building stood. A lot of people were huddled under a small inset alcove, possibly thinking that having a small roof over their heads was protection against the horizontal hailstone blitzkrieg. The recessed nature of the alcove and the nearby lightning conductor made it a perfect sparking point. I looked at them with a horrified expression, shook my head and said, "Nicht gut, zum hütte." I'm not sure anyone agreed.



Only a strip of horizontal tarmac separated us from the safety of the hut, however it was along the top of the dam, 250m long and about 4m wide with a 70m drop on the outflow side, now a raging cauldron of furious black nothingness. The sides were guarded by metal railings, more visually pleasing than concrete ones but also a lot more attractive to lightning. Standing about getting hammered by wind and hail while waiting to get randomly zapped didn't appeal so we agreed to Hail Mary it, running along the middle as fast as we could in walking boots while carrying all the weight of water our clothing could absorb. I'd fully expected the wind over the dam to be insane but thankfully it eased a little. There were explosive bangs and rumbles but no strikes near us and it wasn't long before we arrived at the hut. Soaked, exhausted and little frazzled mentally if not electrically, the comforts of the hut were welcome. Heavy and meaty Austrian mountain food, beer and hot showers sorted us out. The storm eventually cleared giving the evening light an incredible post-storm clarity.

As forecast, the morning brought curtains of rain. One aspect of the hut which hadn't sorted us out was the drying room. Poorly ventilated, small and packed with saturated clothing, everything was still wet including our boots. We wore the dry clothes which we'd scheduled for later and hoped we'd avoid a soaking today and manage to dry our damp clothing later. The walk from the Douglass Hütte to our next stop, the DAV (German Alpine Club) owned Lindauer Hütte took us up a narrow valley and over two cols with the sharp limestone frontier ridge with Switzerland on our immediate right.



One of our rain shelter buddies. Photo by Sally McNaught.

We started the walk during a break in regular sweeping squalls of rain which approached like galleons from the north and arrived at the Lünensee Alpe just as another wave of water hit. There was no sign of life so I knocked on the first door I came to, the top half of which was immediately opened by a cheerful teenage girl who told us to shelter in the barn. The barn interior was quite a

sight. Four Dutch, two Bavarians, one French, two unimpressed pigs and now two Scots, all standing and wearing packs, dripping onto the shit plastered floor, except for the pigs who had provided the carpeting. One of the Dutch guys commented that the weather reminded him of a walking holiday he'd had in Scotland. When the rain passed we all set off on our various ways. Most headed for the steep grassy climb up to the Gafalljoch on the Swiss border. Only the French walker accompanied us eastwards to follow the Rätikon Nord.

The walking was on good paths although the volume of rain had caused a lot of erosion and here as in Scotland the paths were being artificially widened by people walking off to the side to avoid the deep and muddy runnels thus creating new parallel paths which invariably merged into one wide and occasionally messy track. There were significantly less flowers than we'd observed at a similar altitude only a few km away the day before, the shadow of the long north wall of the Kirchlispitzen Gruppe forming a microclimate in the mostly sunless valley. Clouds bounced and shifted around the valley, dropping, lifting and dispersing. I wasn't concerned about thunderstorms, it was still reasonably early and it felt like a humid Scottish summer's day. The first col, the 2330m high Verajoch, was in thick cloud and a large group of walkers passed us going the other way. Their sudden appearance and group density plus the wet muddy paths made me wonder momentarily if I was in the Lake District. The clouds parted on the descent to reveal the spectacularly abrupt east end of the long ridge of the Drusenfluh, a dragon's back of limestone which forms a 5km long wall on the south facing Swiss side. It's north side which we walked under was less steep but darker and broken with tiny remnant glaciers.



The route ahead from the Schweiztor with the Druhsenfluh rearing up.

The low point between our two cols was on a saddle which descended on one side to the Vorarlberg meadows and on the other dropped more abruptly into Switzerland via the Schweizetor or "Swiss Gate," an appropriate name for the only breach in the otherwise impassable limestone ridge separating the two countries for some distance. An abandoned stone building, a former customs post, squatted on the col. It would have made a good if small hut.





Looking back to the Verajoch with the Schweizerhorn customs post below.

We spent much of the day passing and being passed by the French walker, a petite woman with a gigantic rucksack. She was slower than us on the ascents but kept up on the descents and was faster on the flat. When she caught us on the second col, the 2291m Ofapass, she pulled out a stove and proceeded to brew herself some coffee.



The view to the Lindauer Hütte, the furthest away building

Visibility was down to a few metres on the Ofapass and the initial route was less than obvious so the three of us stuck together for the steep and incredibly washed-out descent where we teetered downhill occasionally in narrow hip-deep troughs. The clag thinned once we'd dropped a few



hundred metres of altitude affording us a view down the narrow valley to the alpine meadows with cowbell-wearing cattle and the track leading out to the glimmering wet silver timber shingles of the Lindauer Hütte.



Leo and her huge pack en route to the Lindauer Hütte

The walk out to the hut had the characteristic wearying feel that only comes when three elements have aligned: you can see your destination in the far distance, the weather is breaking and getting steadily worse, and you're a bit wet and profoundly ready to sit down to a beer or a cup of tea. We walked along the track, watching the light and the clouds play along the limestone walls and steep green meadows and talking to the baleful, seen-it-all cows with the huge bells when we heard the first thunder of the day, not far away but high up and of no great concern. We chatted to the French woman more on this final stage. She was called Leo, was from Marseille and was walking all the way to the Dolomites, camping discreetly and only using huts for a shower. Her rucksack weighed 20kg.

Minutes after our arrival at the hut, a barrage of marble-sized hailstones hammered down for a few minutes. They cleared as suddenly as they had appeared and every outside surface looked as if it was under a coating of snow. The hut was bustling, lively, friendly and crucially had a functioning if extremely smelly drying room. Like the Douglass Hütte it was reachable by mechanised means so there was a fair number of people who did not have the disheveled look or BO of the backpacker. A school group meant it was noisier than ideal but it didn't go on too late.

The morning brought promise of sunshine with some welcome hanging cloud which would cool our route, mostly a steep and relentless 700m ascent with only a 1km meander through pine forest and over a few small streams for a warm-up. One of the gifts the wet weather had given us was the preponderance of large Alpine Salamanders which we saw regularly lower down. The climb up was on a firm, pine needle reinforced path through dwarf pines and heathers, gaining height very quickly and affording us a dramatic, ever-changing view back over the Lindauer Hütte and the Ofapass with the spectacular jagged Drusenfluh and Kreuzspitze. Immediately above us and dominating the skyline to our south was the vertiginous creamy limestone mass of the

dolomitic Sulzfluhe. Various via ferrata routes diverged from the standard Höhenweg and we saw a few small groups heading off with helmets, harnesses and ferrata lanyards at the ready.



Sally with the Sulzfluhe rising above her.

Although a short in distance, today's stage was almost all up, from the high point there remained only 1.7km in distance and 150m in height loss to our third refuge, the ÖAV owned Tilisuna Hutte. The final stretch was very steep with increasing exposure but with no technical difficulty or requirement for hands. Incongruously, a large swallowtail butterfly was resting on the path exactly where I wanted to put my foot. It took a substantial amount of gentle persuasion to shift it. The steepening coincided with thick white cloud descending so any exposure was masked. Just as the cloud descended a huge brown bird sailed past me, close enough to hear the whoosh of air pass under its wings and just sufficient time to identify it as an eagle. The col was reached by a rotten exposed path cut into a step in the ridge, sporting a thick wire cable as a handrail. There was no difficulty but it was no place to stumble. We arrived at the col in rapidly rolling cloud and got another glimpse of the eagle soaring up in front of us, less than 50m away. We decided this would be a good lunch stop in case the eagle reappeared, but it did not return.



Alpine Salamander: *Salamandra atra*.  
Photo by Sally McNaught



Swallowtail: *Papilio machaon*  
Photo by Sally McNaught



Descending to the Tilisuna Hütte brought us back to a world of flowers, butterflies and sunshine. The hut sits on a north-facing alp near the edge of an escarpment which plunges into Switzerland in a riot of white broken rock, scrub and vast areas of complex cracked limestone pavement. After lunch we planned a short afternoon's walk which would take us down into the limestone bowl on the Swiss side and bring us back out at a col which was on our planned route for tomorrow. Sun reflecting off the limestone was extremely bright and the polished rocks on the steep path down were surprisingly slippery. We made our return by a little used route though a narrow flower-choked gorge between two sections of pavement which brought us abruptly to the Grubenpass. A small timber hut was built into a rock niche, another historical customs post on the Austro-Swiss frontier. It was a mellow stroll back to the hut and a good recce for our route tomorrow.



Customs post on the Grubenpass

Tomorrow's route was intended to return to the Grubenpass and follow a gently rising line to a shoulder, the Plassegenpass, then traverse a ledge-like path across the south-west face of the Sarotlaspitzen. This would terminate at the Sarotlajoch before plummeting easily down to the village of Gargellen. From there we'd get a bus to Sankte-Gallenkirche where we'd booked a hotel for the weekend, seeing as all the huts were full.

Dinner in the Tilisuna Hütte came with an after-dinner speech by the guardian, a cheerful mountain of a man with a big beard and a baritone voice. I managed to decipher enough of his Low Bavarian to tell that the weather was suboptimal. His English was good so I asked him the details. He said that while all the forecasts disagreed on the details, the consensus was that earlier rather than later, it was going to kick off in epic fashion.

It hammered down all night and I didn't sleep well. I didn't fancy teetering along an exposed rattly ledge with a big steel cable at my side for 1km in a breaking storm. We had reasoned that with an early start we should be descending by 1100, comfortably outside my thunderstorm worrying threshold. Three Scottish guys, oddly the only anglophones we'd met so far, were going the same way and had resolved to leave the hut by 0600. They hadn't been sparing the beers so mooched in for breakfast while the rest of the hut was finished and packing to go. They were still committed to the route and we wondered if we should too. Stepping outside didn't fill me with hope. We chatted to a couple who had been across our route the day before; they reported that the ledge was loose, slippery and, crucially if it



was wet, potentially slow. I had a vision of picking over slippery shale and loose rock while thunder boomed and the cable fizzed. “Let’s abandon and walk down to the valley.”



The escape route, the best of bad options.

Most people in the hut were doing the same. We didn’t see them for long as thick mist was moving up the valley ahead of blackening clouds. Entering the mist was like walking into a steam room where visibility was suddenly reduced to a few metres. Cows would appear suddenly in front, occasionally jumping with fright, bells clanging. Eventually the path faded to a discontinuous linear impression on the stony grass. The mist cleared momentarily to allow a glimpse of a red and white painted rock some way below before closing in again. We tensely descended a few hundred metres of unfeatured hillside on unstable saturated vegetation while avoiding stepping the many alpine salamanders who had emerged to feast on the plentiful slugs. Thankfully Sally had a mapping app on her phone and using this we located where the track was meant to be but mostly wasn’t. A weary soaking trudge down never-ending switchbacks eventually landed us in Schruns where we went straight to a pizzeria for lunch. We sat under a parasol in tipping rain, warmed by a patio heater. I didn’t care that I was sitting in a puddle.

After a weekend in the unremarkable Sankte-Gallenkirche, we took the train to Innsbruck and a bus to Neustift am Stubaital where we’d rented an apartment. The Stubai valley is steeped in mountaineering lore, the industrial zone is mainly occupied by the factories of Stubai and Austria-Alpin and outdoors tourist infrastructure was more in evidence than in Vorarlberg. Neustift was a pleasant place to be and especially to eat.

Any frustration we felt at not being here to walk the Höhenweg was tempered by the unsettled weather. The random violent thunderstorms of the previous week were a little less evident but the rain was not. It was very like Scotland in summer, thankfully minus the midgies.

On our first day we did a standard walking route called the Panoramaweg, reasoning that if the clue was in the name then the views ought to be good. It didn’t disappoint and gave a good impression of the terrain the first couple of days of the Höhenweg would cover. Later our friends from the JMC, Emily and Rod joined us for a couple of days. We managed a short forest walk but the incessant rain drove us to another shared passion amply catered for in Tirol; large beers and meaty food.



Pointing towards the Innsbrucker Hütte from the Panoramaweg.

After our friends departed we had a couple of days remaining and the weather forecast looked promising. We took the bus further up the valley where we planned to walk up to the Sulzenau Hütte for lunch. The start of the walk through steep forest was busy, with a large extended Italian family and out of control kids hopping around oblivious to the slippery rocks, roots and the sheer plunge down the icy waterfall into the blue-grey glacial torrent which was almost directly below them. We soon barged past and thankfully left them behind. We reached a small alm at the top of the hanging valley, serving hot drinks and cakes. Most people went no further and the trail became much quieter. The rest of the way to the Sulzenauhütte could be seen ahead, more open, steeper and rockier and looking more like a mountain environment. A steady walk up a superbly constructed zig-zagging path up an improbably steep bit of hillside brought us to the Sulzenauhütte about an hour later. Looking back to the flat meadow above the forest I was reminded of the characteristic oval of Glencoe's Hidden valley, but the Glencoe version is smaller, more hidden and thankfully does not, at the time of writing, have an establishment selling drinks and cakes.





The Sulzenau Glacier

The previous week's walking, a few days of rest and a calorific binge had left us both feeling a bit stronger than usual so we opted to skip lunch and see how high we could get on a trail leading up the glacial lake of the Sulzenausee at 2500m. This followed part of the Höhenweg and was well established and waymarked. Not far from the hut we had to negotiate a herd of inscrutable goats with huge horns. They didn't so much as move out of our way as be totally oblivious to us threading through them. The path was gentle for a while then kicked up over loose, rotten ground similar to the worst of Skye scree to pass a cliff band. In hindsight there was an easier line we could have taken; routes change frequently close to the glaciers due to rapid erosion. It was an unpleasant grovel up and I wondered if it might be better later in the year when the attrition of the spring thaw had settled.



The best thing about pictures of goats is that pictures don't smell.

Arrival at the glacial lake was abrupt. Hemmed in by a sharp moraine, the lake was still and profoundly flat sliver grey, diffusely reflecting the colours of the surrounding rock. All that



remained of the winter's freeze was a solitary iceberg, the lake being fed from the hanging Sulzenau glacier above. The lake has only existed since 2003 when the Sulzenau glacier retreated far enough behind the moraine to change the location of the outflow overnight, thus forming the lake. Photos from 2014 show a significantly larger glacier apron surviving at the back of the Lake; currently the lake mostly abuts bare vertical cliffs beneath the snout of the vanishing glacier.



The Sulzenau Glacier Lake, with the glacier above.

We walked out wishing we had more time to explore but more bad weather was due. The next evening we were content to sit under the canopy of a bar in Herzog-Friedrich Straße in Innsbruck, listening to the String Art Ensemble busking Mozart while loud thunder rolled overhead and rain bounced off the cobbles.



The String Art Ensemble in Innsbruck, the perfect soundtrack to the end of a trip.



Oil Painting of Bonaly Dam by Euan Cameron