

Jacobites Mountaineering Club



Journal: 2024 – 2025

Committee

Post	2024 – 2025
President	Karl Zeiner
Secretary	Jane Robinson
Treasurer	Fiona Shepherd
Meets	Alison Beresford & Iain Kinnell
Membership	Robbie Hewitt
Social	Richard Birkhill
Inver Custodian	Amanda MacKay
Newsletter	Blanca Jiminez
Webmaster	Fiona Zeiner
Gear	Kenneth Humphreys
Journal	Stuart Mitchell

Editorial

This was the year the Jacobites Mountaineering Club entered its second half-century. The first fifty years provided a lot of stories, the articles in this journal suggest a continuation of that.

There are a diverse collection of tales within these pages. We have accounts of rock climbing in the Dolomites, Colorado and Jordan, a high-altitude expedition to Mount Logan in Canada, sailing combined with ski-mountaineering in Norway and walking trips both here and abroad, including an impromptu participation in the still current record for the fastest round of the Munros. We also have reflective essays on social and psychological aspects of rock-climbing and mountaineering and two book reviews.

Noel Williams, one of the Jacobites founder members, has kindly shared an article on the formation of the club and some of the adventures the founders got up to.

Very sadly, the journal also contains an obituary. In December 2025 we lost one of our own, Fiona Zeiner. It is difficult to overstate the significance of Fiona's presence and contributions to the club during her 20+ year membership and her passing is an unfathomable loss to the fabric of the club.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of the club, I would like to express warm thanks to everyone who put fingers to keyboards and submitted an article, to Noel Williams and the SMC for allowing us to reprint Noel's article, and to Karl Zeiner, Margaret, Fred and Alison Milligan, Elspeth O'Neill, Cathy Southworth, Alison Beresford, Catherine Jones, Iain Kinnell, Graham Pearson, Chris Banks, Pamela Van de Brug, Fiona Shepherd, Susan Guest and Cath O'Shea for the ingredients of Fiona Zeiner's obituary. Finally, posthumously, to Fiona Zeiner for her many and significant contributions to the club.

(Cover photograph: James Moncur on Compression Crack, Ben Nevis. Photo: Stuart McLeod)

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Annual Summary

Autumn

Following the memorable 50th anniversary annual dinner in Edinburgh, the club year settled down to a variety of well-attended meets and the festive social calendar. Hogmanay at Inver was observed the unstoppable team of Pam van de Brug, Catherine Jones, Chris Banks, Sarah and Kenneth Humphries and Richard Birkhill who admirably scoffed in the face of the weather warnings and biblical floods.



The boardwalk...



*...held no fear for this hardy lot.
(Photos: Pam van de Brug)*

Winter

The winter season of 2024 to 2025 will not be joining the hallowed ranks of 1986, 1991, 2010 etc as a vintage year. Nevertheless, weekend meets were largely well attended and the usual suspects were ticking off and occasionally putting up new routes both in Scotland and abroad.

The weather for the annual meet to Muir Cottage was particularly miserable but everyone went out on the hill, although Graham Pearson walked there from Aviemore via the Lairig Ghru.



Clockwise from left: Steph, Miles, Paul and Munro. (Photo: Munro the Labrador)

Lagganlia was well attended with reasonable weather and was notable for every attendee going on the same walk as a single group over Sgor Gaoth and Sgoran Dubh Mor, including 14th month old Sebastien Strong, bagging his 4th Munro.

The Glencoe meet was notable for a large group who traversed Bidean nam Bian and Stob Coire Sgreamhach, upon which Joanne Thin celebrated her completion of the Munros.



Joanne Thin, right, celebrates finishing the Munros on Stob Coire Sgreamhach with Fiona Zeiner (Photo: Adrian Proctor)

Spring and Summer

With winter's cold and damp having retreated for a few months, first out of the blocks was John Coffield who walked the long and arduous Cape Wrath trail during the spring. Further afield, Steven Turner took part in an expedition to Mount Logan, at just shy of 6000m it is the highest mountain in Canada and second only to Denali in North America.

Summer meets continued to be well attended including a desperately hot and humid midsummer's weekend at the Glencoe Ski Lodge at Bridge of Orchy. Hills on the Black Mount, Glen Etive and Beinn Mhanach were sweated up, while Michael Barnard made the drive over to Glen Gour to solo Indian Slab among others.

Another Munro compleater was Emily Alder who snatched a stunning day on Stob Coire Odhair at Bridge of Orchy to finish her Munros.

Cathy Southworth suffered in the heat to complete the legendarily hard Isle of Jura Fell Race.

The biggest trip of the year in every sense belongs to Paul Harris, who walked the Appalachian Trail in its entirety, a massive undertaking and a huge personal achievement.

Adrian Proctor and Amanda MacKay went out to the Alps and amongst all the climbing, summited Monte Viso before catching up with Marion Lurf in Austria.

The ever-industrious Martin Bagshaw managed to fit in trips to the Dolomites, Colorado, Ceuse and Jordan, the latter three in the company of Michael Barnard, the latter two also with Stuart McLeod and the final one including ex-Jacobite and Wadi Rum guru Robert Durrant. In between times Martin managed to crash his bike resulting in a bad shoulder injury and a long layoff from climbing. It didn't seem to have held him back as he onsighted Pettifer's Wall at Ratho then flashed a 7a at Ceuse.

Nearer home, the annual Skye meet was relatively and unusually poorly attended but Fiona Zeiner did what was her final ever Munro, Sgurr Mhic Coinneach, with Pam van de Brug and Lucy Spark.



Michael chillin' at Ceuse. (Photo: Stuart McLeod)

Autumn

Autumn brought the annual dinner which was held in Consiton in the Lake District, with accommodation being at the ominously named Low Bank Ground. The weekend observed the challenging weather which is becoming a tradition for annual dinners. Storm Amy hit her peak on the Friday night, turning what is usually a dull 3-hour drive into a proper adventure. Despite long detours, floods, fallen trees and a puncture, everyone made it and many even went for a very windy and soggy walk on the Saturday.

The President's Speech

Karl Zeiner

A big well done to everyone for getting here safely in the face of storm Amy.

Firstly a big thank you to Richard for all the work he put in in organizing this year's annual dinner as well as all the other social events he organised in the 2024/25 club year.

I haven't been around club activities much this year which makes highlighting things that members have been up to a bit more difficult. Added to that, I didn't ask the right question when trying to find this out as I ask for what members have been up to with a view to highlight great achievements and failed to find out what was happening on meets and regular Jacobites outings.

It does seem to have been a year for travelling long distances though. All those that did, seem to do it in a hot and dry spell. Dry spells are good – hot spells can be a bit draining though.

John Coffield hiked the Cape Wrath Trail during a hot and dry spring. Mike Snook cycled Land's End to John O'Groats during a hot and dry summer and Paul Harris took the biscuit by hiking the 2000+ mile Appalachian Trail in the US. Cathy Southworth on the other hand competed in a number of the Scottish Long distance hill races over the course of 2025. And Emily Alder completed the ultimate Scottish long-distance challenge – the Munros.

And I started my presidency whilst a long distance away in the French Alps which seems pretty apt.

I am going to use this speech though to focus on the volunteers in the club. We've had an excellent summer and winter Wednesday evening program. I had every intention of leading some of the activities myself but the volunteer list filled up very quickly and allowed for some great variety of activities both summer and winter.

The Wednesday evenings had pretty much everything and were all thought up by those organising them. In winter Adrian took us Orienteering in the Pentlands while Anna had 2 groups orienteering in the Hermitage of Braid whilst completing silly challenges such as building a human mountain or getting a polo mint from one member to another whilst holding it on a skewer in one's mouth. What could possibly go wrong.

Both Fiona and Mike took us mountain biking in the Braids on different routes on separate occasions while I took a group on a gravel ride into East Lothian.

One of the biggest outings of the winter though was Martyn's full moon Pentlands Walk. This did include a visible full moon. On that note we were very blessed during the last 12 months with the Wednesday evening weather. Even on the day that the evening activity went indoors and Ken and Steph took us ice skating the weather was good too.

Both Keith and Richard took it in turn to organise runs both in the winter and the summer. Biking and hiking dominated the program in summer but with it being so nice some were keen to get wet and joined Richard for his OW swim session and others joined Pam for her snorkelling session. Several of the summer biking sessions included pub visits – Mike took us to the Bridge Inn, Ken to the Espy, Sally to the Crammond Inn and the final one ended at Stewart Brewing for beer and pizza. Fiona Shepard and Joanne Thin had groups join them in the Pentlands and Moorfoot hills for walks.

Every winter we have a bunch of volunteers present a great set of slides to the club members with the proceeds going to outdoor related charities such as mountain rescue teams and path upkeep

groups. Last winter was no different and the variety of slideshows was great. It started with Lisa taking us along a via ferrata route in the dolomites that she and Walt did only a couple of weeks earlier, Catherine and Chris had spent a few weeks in Canada with some hiking and camping, Stuart McLeod gave us his usual excellent rundown of his climbing, and ski touring exploits including his ascent of the Walker Spur with Ollie Stevenson. After Christmas we had some watery slideshows where Keith took us through some white-water kayaking action on various Scottish Rivers and Guy's slideshow took us on a multiday kayaking trip along the Corsican Coast.

There wouldn't be a club if it weren't for our volunteers. Volunteers are on the committee, attend work meets, present slideshows, lead activities and help out where they can.

Can I ask you to raise a glass to past and current committee members as well as those who have helped out in the past or are doing so at the moment.

I even have folk who have volunteered themselves for a silly award as in nominated themselves. That in itself may warrant a silly award.

First up on the self-nominations is Steph who nominated herself and Ken for their mishap in India when they were detained by police for having a prohibited GPS device. As a consequence they missed all of their flights.

Anna nominated herself for leaving her crampons behind and convincing Martin to do another route in that area to retrieve them.

According to both Steph and Anna those events happened more than 12 months ago so should be disqualified from the awards.

Now on to not self-nominated silly award nominations.

Paul Harris has been nominated by Steph for walking down the wrong Corrie on Derry Cairngorm in very misty conditions leaving Miles and Steph looking for him for ages in freezing mist. They were suitably unimpressed.

Fiona Zeiner has been nominated by Pam, for her excellent foresight in bringing enough safety pins to do an on-site repair on her trousers, which lost their whole bum after a slip on gabbro coming down one of the Skye Munros.

Apart from nominating herself Anna also nominated Martin Bella for what she called the 'wildlife tolerance award'. On their way up to the Ronnan cottage meet they decided to get some climbing in at Guirnard Bay crags. On their way to 'road crag' they got badly ticked and retreated. On their way to 'car park slabs' they protected themselves from ticks as best they could but at the crag conditions were perfect for midges and less perfect for climbing. Martin noted dryly: "I miss winter".

I remembered earlier today on my walk that Miles should also be nominated. His girlfriend asked him before the Braemar meet if he needed anything from the shops. Pork pies he said and she returned with one huge pork pie instead of the more commonly used snack size ones.

The last 2 nominations are food related:

Richard nominated Scott for his communal meal contribution. Scott was asked to bring potatoes but brought a different vegetable which he (and seemingly nobody else) knew how to cook. Due to lack of phone reception he then drove to a place with reception to google how to cook said vegetable.

Finally, more than one person nominated Richard Birkill for a silly award. Therefore I took it upon myself to get him a prize for it. Richard was nominated for bringing turnip and not swede to cook at the Burns' Supper. An easy mistake to make if you are not Scottish. A Swede is called a turnip in Scotland (Ed: or a neep or a tumshie. Opinion is divided). To make sure it doesn't happen again here is a Swede/Turnip. Probably worth using before the Burns Supper 2026 though.

To be on the safe side Richard decided to organise the annual dinner in England.

Guy was nominated very late for not having the right equipment to change a tyre/wheel on his care on the way to the annual dinner meet.

I have had several nominations for the McHugh Award which was set up by the parents of Dave MacHugh, who was sadly killed in a road accident in 1986 while travelling to a weekend outing with fellow Jacobite Lyn Merritt. Criteria for the award are broad, but it's generally awarded for outstanding personal achievement or activities which bring honour to the club.

This year's recipient fits both of those criteria. He has over the year's climbed many routes in Scotland, the UK and across the Alps both in winter and summer and more recently interspersed this with multiday ski touring. He also on an annual basis delights the club with a slideshow of his exploits over that year and draws in a big crowd. Most who nominated him mentioned his ascent of the Walker Spur together with Ollie Stevenson as their reason.

This year's McHugh Award Recipient is Stuart McLeod.

Sadly Stuart couldn't join us this evening so I will present this to him as soon as possible when back in Edinburgh. I did think it would be apt to do it at his slideshow but that is in January which seems a bit late.

I would like to wish you all a good club year wherever it may take you. Thank you.



Half a Century Ago

Noel Williams

Last October, along with my friends the Andersons, I attended a dinner on the outskirts of Edinburgh to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Jacobites Mountaineering Club. It was a most enjoyable evening and it was great to see that the club is still thriving after all this time. The event brought back memories of the frantic events in my life during the first year of the club.

It had all started back in 1973 when I encountered Martin Plant in the Avon Gorge in Bristol. His loud and friendly demeanour made an instant impression. I did a couple of routes with him, but soon afterwards I upped sticks and moved to Edinburgh to start a teacher-training year at Moray House. My plan to pursue a career as a marine geologist had quickly evaporated when I discovered that chronic seasickness made life at sea a misery for me. Several trips to go winter climbing in the Highlands with my friend Andrew Wielochowski had fired my interest in moving to Scotland.

Within days of moving to Edinburgh, lo and behold, who should I bump into on South Bridge but Martin Plant. It turned out he had just moved to Edinburgh too.

We soon made contact with the JMCS in what was then called the Zodiac Bar. They were friendly enough and we joined them on a couple of local outings to Aberdour and Traprain Law. However, the male-only thing struck us both as rather archaic. It was Martin who suggested we set up a more open club. He had the energy and temerity to get posters printed and slapped them up all over Edinburgh. A very encouraging turnout at the first pub evening soon snowballed. We decided to set up a weekly pub meeting, but very rapidly had to find a larger venue to cater for the hordes that appeared. We soon felt confident enough to set up a committee. Maggie Harding, who had moved up to Edinburgh with me, was appointed treasurer and she was adroit at charming newcomers out of a subscription before they had finished their first drink. I don't remember who suggested the name Jacobites Mountaineering Club. It certainly felt a bit of an uprising, although three of the four founders were from south of the border. In no time at all we had a vibrant club with a great mix of personalities, all united by a passion for the hills. There must have been a big demand for such a body at the time.

The very first club meet had taken place at the end of January before things really took off. Martin had spotted an abandoned railway station near Drumochter and he suggested we could doss there for the weekend. He produced a newsletter and five of us headed north on the Friday. It rained the following day although we managed to salvage a rock climb at Creag Dubh. Visibility was poor on the Sunday but we set off up into the corrie below the summit of Sgairneach Mhòr. The plan was to climb the headwall of the corrie which Martin had spotted from the roadside on his previous visit. Maggie was a little apprehensive because she hadn't done a winter climb before. We eventually roped up and I buried a deadman to give Maggie a belay

I knew already that Martin wasn't an especially good climber, but I was about to find out that what he lacked in ability he more than made up for not just with enthusiasm but also competitiveness. I made a beeline for the summit and, when I hesitated below the extensive cornice wondering how best to tackle it, Martin came storming past me. He then proceeded to go horizontally along below the cornice thrusting his axe deep into the snow as he went. Next thing I know a huge length of cornice unzipped and swept me off my feet. I shot off back down the slope and whizzed past Maggie. To her great credit she held me firmly when the rope ran out. Martin meanwhile had got away unscathed and when he realised that I was alright he broke through the new gap in the cornice to reach the summit. I remember the trig pillar being right by the top of the route.



The original Jacobites MC committee on Sgairneach Mhòr, January 1974. Photo: John Fleming.

There was an Outdoor Education option at Moray House at that time and that had been one of the big attractions to getting my teaching qualification in Edinburgh. I am forever grateful for the range of skills that Nev Crowther, Eric Langmuir and Kim Meldrum introduced me to. Nev taught me to navigate properly, and it was one of the most useful things I ever learned.

By the time April came round the club had attracted quite a bit of attention. When Heriot-Watt members failed to materialise for their CIC Hut meet they offered their places to the Jacobites. We jumped at the chance and arranged to get the key. I don't remember how, but two of my Bristol friends, Terry Gloag and Blob Wyvill – both very good climbers – were visiting Edinburgh and somehow tagged along. I still had to complete a couple of crucial tasks associated with my teaching course. One was to prepare for a visit from my tutor while I took a second-year science class – the dreaded 'crit'. The other was to hand in an Education essay.

I was well aware by this time that I had to involve pupils in the learning process rather than just spout from the front. So in Liberton High School with three columns for the main foodstuffs on the board I was asking the pupils to tell me what they had for breakfast. One pupil had said 'toast' and we agreed that it should be added to the carbohydrate column. I made the mistake of then saying 'that's bread' before turning to write it on the board.

Next thing I knew the whole class was in uproar. My tutor who was at the back of the class lowered his head and stared fervently at his paperwork. I couldn't imagine what the problem was. I turned back to the board, and to my horror I discovered that I had written 'BREAST' instead of 'BREAD'. Nothing was further from my mind at the time. I quickly used the board duster and somehow continued. To my astonishment at the end of the lesson my tutor didn't even mention my faux pas and gave me a good grade.

That still left the Education essay. As usual I'd left things to the last moment so I stayed up all Thursday night to get it completed. I managed to hand it in by the 9 a.m. deadline.

On the Friday evening we headed north to the Ben. We planned on driving up the track to the dam and arrived in Torlundy just before midnight. To our horror we discovered that the Forestry Commission had erected a new locked gate at the start of the track. We couldn't face walking all the way up to the hut at such a late hour, so drove round to Glen Nevis and bivvied out on the grass verge. Unfortunately it started to pour with rain at 5 a.m. We quickly transferred our sleeping bags to our vehicles and tried to sleep there as best we could. With the rain still tipping down we eventually went into Fort William to get some breakfast.

Fortunately the weather gradually improved so we returned to Glen Nevis and set off from the Youth Hostel for the CIC Hut. By the time we got there it was early afternoon. There were six of us altogether and half the party were novices. The sun was now out and I assumed that Terry and Blob would be willing to help look after some of the team. But no such luck. They'd set their hearts on doing The Bat.

I didn't know the Ben all that well in those days, and the only rock climb I'd done on the north face was Centurion. Càrn Dearg Buttress was in the sun so Route 2 seemed the most obvious choice. My Moray House friend, John Fleming, who had done more climbing with me than the other two agreed to do the leading with Jim Aitken. Meanwhile I would look after Mike Martin, our least experienced member. It was a little bit wet in the chimney but we soon made steady progress. That is until a huge black squall blew in out of nowhere. In no time at all it started snowing heavily. The flakes were enormous – the size of half-crown pieces in old money. Things took on a serious air. This all happened just as I arrived at the stance at the very start of the big traverse feature quite high up the route. Mike shouted up, 'I can't hang on.' This puzzled me because I assumed he was still tied on at the stance. I quickly got a good belay and took in the rope. Mike's glasses were plastered with snow and he calmed down a bit when I gave him a tight rope.

What to do? It seemed fraught with difficulty to try and abseil diagonally from here, and in any case Mike had never abseiled before. I decided that we should try and carry on if we could. Eventually the other three joined me on the stance and I tied the whole party together. This is when I discovered that Jim had nearly garotted himself when seconding the chimney pitch. He had just taken a super blue tape off and placed it round his neck when both his feet slipped and the tape got caught on a spike. He was left hanging by his neck with both feet in the air. He had quite a struggle retrieving the situation.

By now the snow had eased off, but the whole face was still plastered. I used the adze of my axe to clear the holds as I edged my way rightwards. I had to concentrate hard because runners were not plentiful. Getting the whole party across the face took some time, but we managed to achieve this without mishap. Unfortunately the light was fading fast.

Terry and Blob had abseiled off their route and came round to the foot of the face to enquire how we were getting on. By this time I'd discovered that none of us had headtorches. So I shouted down, 'We need lights!'

Unbeknown to me Terry returned the hut and tried to raise the rescue team on the hut radio. The police enquired if anyone was hurt and when Terry said he thought not the police responded commendably by saying 'Oh, in that case we won't come out tonight.'

Terry then tried to carry torches up Ledge Route for us but chickened out when he found his peg hammer wasn't much use as an ice axe. Meanwhile we kept battling on up the route as best we could. The sky cleared and a crescent moon appeared. This produced just sufficient light to allow us to

continue. Eventually we reached the top of the buttress. I do remember glancing down towards Number Five Gully but wasn't sure how easy it was to descend in that direction. As I said I didn't know the Ben very well at that time.

The best option seemed to be to carry on up. However, the moon soon disappeared and we had to stop. We found a bank of snow on the side of the ridge crest and decided to dig a snow-hole. I was pretty pooped by this time and wondered why Jim kept insisting that I do more than my fair share of the digging. We laid the ropes on the floor of the snow-hole and crawled inside. We slept like sardines, but again I was puzzled why Jim kept giving me sharp jabs in the ribs all night.



Snow-hole on Ben Nevis, April 1974. Photo: John Fleming.

When we were aware that the sky was getting lighter we crawled outside and it wasn't long before we reached the summit of Càrn Dearg. I think it was Mike who'd never been on the summit of the Ben before so we decided to continue to the main summit, which we reached at 7 a.m. We only had one ice axe among us so we had to take care abseiling into Number Four Gully and then roping up to descend it.

John and I had more outdoor experience than most of the others, having done the Outdoor option at Moray House that year. John was a good skier and impressed us with tales of using a parachute to get blown across the Cairngorm plateau. Because of this, Nev arranged for John and me to do a week of our teaching practice at an outdoor centre in the Borders. It had sounded a cushy option, but I hadn't encountered P6 and P7 pupils before. John and I drove back to Edinburgh and then continued down to Scotch Kershope. For many of the pupils this was their first taste of staying away from home. Their teacher walked us all off our feet the first day. He explained to John and me that he always did this to ensure that the pupils didn't wake up and start making a noise until 5 a.m. If he didn't try and exhaust them in this way they started creating pandemonium at 4 a.m.!

The pupils would scoff their evening meal and be out playing football with barely a pause for breath. Those ten days on the Ben and at Scotch Kershope were among the most exhausting of my life.

And it was weeks later before Jim Aitken finally came clean. He'd noticed me nodding off as I waited my turn to dig the snow-hole in the dark on the Ben. He'd somehow heard that if you fell asleep in conditions like that you wouldn't wake up. He thought he was going to lose me. He said he hadn't slept a wink all night himself.

In those days the Directors of Education for the various local authorities used to visit Moray House to interview students for jobs. There was a queue out the door for jobs in Edinburgh, but there was no-one at the table for Inverness-shire. My tutor had somehow learned that there were science vacancies at Lochaber High School. The man from Inverness-shire was called Ronald Macdonald, and he used a monocle. He offered me a job in Inverness and when I asked what he could tell me about the place he got a bit exasperated. I gently enquired if he had any jobs further south. He flicked through his papers and said, 'Lochaber High – they want a physicist, but they'll take a chemist.' With this he let the monocle fall from his eye and caught it down by his waist. So started my 50-year residence in Fort William. When I moved to the area in the August that year there wasn't a dry 24 hours until 31 January the following year.

There was an eventful visit to the Alps in the summer with the Jacobites. I'm not sure which was more memorable – all the peaks we climbed or the journey back from the Bregalia to a Channel port in a day on the back of Bob Campbell's Honda 500 4. I'd had to tap him gently on the shoulder to tell him to drive on the right as we blasted up the valley at dusk the night before. Bob decided he needed to put more air in his tyres before we set off, but gave the attendant the pressure in psi and his back tyre nearly exploded before he realised something was wrong.

It was a pleasant surprise to learn that I got a whole week off from teaching for half term in October – the time of the so-called 'tattie harvest'. With all the bad weather in Fort William all I'd achieved up till this point was a partial ascent of Clachaig Gully. Despite this we managed to organise a Jacobites team for an attempt at the Old Man of Hoy at the end of October. We snatched an ascent by the skin of our teeth and still made it back in time to attend the very first ever Jacobites dinner at the Ballachulish Hotel

That all happened 50 years ago, and Martin Plant, Jim Aitken and John Fleming are no longer with us. I don't think I've done as many climbs or been to as many places in a single year since that time. My only regret is that as a penniless student in Edinburgh I couldn't afford a camera, or even the film to put in it, so I have few tangible records of what we got up to. However, my memories of that first year of the Jacobites still come flooding back. Here's to the next 50 years.

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The End of the Making of a New World Record, and our very small part in it. Or: “Oh, you’re THOSE guys”

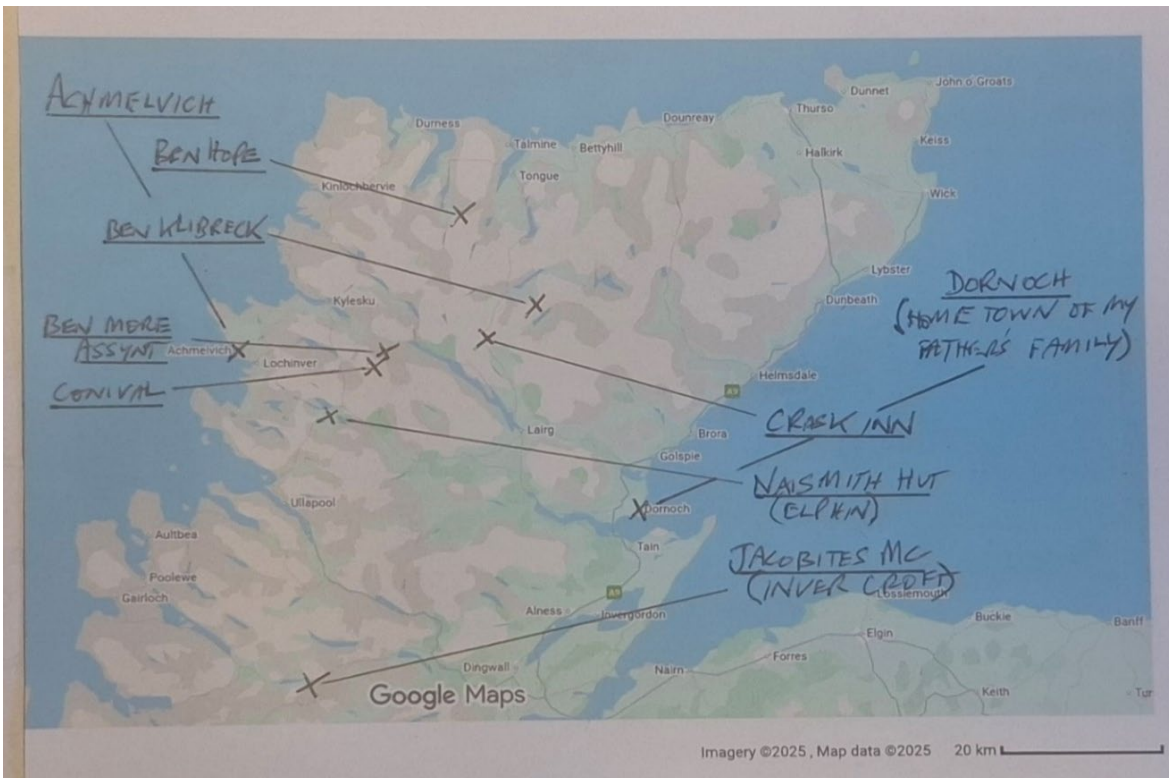
Scott Sutherland

We had been 2 nights on a Jacobites meet, staying at the rather beautifully located Achmelvich Beach Youth Hostel on the west coast, north of Ullapool, in late June 2023. Blanca, Gary, Miles and I had climbed Conival and Ben More Assynt on the Saturday. Several, including me, had later enjoyed a superb evening swim in unusually warm water on the stunning Achmelvich beach, prior to a relaxed evening BBQ sitting outside the hostel, completely midge-free. On Sunday eight of us went for a walk along the coast near the Stoer Lighthouse and Old Man of Stoer. In the evening, Amanda, Alexey (who had together rather impressively climbed the Old Man of Stoer sea stack on the Saturday), Richard Chandler, Miles and I, decided to extend our Highland visit and moved to stay in the Naismith Hut, in Elphin. The weather outlook was good, so Miles and I decided on Monday to take in Ben Hope, the northernmost Munro which sits on the eastern edge of The Flow Country, a Unesco World Heritage Site comprising a vast and unique area of peatland stretching across much of Sutherland and Caithness.

It was a fine, sunny day as we arrived at the small car park at the foot of Ben Hope on Monday 26th June, round about 9am, to find a few other cars already parked and several figures apparently preparing for the same walk. A fellow approached us as we parked. We wound down the window and he said: “Hello, are you part of the team?” What? No. What team? Miles and I looked at each other. “Don’t you know about Jamie, the girl trying to set the record for the fastest continuous round of Munros?” No. We need to check this out. (If Miles already knew about it, he hadn’t told me. Miles adds later: the subject had been mentioned in Achmelvich, but it had passed us by). We got out of the car, wandered about 20 yards over to a small group, it slowly dawning on us what we had stumbled upon. I saw this tall, strapping, impressive-looking woman in a kind-of azure blue top, plastering on sun lotion. ‘Ok, this must be the girl’. We approached a bit closer, then from behind her, kind-of round the side, under an azure arm, this thinner, a bit scrawny, distinctly tired-looking woman, in an altogether older, worn-out blue top and bottom, peered at us, saying: “It’s me! It’s me!”. Aha! We introduced ourselves, got the phone out for the obligatory photo, amid smiles, greeting, friendly good luck and so on, then returned to the car to put boots on etc. Hmmm, wow, interesting.



At the foot of Ben Hope, 9.20am-ish, Monday 26th June 2023



Map of The Story (including, tangentially, Dornoch, home of my father's extended family, a nearby place I have often visited)

Setting off up Ben Hope, we were about 20 minutes behind Jamie and the 2 of her team accompanying her that morning. They were, we discovered later, a small, slight, wiry, fit-looking older man with white hair and beard, and the Azure Girl. Miles notes he asked later who the old guy with the long beard was, and was told “oh, you mean Beardy!”. The Azure Girl turns out to be a great friend of Jamie’s called Alex.

It was the last day of her challenge, meaning Jamie had completed 280 of 282 Munros in a time of some 31 days and 3 hours, and was therefore on schedule to beat the record, set in August 2020 by Donnie Campbell of Skye, by some 12 hours. A former Royal Marine Commando and Ultra marathon runner, Donnie’s remarkable record had all but obliterated the previous record by more than a week.

Jamie hails originally from California, moved to the UK in 2005, is now a naturalised Brit and married to Andy, who was Chief Operations Officer and manned the support van. The 2 of them completed a round of Munros inside a year in 2013.

Ben Hope was Jamie’s penultimate mountain on this, her 3rd round, and Ben Klibreck, some 20 miles to the south, was to be the final one. After completing Ben Hope we had learned she planned to cycle to the foot of the final mountain, in keeping with the rule of no mechanised transport allowed for the entire continuous round of Munros. Jamie survived her round on an average of 4 hours sleep per night, which was probably the main reason she was able to beat Donnie’s record, given he had moved faster but slept more. It should be noted Jamie’s route owed much to Donnie generously allowing her access to his route, but there were also a number of significant differences.

It is appropriate here, at this juncture in our story, to note some related history of this most momentous of challenges, this mammoth feat of human endurance, a magnificent mountaineering endeavour, set in our very own Scottish Highlands:

- Jamie Aarons (7642) completed her third round of Munros on 26 June 2023 in 31 days, 10 hours and 27 minutes.
- Donnie Campbell (not registered) Completed on 2 September 2020, taking 31 days, 23 hours and 2 minutes
- Stephen Pyke (not registered) Completed on 3 June 2010, taking 39 days, 9 hours and 6 minutes.

Interestingly, if (like me) going fast is not your thing, there are also records for the slowest rounds, notably:

- Robert Waterston (3210) took 69 years, finishing at the age of 80.
- Scottish Mountaineering Club member Peter F Macdonald (7978) completed his Munro round in 2025 more than 70 years after his first Munro in 1954.
- The SMC refers to those who took 50 or more years between first and last Munros as “Golden Munroists” (Any from the Jacobites?)

And there are records too of the youngest, and oldest, to have completed a round of Munros:

- Ben Fleetwood (4954) aged 10 years 3 months
- Cliona & Nuala McCheyne (5117 & 5118) and Quinn Young (7330) aged 10
- Daniel M. Smith (5216) aged 9
- Nick Gardner (7246) completed on 20 August 2022 aged 82.
- Peter F Macdonald (7978) was also 82 when he completed.

Source: https://smc.org.uk/hills/munro_faqs

The mind boggles.

No doubt there are members of the JMC who have also distinguished themselves in a related way.

Given it was June and good weather, there were surprisingly few, if any, others on the hill that day. The climb to the summit of Ben Hope is short and steep, a round trip of nearly 8km, with 946m of ascent. When Miles and I were within a few hundred meters of the summit, on the more gradual top section, we knew we would soon pass Jamie and her two companions on their way down. We agreed we had to do something to recognise her efforts and encourage her, as we figured she would then be near the end of her physical and mental tether. So, as we saw them about 100m away coming towards us, we started clapping and shouting, then stood together both holding our walking poles in the air, as an arch for Jamie to walk through. When Jamie saw this she started to run down the hill to us, waving her poles a bit, with a big smile on her face. But it wasn't so much a run, as a painful-looking sort-of shuffle-jog-hop-limp. Well, after more than 134,000 vertical meters in 31 days, about 16 times the height of Mount Everest, you're entitled to be a little sore. Jamie writes later in response to the question how tired she felt on that last day, she was: "not as tired as my foot was sore... Was most likely an infected internal blister that was terrorising nerves in my foot... but my stubbornness knows few boundaries". 😊 The Azure Girl, Alex, took a video of this hilltop encounter and kindly sent it to us later. Not too far to go now to the foot of the penultimate; only one Munro left for her to climb of all the 282.



Near the summit of Ben Hope, looking south, about 11am, Jamie, with Beardy behind and Alex the Azure Girl taking the video, on the way down, Miles and me still climbing

Miles and I reached the summit of Ben Hope about 11.15am, turned quickly round, and got back down to the car. It took us 3 hours 47 minutes. Jamie and team had by then gone. We thought their plan was for her to cycle to the foot of Ben Klibreck, some 20 miles to the south. We were travelling in that direction and thought we might pass her on the way. Neither of us was seriously considered joining her for the final mountain, despite the opportunity to do so having been raised in the back of our minds. We were in awe of her pending achievement, of course, but one Munro on the day was enough for us, after what had already been a good weekend of hillwalking. Miles notes he had already completed 5 Munros before we climbed Conival and Ben More Assynt on the Saturday, as he had travelled up earlier, so was, as well, not feeling as fresh as me. 😊

We passed 2 cyclists on the road south, it must have been near Altnaharra, had a swift check and look on passing. It didn't seem like them, but actually it was them, of course, as we soon realised when we stopped a few miles later at the small crowd which had formed on the side of the road by the smartly painted support van. We stopped, parked, went and sat down and talked with a few of the group, relating our story of the meeting earlier in day, learning a little more of the project, had it gone to plan, the long preparations etc. One of the ladies we talked to, Susie, looked vaguely familiar to me, but I thought nothing of it.



At the start of the route up Ben Klibreck, her final Munro, heading east from the road (following the GPS trace of Donnie Campbell) with team members, supporters and the van

Jamie arrived on the bicycle, about 2.30pm, and was sat down in a chair by a team member. Her feet and boots were tended to, other necessities like food, drink, sun cream administered. Perhaps there was a minute-long power nod, as was her wont, and there was a quick change of clothing (the men were ordered to move away). The stop seemed to take not more than about half an hour. She was still well on target to beat Donnie Campbell's time by 12 hours or so. A group of a few dozen were gathered there, ready, intent on climbing Ben Klibreck with her, but not by the conventional route. The plan was to climb it faster, more directly, from where we were parked on the road, at the fenced off entrance to a power installation or similar. The anticipated route was nearly due east, about 5km as the crow flies. The first 2.5km was flattish, with a gradual incline, followed by maybe 1.5 km of steeps,

followed by a final shortish, gentler climb up to the summit, there being no path at all along the route, except near the top, where it joined the tourist route.

Miles and I were sitting at the side of the road, chatting with some of the team (it was a big team, Jamie explains on her website, 117 strong, and the whole project was 2 years in the planning), taking in the occasion. It was still a warm sunny day in the wilderness of the far north of Scotland. We had sort-of vaguely discussed the possibility of joining them. Miles had already indicated a while back, no, he wasn't interested. I was then undecided but had kept quiet. It would be great to really witness the new world-record, to be properly part of it, especially Munroing being a hobby, an interest, and in Scotland too. But to climb Ben Klibreck as well as Ben Hope, would mean, for me at least, a relative novice to this Scottish (Austrian too, it must be said) hillwalking mania, and not a hardened member of the Jacobite Mountaineering Club international clan regularly doing massive mountain days both here and abroad, probably more vertical meters in a single day (over 1900) than I had ever done before.

Miles notes: "I wanted to go, but I thought we wouldn't have time and still be able to make the journey back! The thing that decided me was learning that we'd be going straight up rather than taking the roundabout normal route. Though in the end we ended up staying for dinner and not driving back..."

Soon after Jamie and her band of followers all took off in the direction of the summit, I said to Miles, "Come on, we have to, let's go." Miles barely commented, as far as I recall, but we raced to put our boots on again, grab a bag and any water/energy bars we had left in the car. They were already maybe 300 meters away when we started. Miles was off like a jackrabbit, chasing after them. I thought he had probably been kind and polite in not indicating his interest in joining them, either because he did not want to leave me behind on my own or push me into too big a day (which of course was nothing in comparison to what this woman was doing!). In any case it took us 30-45 minutes to catch up with them, Miles yomping ahead all the way.

After the flattish lower part, hopping a few fences, where thankfully it was not toooooo boggy, it started to get steep. With no path. Steeper and steeper, one of those relentless Munro slogs, but made a little more bearable by the fact we were surrounded by many others, all partaking in this unprecedented mountain feat in the making. At least one person was making a video, scanning from person to person as we climbed up through the bracken and long grass.

According to Miles' Strava, we did 12.76km and 971m of ascent in... 5h45m total, burning 1947kcal. But we took the long way back, which added a lot to our total. We reached the summit after about 2h10 and just over 5km of walking".

Finally, eventually, we broke out onto the flatter top section, turned left and continued up to the summit. There is a photo on Jamie's website home page, copied below, one of 4 rotating photos posted there as I write, in which Jamie is seen breaking through a tape held by 2 of her team, reaching out for the cairn summit on the top of Ben Klibreck, the moment of achievement. 282 Munros. 31 days, 10 hours and 27 minutes. Roughly 900 miles and 126,000m of ascent on foot, 900 miles and 14,500m of ascent by bike, with about 20km of paddling. And, also as I write, £25,127 raised so far for World Bicycle Relief (anybody can, if you so desire, still contribute, as the original target has, it indicates, not yet been reached, using link:

<https://www.justgiving.com/page/jamiesmunrochallenge#supportersList>)



Group photo at top of Ben Klibreck

Congratulations Ms Aarons, to your husband Andy, your girl Friday Jenny and all your support team, albeit somewhat late. The whole official story can be found on their website:

<https://jamiesmunrochallenge.run/>

And to prove Miles and I were there, representing the Jacobites Mountaineering Club of Edinburgh you might say, or alternatively simply as “Oh, THOSE two guys”, you can actually see us in that photo below (and the one above, in fact). Among the followers and supporters, Miles is clearly there in the background, smiling, and if you look very closely, you can see a little of the left side of me as well 😊 .



<https://jamiesm>



1



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CHALLENGE**



Crossing the Finish Line, Miles and Scott in the background

The story doesn't end quite there, however. Maybe it should. After we had all sat there, on the top of a Scottish mountain at the end of a fine summer's day, resting, sharing celebratory booze, some minor, tired-but-happy chat, photos etc, slowly, in dribs and drabs, everybody began walking down the hill. The walk down seemed a long way, by the conventional, tourist, route. A very big fellow, who we passed an hour or so from the bottom, told me he had a heart condition. Jamie has told me his name is Ben, who had sorted out the GPS tracker tech. It was a bit concerning, but we kept an eye on him and made it safely back, bravely ensuring he was a part of it all on the day. Miles got a lift north up the road to the car, it being then about 8.30pm, before returning to pick me up.

In time-honoured and highly suitable fashion, all then adjourned to the nearest hostelry, the Crask Inn, 3 or 4 miles further south. There we sat, ate and drank, squeezed on to the small pub seats and stools, rubbing shoulders with the team and motley band of walkers, family, friends (some with injuries

but still there, supporting), children, dogs. Miles notes: We were asked several times: "How do you know Jamie?" "We don't, we met her up on Ben Hope."

"Oh, you're THOSE guys!"

Jamie was somewhere on the other side of the room, low key. I was mildly surprised to see her, thinking if it was me I would have collapsed into a stupor by then, regardless the occasion was in her honour. Miles and I, still feeling a little like interlopers, having serendipitously found ourselves involved and made the most of it, were welcomed into the camaraderie and conviviality at the pub. Again I was aware of a woman sitting close to us, familiar or not? No matter.

We left and drove back to the Naismith Hut. Then it came to me in the car. Susie, yes, maybe. I wasn't sure, but was Susie the distant relation, who I had sat next to, together with her husband and sister, at the Wedding of Jane and James in North Berwick in summer 2018? I called the next day and yes, it was her. Susie Allison, hillrunner, and author of 'Scottish Trail Running – 70 Great Runs', published in 2017, with whom I remembered also talking at the Wedding about her and her husband pioneering the new, difficult and suitably madcap it seemed, sport of kite-skiing. For Jamie to have Susie, utterly well-qualified, on board for her Highland challenge, of course made sense. The world is not getting smaller, but sometimes it feels like it.

It turns out Susie, still then recovering from a hernia operation, had accompanied Jamie on quite a few hills, including the Grey Corries and Ben Nevis (on a day when lightning hit and broke a pillar of rock on the Ben, but they had fortunately managed to avoid the worst of the storm without it disrupting the plan too much).

What a day. It lives long in the memory. Thanks to Miles for your (continued) patient hillwalking companionship (more planned for 2026, to compleat your round) and very many congratulations again, to one Ms Jamie Aarons.

Have you ever been to the Fannaichs?

Stuart Mitchell

Despite regularly, sometimes obsessively, tramping the Scottish hills for four decades, my answer to the above question has, until recently, been "No." Although never having been to the Fannaichs, their presence was tattooed into my mind at the very beginning by two characters whom I'll call Davie and Jim, because one of them was called Davie and I'm pretty sure the other one was called Jim.

I was introduced to the Fannaichs in the Kingshouse climber's bar, Hogmanay, 1988. I was fairly new to hillwalking and was with a mixed crowd of people whom I'd met on college hillwalking trips. In the crowded bar we met Davie and Jim from Glasgow. Jim had boyish looks with incredibly bright eyes and was very well spoken. Contrastingly, Davie was lumbering and extremely haggard. Nevertheless, they were hill folk and friendly so after waking up in our orange plastic survival bags in the snow outside, we went for a walk into the Hidden Valley with them. From the outset, Davie would repeatedly enquire, "Have you ever been to the Fannaichs?" This would be followed by a verbally delivered essay on the characteristics of the Fannaichs by Jim. I'd never even heard of the Fannaichs but after a few repetitions I felt like there was no point going, they'd inevitably be a disappointment. Over breakfast in the youth hostel a couple of days later, Davie joined us. Within minutes: "Have you ever been to

the Fannaichs?” Changing tack, I replied, “Aye, I have, aye.” Davie immediately gushed about the ridges of Sgurr nan This or the views from Creag nan That, to which I repeatedly answered, “It was claggy.”

Thus the phrase, “Have you been to the Fannaichs?” became a catch phrase among our little group. Those of our friends who had not been there and had missed out on the Jim and Davie show were not allowed to utter it. It was special, you had to have been there.

Many years passed and I never saw Davie and Jim again, nor had I been to the Fannaichs.

I did have two sorties into the Fannaichs prior to the subject of this article. On another Hogmanay trip a few years later, several of us flogged up Meall a Chrsgaidh in horizontal sleet and reached the summit bent double, occasionally dropping to our hands and knees in the wind. The second exploration was on a JMC meet to The Smiddy in 2004 when a group of us waded over A' Chailleach and Sgurr Breac in knee-deep snow, leaden skies and no visibility. Whether either experience sufficed as having been to the Fannaichs is debatable as nothing was seen and I might have been anywhere.

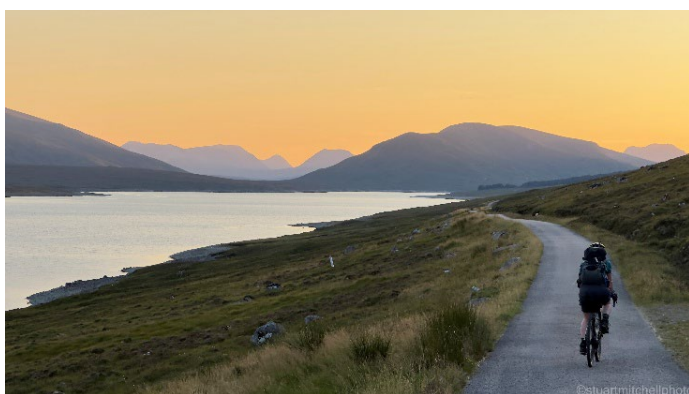
However this year Sally McNaught and I had a fantastic trip to the Fannaichs. I was on an uncharacteristic mission to complete my Munros and as I only had 11 left and six of them were in the Fannaichs, I reckoned that hoovering them up would encourage me to keep it going and actually finish them.

I'd long considered that a horseshoe of the Munros of Sgurr nan Each, Sgurr nan Clach Geala, Sgurr Mor, Meall Gorm and An Coileachan, with an out and back detour to the smaller Beinn Liath Mhor Fanniach would be a magnificent day out. The map shows a fine and long blunt ridge leading up to Sgurr nan Each from where a clockwise high-level traverse would eventually land on An Coileachan, leaving a knee-wrecking slog down a uniform and uncomplicated looking hillside back to the start.



We'd wondered about backpacking and doing a high camp on the col at Clach Mhor na Beuchdaich at around 870m but water was reputedly an issue, and I didn't fancy carrying two days' worth of water. We decided to camp near Fannaich Lodge, and as Sally had already done all of these hills and variants of the round twice before, she was familiar with the long approach and advised taking bikes to save what would otherwise be a very long walk in and out. Our chosen weekend coincided with a heatwave which meant we would be carrying a lot of water anyway.

The ride in on the Friday night started steeply but very quickly eased to a gradual and steady climb. Sally had said the ride back out barely required turning a pedal. This was untrodden ground for me and I felt a tinge of excitement at entering a new part of the Highlands, a rare occurrence now but one which triggers happy nostalgic feelings of early trips when everything was new. The ride along Loch Fannaich was towards a blazing orange sunset over the Fisherfields. The track circumnavigating Fannaich Lodge was too steep to ride but it wasn't an especially onerous push nor was it far to the high point.



We'd originally planned to camp somewhere to the west of the Lodge to minimise our walk in the following morning, but we reasoned that when we came back down the hill at the end of the day we would curse having to walk all the way to the end of the track then have to regain all this height again. The light was also fading so when we saw a flood-flattened area of grass beside a stream we pitched the tent quickly and got into our bags to exclude the rampaging midgies.

The alarm went off at 0500. The midgies were bad enough to dissuade us from brewing coffee or cooking porridge so we had a couple of cinnamon buns, drank as much water as was comfortable and were walking at 0600. We left the tent up, I wasn't really concerned about light fingered types up there. The trail back down to the main track had occasional sunken sections where Argocats or Haaglunds had dug deep into the soft subsoil and even in the parched conditions a degree of tussock hopping was required to avoid wet feet. I was wearing approach shoes which didn't have a waterproof membrane and while I accept that going out into the Scottish hills means getting wet feet, it was going to be a long day, and I didn't want soaked socks this early on.

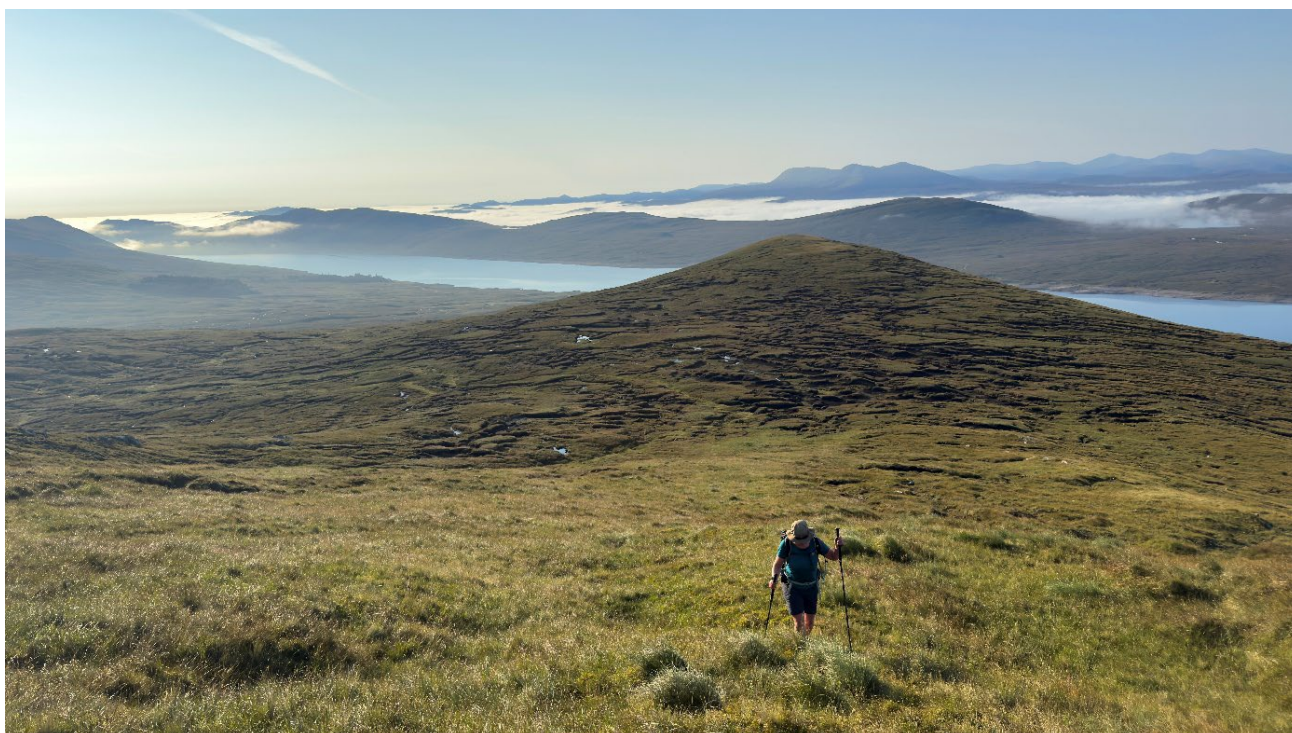


©stuartmitchellphoto

The popularity of Munro bagging generally dictates that once on a definable feature like a ridge or logical line up a hill, a path will have been well worn but we could see no sign of one leading up from what is clearly the optimal line from where the track enters the forestry plantation. Nothing for it but to flog up the heather to the low hummock of Torran Ruadh. Thankfully the ground was baked hard; it was very apparent that its normal state was saturated. We weren't far into the ascent when the sun hit us. The heat was shocking for this early hour, and we knew there would be no shade until we were nearly back at the car. The heat and the weight of our packs dictated a very slow, steady, one step at a time pace while trying never to get out of breath.

Our packs were heavy mainly with water. While I drink relatively little when on the hill, I also have previous in severe dehydration. My usual tactic is to drink a load before setting off, take along what I think will be enough for roughly halfway then get to the end parched but still functional. I'd proposed taking three litres, one of which would be drunk at the tent before leaving. Sally opined that this might be insufficient. Given that it was going to be a long and hot day with potentially no refill opportunities, I caved in and agreed to carry three, with a fourth inside me before we started walking. Carrying this weight of water didn't sit well with me as I love moving lightly and quickly and am of the view that extra food and water is only required to fuel the effort of taking it along. I saved some weight by leaving my usual big camera and took along a relatively small APSC body with a prime lens. I love my photography too much to not take at least something with me on a day like this.

Reaching the top of Torran Ruadh revealed a small drop to an unavoidable area of peat hags before the proper ascent began. Navigating the labyrinthine peat hags saw us zigzagging around and made me further stressed that it was eating up time. Thankfully it was fairly firm and dry but would have been very messy in more average conditions.



Once through the hags, a monotonous steep ascent on grass in the full glare of the rising sun led us to the first significant top, Sgurr a Chadha Dheirg. It was a fine summit but the slog up its steep south ridge had been arduous. It had been oppressively hot and minimising our effort felt critical. We reached the summit two and a half hours after leaving the tent and we hadn't even summited a Munro yet. We both felt that we'd done much more than we actually had, even if it had been an early start and we'd already walked about a third of the horizontal distance and total elevation. There was still a kilometre of hill to ascend but at least it would be spread out over several summits. Because of the heat and our slow pace, gremlins of doubt had troubled me a little on the ascent but now we felt like the hardest part was over and the primary challenge became staying functional in the heat while covering the remaining distance. We had a quick refuel on the top and drank, as much to lighten our loads as to rehydrate. It was at this point I realised I'd set out with 4 litres of water rather than three. I'd even considered pouring some out on the way up the first hill to save weight, but as it happened, we needed every last drop.

Upon leaving the summit, a faint path appeared showing that very few people approached these hills by our route. A drop to a wind scoured saddle, Cadha Dearg Mor, stripped of its vegetation and exposed to rapidly eroding till, gave way to an airy, easy ridgewalk to the first Munro, Sgurr nan Each. One down, four or possibly five to go. As the faint path had appeared after the top, as may be expected a bigger, better-defined path descended from the Munro. Clearly the vast majority of people approach this from the Dundonnell road and do it as an out-and-back, a tactic which involves traversing Sgurr nan Clach Geala twice.

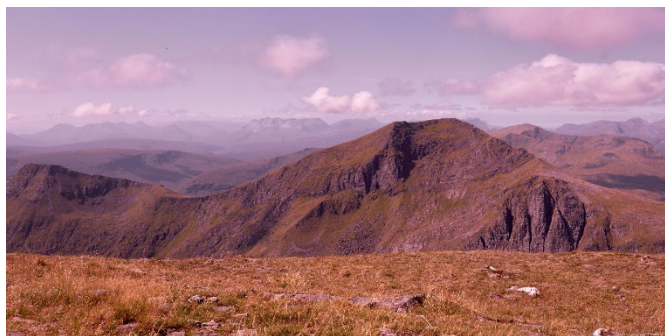


Thanks to the path and a complete absence of wind, the going became much easier and Sgurr nan Clach Geala was soon reached. Although only the second highest of the Fannaichs, it is the jewel in the crown of this range with a complex, steep north face which, under ever decreasing favourable conditions, holds a number of highly rated winter routes. We met two guys from England who were doing the same route as us but in the opposite direction and over two days. They had camped on the col where they reported good availability of water. We still had a couple litres each and didn't feel the need for refilling. The vista was simply stunning with unimpeded views to the Strathcarron hills, Torridon, the Fisherfields and Coigach. Even the lumpy magnificence of Quinag and the wedges of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal were discernible further north. A little haze had formed to the west and north and there was a cloudy greyness building to the south but in general the North-west Highlands were a huge sun trap and we were in the epicentre.

The descent off Sgurr nan Clach Geala was rocky and steep, exposed in a couple of places but with no difficulty. It brought us quickly down to a broad col where a wide trickle of glistening water almost appeared to run along the surface rather than follow a watercourse. We didn't need to refill; I didn't want the extra weight and there was only one strenuous summit to go then the rest would be gentle grass walking which would go easily and quickly despite the still considerable distance. We had a decent rest and ate some food at a curious and exquisitely built dry stone armchair-cum-windbreak and vainly attempted to get some shade.



Sgurr Mor, The Big Yin, loomed ahead. In contrast to the fine ridge of the previous two Munros, the route up appeared to be an ill-defined and very steep boulder field all the way to the top. It looked a right slog. Our packs were a few kgs lighter, but it was still tough going mainly due to the heat. Again, it required slow, deliberate moving so as not to become exhausted. It reminded me of being at altitude unacclimatised. It was also impossible to get a good idea of how far up we were and if I've learned one thing from my years in the hills it's not to be taken in by false summits. I'd noted a couple of boulders as landmarks to gauge how far up we were and clearly my ability to visually estimate vertical progress in this way is lacking; just as I was thinking that we were probably slightly more than half way up, the angle slackened and I was confronted by a large, broch-like cairn and 360 degree views with a particularly good view to Sgurr nan Clach Geala's impressive craggy north face.



By now it was midday. We stopped for a rest, more water and little food. A minuscule breeze could be felt and even although it was hair-dryer warm and made no difference to the temperature it felt as though it was taking the edge off the harshness of the sun. We shared the shady side of the cairn with a man and his small dog who burrowed under my legs and refused to move.

The steep and strenuous over, now all that remained was a not insignificant 10km distance and 250m ascent over two more Munros before the 600m knee-wrecking plunge back to the tent. We were unanimous in our decision to leave Beinn Liath Mor Fannaich for another day. We reasoned that it would be a shame to sully a perfect loop. Additionally, it has to be admitted, Beinn Liath Mor Fannaich is neither a shapely nor inspiring lump, certainly in relation to the rest of its clan, being very much the runt of the Fannaich litter. I had also been considering it as a final Munro as it appeared suitable for any weather, feasible for any of my less fit friends who may join me and also reasonably safe to descend after having rehydrated on the summit with Champagne. But let's not pretend that a desire to get out of the desperate sun didn't influence us, we'd been sweating it out for quite a while now and were feeling weary. We noted that we were both monitoring ourselves and each other for signs of heatstroke, much in the way one does for hypothermia when in desperate winter weather and staying warm enough is marginal. It's something we've both dealt with in southern Europe but it's unusual in Scotland.

The broad ridge ahead descended through the large solifluction terraces this corner of the highlands are known for, the Fannaichs particularly so. The terraces are created by a combination of freeze-thaw cycles, water logging and wind, and many of them were high enough to require a little zigzagging to find an easy way down. It wasn't particularly onerous, but it did add unwanted effort to what we'd anticipated as being a simple grassy stroll. We passed the penultimate Munro of Meall Gorm with its remarkable overlapping slab summit. We didn't notice any trace of the old stalkers shelter, although reports suggest it collapsed during the 1990s. Jelly babies got us to An Coileachan, the final Munro, with some weary panting up a trackless boulder field, something we could have done without at that point. It is difficult to describe the feeling of satisfaction he had looking back, where we could see every summit we'd crossed that day.



After a reasonable rest on the rocky summit, we turned downhill. The descent was very direct, trackless, steep and was thankfully unfeared with no cliffs, bluffs, gullies or anything to micro-navigate our way around. We hadn't gone far from the summit when we could see the tent and the bikes. It was largely painless and even the anticipated bog-flog at the end wasn't overly squelchy.

When we got to the tent the first thing I did was to stick my head in the stream. Sally simply just sat in it and didn't move for about five minutes. After we'd drunk our bodyweight in water, we dismantled the tent, packed the bikes and were on our way by 1600hrs. The estate road out was heaven, almost all downhill and just steep enough that no pedalling was required but not steep enough to require braking. Because I'm heavier, I tend to roll downhill faster than Sally so I stopped to wait for her. The moment I stopped I became aware of the insane heat. This was like being in Spain. We arrived at the car, changed into less disgusting clothes and cranked up the aircon. The pleasure of fatigue, aching muscles, grimy eyes, sweat and suncream ingrained skin was made all the sweeter by the knowledge that nearly 40 years later, I could now honestly say, "Yes, I have been to the Fannaichs!"



Journeying through the Karkonosze Mountains

Catherine Jones

The Karkonosze Mountains run along the Polish - Czech border. This was a holiday planned in the 2 weeks before we went: Chris broke his hip falling off his bike at Ballencrief roundabout in late March. By August he was sufficiently recovered to do some sort of walking holiday, but not of the back-packing with tent, stove and food for multiple nights variety. With some initial internet exploration we found there were cheap flights to Wrocław, and with more internet exploration we found out about the Karkonosze mountains. The mountains are low by European standards (highest is 1603 m) and rounded, but have a network of huts and the highest mountain in Czechia.

We started in Swieradow-Zdroj, getting there from Wrocław by train and rail replacement bus. Getting to the start was an experience, having had to go to three different ticket desks in Wrocław railway station to buy a ticket followed by successful navigation of the rail replacement bus system despite all railway staff only speaking Polish and our Polish limited to numbers up to 10 and Dzien Dobry.* We set off up the hill to reach the first hut, which was beside a cable car station where builders were working all hours building a giant helter-skelter slide from the top of the cable car station building, (this is genuinely what they were building).

However, we nearly didn't get dinner or a beer or indeed our room. The accommodation was closer to being a hotel than a hut, and the "warden" was about to head off down the hill: "we emailed you the code to your room". This would have been ok, except I couldn't access my email. After a conversation (mostly in German: this seemed to be a better option than English for communication in the hills) we successfully got dinner (dumplings), beer and access to the room. Next day we set out for Hala Szrenica, just below the summit of Szrenica. Most of the day we walked through woods, deciduous and pine. We saw an adder and there were a lot of bilberries. We saw the locals going bilberry picking with giant comb type contraptions to strip the bush. Hut 2, Hala Szrenica was a more run-of-the-mill hut, but came with hot water and showers (for free). It also had a very large hut cat sporting a bowtie.

Next morning we set off for the Akedmicka hut below Sniezka, which is the highest mountain in Czechia at 1603 m. We were above the tree line and the landscape (rounded tops, rocky outcrops) was somewhere between the Cairngorms and the English Peak District. Not far into the day's walk, we entered the Karkonosze National Park. We were aware we needed to pay an entry fee, but had no idea how to pay. The answer for those who walk in on a path sort of via the "backdoor" (like we did) is to scan a QR code on a sign. (We later saw that if you walked up from Karpacz, there was a small toll booth by the path).

The Akademia hut sits just above a corrie and the communal areas look like it has not changed in about 100 years. However, it was exceptionally friendly. From there it was a short walk up the next morning over Sniezka. We had tried and failed to book to stay in Hala Sniezka just below the top of Sniezka (it was full), but on going in to collect the hut stamp we were glad we had stayed at Akademia. The Sniezka hut was super busy and noisy.

Unsurprisingly as the highest mountain in Czechia, the top of Sniezka is rather crowded with people, plus a church, observatory and a snack bar. There is a cable car on the Czech side which stops just short of the summit. To manage the crowds at the top, there is a one-way system enforced on the path to the summit. From Sniezka we walked down over the rocky plateau, then through shrubby "larchen", and then back down into the woods to the Okraj pass. They sell two types of beer at the Okraj pass hut, Polish and Czech. It was strongly suggested we drink the Polish beer (don't tell the

Poles, but the Czech beer was better). We stayed overnight at the hut and went for a walk into the village of Mala Upa in Czechia for the afternoon.

From the Okraj Pass we walked to Karpacz via what had been the “biggest uranium mine in Poland” (closed in 1958). It’s now a museum. Choice of tours available: tourist, extreme and cave diving. We emailed in advance to ask about an English-language “tourist” trip: they were very happy to do this for us. If you do the Polish tour it’s groups of 40. English language tour: group of 2, some very colourful language and high levels of sarcasm. We then walked round to Karpacz. Karpacz is as you would expect for a ski-mountain-resort type place (the Polish Aviemore).

Our final day of walking was down through the trees to Jelenia Gora. This was surprisingly pleasant, almost all along paths (very little on roads), and passed through some very pretty countryside. A highlight was going over Witsosa which was a rocky outcrop with caves! We had time to look around Wrocław on our way home. Should you ever find yourself there, the Raclowice panorama is worth a visit. And we flew back to Edinburgh with all hips still intact!

Useful links: Polish maps: <https://mapa-turystyczna.pl/>

*Good Morning!



Telecoms station at Snezne



Chris on Skanly Skoł with top of Sniezka and ridge we walked along in the background



Once you go Black, you may want to go back

Martin Bagshaw

In October 2024, I had the pleasure of spending five days climbing in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, a deep river gorge section of the Gunnison River in western Colorado, and a fine adventurous climbing destination.

Also known as 'The Black', this is a place that has been on my radar for quite a few years. I remember seeing either a UKC article from their former poster boy, Jack Geldard, or a Rockfax topo of the most well-known route there, 'The Scenic Cruise.' Featuring towering, complex cliffs, many of which are possibly just the right size and difficulty to scale in a day without resorting to aid climbing and hauling faff, 'The Black' also lacks the crowds of better known American climbing honeypots. With a couple of days of great weather, and three that threatened biblical rain, trip ambitions were curtailed somewhat, leaving me wanting more! In summary, I wanna go back!



The Black Canyon of the Gunnison on a 'bluebird day.'

A Jacobite team, and Local Hospitality

I am privileged to have had my good pal Mr. Michael 'Big Balls' Barnard join me for this trip, which included a nice jaunt around the Utah desert afterwards, which was also the bollocks. Anyways, the moniker I have assigned to Michael originated from Jacobites president of yesteryear (Ed: he was never president, he only acted like he was) and acquired taste, Ian Jones who I understand once dished out this title in an ironic sense to Robert Durrant, Scotland's strongest E2 (or is that E1) leader, so I hear. As an individual who picks off the odd E4 but doesn't bother with anything resembling

training (as far as I know), my application to Michael is far from ironic. Anyways, I figured I can lead the burly crack pitches, while Michael can lead the bold scary pitches, a mutually beneficial partnership.

The other component that made the trip way more civilised than your standard American 'dirtbaggin' affair was the base we had at my Aunt Susan and Uncle Dave's place in Palisade, a couple of hours from the Black. Michael and I enjoyed some fine Colorado hospitality, being treated to a hearty meal and Margarita or two every time we dropped back into Palisade. We also enjoyed some lively conversation, with Dave educating us on the intricacies of elk hunting, and Susan engaging on just about any topic under the sun. 'She's always been that way, jibber jabber', as my grandma once remarked.



My Aunt Susan, feeling the Halloween spirit (and caffeine), while 'Triple B' looks on

Almost Missing the Boat

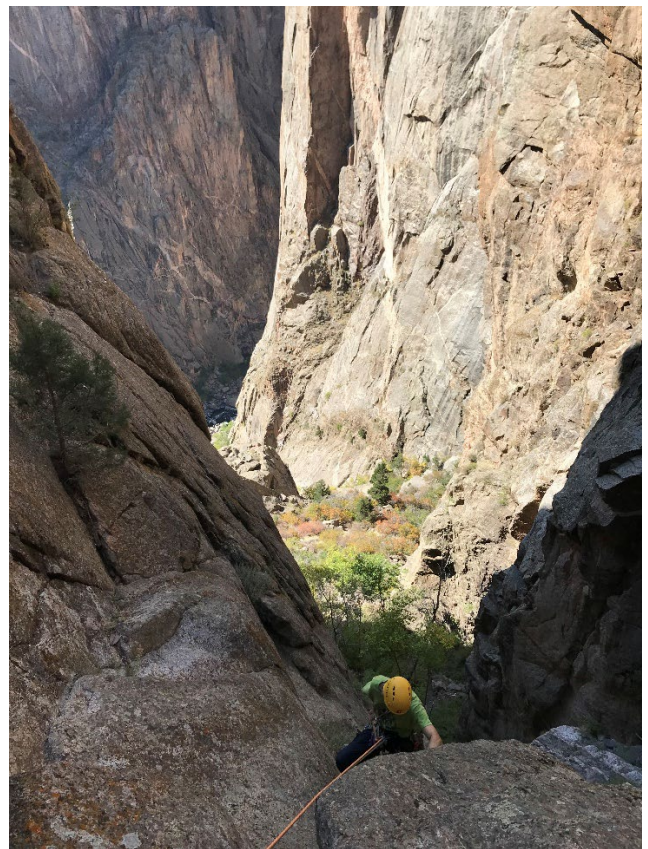
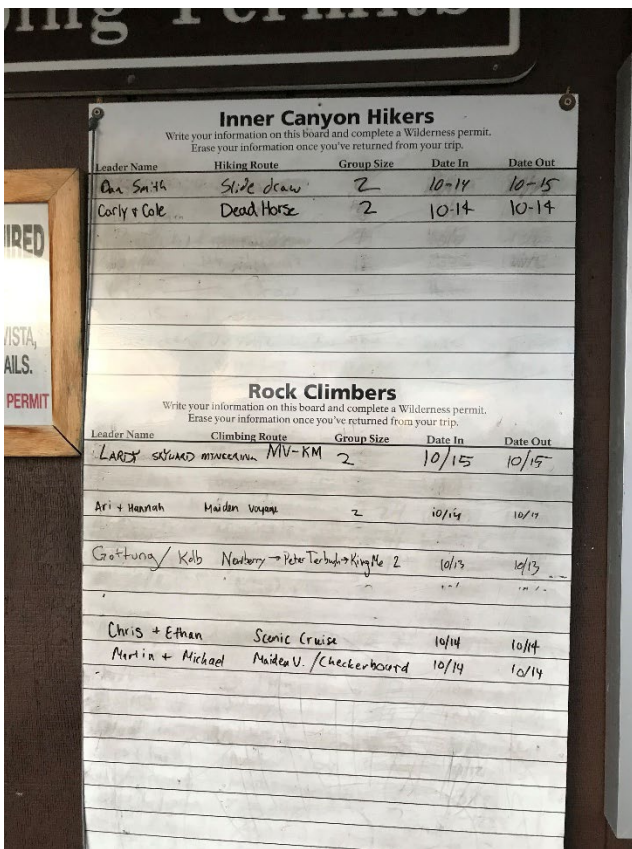
We arrived at the Black late morning, with a view to either do the recommended introductory route, 'Maiden Voyage', a four to five pitch 5.9 - one that (should) translate to maybe about HVS in British money. Either that, or the harder five pitch 'Checkerboard Wall', which is right next to it.

Getting to the start of routes in the canyon involves often long, steep, and loose scrambles down gullies to the start of routes, with constant use of your best judgement to deduce where the best line goes and taking care to avoid the poison ivy. As we headed down our fork, evidence of a well trodden path seemed to be dying, and the terrain steepened to cliff out in places. The feeling we were

squandering precious daylight hours rapidly crept in. I called out to a team who were a couple of pitches up on Maiden Voyage but they couldn't seem to offer much advice. Damn. We might not actually get anything done on this perfect weather day. Are we condemned to commit to the 'Walk of Shame' - the long, slow trudge out of the Cruise gully? (a humorous write up of this 'route' can be found here:

<https://www.mountainproject.com/route/105761328/walk-of-shame>).

Just as we were beginning to give up hope, we turned a corner to find an in situ abseil anchor (your standard American two bolt rap ring setup does not exist in the 'Black', making the prospect of a big route much more committing). Someone else had made the same mistake as us before. We gratefully abseiled down to the start of the route.



The noticeboard at the ranger station, (which had been unmanned since the end of August). You are meant to write your name, route and date here so you/your corpse can be retrieved at some point in the future, should things go awfully wrong

Michael enjoying the merciful abseil of destiny, that saved our first day, getting us to the base of 'Maiden Voyage.'

We whipped up 'Maiden Voyage' fairly quickly, which was a bit of a relief given 5.9 can mean something between HVS and E3 in my experience climbing in America so far. The crux on one of Michael's pitches was quite short lived, and the route had good quality rock throughout. The first pitch had a slight Lakeland feel to it; a bit lichenous, a touch bold, crimpy, with far more nuts than cams. Towards the top, we caught up with the all-female party ahead of us (whom I had called out to earlier in search of directions), also on their first route and first trip to the Black.

The Biggun

Looking once more at forecast that first evening, we could see that tomorrow was going to be the best day of the lot. Not feeling emboldened enough to commit to the dream route, The Scenic Cruise, (also having descended the approach gully the wrong way in the light that morning – and we would need to go the right way in the dark) we agreed on a lesser objective: 'Cloaked Interpretation.'

Cloaked Interpretation is a combination of 'Cloak and Dagger' and 'Modern Day Migs,' taking the longest line up this section of cliff at around three hundred metres, and highly regarded from what folks on the interwebs had to say. This would also turn out to be our longest day out of the trip starting the approach down the 'S.O.B. Gully' as it was getting light (in spite of the name, this gully turned out to be the most pleasant descent of the lot) and getting back to camp in the dark.



'Cloaked Interpretation' topo, freely available from American climber, Steph Abegg's website. We relied upon these topos, and an old guidebook (published 2000), borrowed from my friend Dave, as the latest guidebook is not available in the UK

Michael on the crux corner pitch (5.10+)

The highlight pitch of the route was undoubtedly the 5.10+ corner pitch, which Michael led, proclaiming it to be E2, though I found it to definitely be harder than that. Curiously, the final two apparent 5.11 pitches felt a fair bit easier, perhaps HVS/E1 and E2 respectively, face followed by hand crack pitch. We also experienced our first hint of weather instability – myself getting cooked

while belaying Michael, then the sudden appearance of dark threatening clouds and what felt like a drop or two when I led the final difficult pitch. An alpine type ridge scramble led to the top, followed by an abseil off into a gully, and scramble to the top, campsite, dinner and wine. The route had a little bit of everything!



Myself on a 'Yosemite style' smeary undercut roof and corner pitch immediately after Michael's crux corner pitch... ...then hastily moving up the final tricky pitch under threatening skies.

The Adversity Tick

I think I enjoyed the following day's route the most out of what we climbed in the Black. The enjoyment was possibly similar to the type of enjoyment I would imagine folks who climb big peaks get however - retrospective.

On the short walk back to camp, we chatted to a friendly fellow at a neighbouring site, who turned out to be a guide. He mentioned he was set to take a British woman up the classic 5.9, 'Russian Arete' later in the week, but may have to tone down ambitions given the deteriorating forecast. Feeling quite contented with our day as we drank, ate, and listened to music on the Bluetooth speaker, we decided to heed the guide's advice, and go in for a half day route - or so we thought. The decision was made to go to 'Checkerboard Wall', a five pitch 5.10+ that looked like it might fit the bill.

The day was going rather smoothly until we got to the start of the route, for we certainly knew which way not to go now! Locating the starting ramp proved a little tricky, but after a couple of discussions about there 'not being chalk there', and 'we saw a party on it on Monday', combined with a topo inspection and trip around the corner, we were soon put right. We each led an introductory pitch up

a right leaning ramp system, and arrived in a corner. Michael led off to the right, around an arete, and out of view. I soon heard reports of it being quite bold, with only a single peg to protect, and a bit of back and forth was eventually followed by retreat to the belay. My turn to see what all the fuss was about. The climbing was indeed a bit bold and thin beyond the peg, but it was tempered by the totem cams I had on my harness, something I had been offering out to Michael all trip, but he had refused to make use of this fancy new technology! One of the Camalots I placed wiggled and fell out while I was doing my best to stay on, whereas both the totems stayed put in their awkward and slightly flared placements. Slowly, I managed to inch my way up this remarkably thin pitch to the belay spike for the crux pitch we had previously agreed I would lead, in a commanding position in the middle of the wall. Beware of 5.9, kids!



*It's called 'Checkerboard Wall' for a reason!
Better conditions than we had on our ascent*

A short debrief and flaking of the ropes later, I was off on the next pitch, starting with a slightly bold vertical section into a strenuous corner, but with better gear. As with the previous day, the blue skies were fading away again, adding to the sense of urgency to get up the damn route in case the heavens opened on us. A few minutes later, though probably more (it can be hard to judge time on the lead), I made it to the semi hanging belay, where I was about to spend an eternity.

I had felt a few drops while on the lead, and there were more as Michael seconded, but nothing to stop us in our tracks (yet). The sky was getting more menacing, and gusts were getting more frequent. We could see which way the clouds were moving, but the enclosed nature of the canyon walls meant that the furthest visible clouds were over our heads only a couple of minutes later. After the usual belay faff, exacerbated by the fact it was hanging, Michael set off, and so did the drizzle. A few metres later, it intensified to full on rain, the rock was sodden, and he lowered to the belay. We both put on whatever layers we had with us (obviously not enough), and hunkered down to retain warmth. We had a drink and a snack, swore a fair bit, and pondered what to do. FFS, are we really going to have to leave a bunch of rack, march up a slippery gully, and how and when are we going to retrieve the gear we need for the rest of the trip?

We opted to stick out the shower, and it eventually stopped. A slight breeze picked up, and eventually a few rays of sunlight shone through. The rock was drying! A few minutes later, Michael headed off on the final pitch, which went up to, and traversed under a roof to a weakening, then up to the top. Unfortunately, he misread the location of the weakening the first time around and took a reasonable tumble, but was fine. Second time was the charm, and a while later I was finally liberated from the hanging belay purgatory of my life. It felt like three damn hours I was there. Take me back to the Shelterstone with its spongy terraces! It was dry and calm for the rest of the day, but I felt like this was the death knell for grander ambitions at this venue for the trip. The boat had been pushed out only slightly, but rocked a bit much for comfort.

Laurel Resting / Excuses

Over the next couple of days, we took it easier, climbing a couple of three and four pitch 5.10- routes (both about E1). We got rained on on one, but nowhere near as badly as on 'Checkerboard Wall'. The weather was gradually getting colder and more wintery, something which doesn't really inspire the prospect of long and hard routes to this southern fairy (of course Michael has no such excuse!) Although the sky did have a habit of looking particularly foreboding, the weather never crapped out for more than a few minutes at a time, though heavy raindrops make rock quite wet in that timeframe.

All in all, the trip made a great introduction to the Black, which felt like a real backwater compared to the many other American climbing destinations I have been to. I suspect we got there at the tail end of the season, though I also suspect the lack of fixed anchors, arduous approaches, and difficulty in getting a decent photograph of the place keeps the crowds at bay as well. I'm now viewing this as a reconnaissance mission, which means I've gotta go back.



Sun probably rising on the canyon, but setting for the purposes of this article.

Postscript (October 2025): As the now chastened TV personality Keith Lemon would put it, Michael has 'smashed the backdoors' off the climbing since I first drafted this article a year ago, having now onsighted 7a and flashed 7b on the bolts, and put himself on more E4s than any year previously. Maybe he is now 'Quadruple B', the fourth 'B' standing for 'Burly.'

Marmolada South Face

Martin Bagshaw

Since I have lived in Scotland, I have got to know far more people who go in for climbing truly big things than I ever encountered while living down south. Often this has meant the 'classic' big things covered with snow, ice, crevasses, rockfall, and other assorted miseries, but sometimes this has meant big rockfaces too. In September this year, I'd like to think I finally joined that club.

The day my friend Dave and I had on the Marmolada in the Italian Dolomites was my longest yet, and by quite a margin. Back in 2016, I had a 12-hour day enchainning 'Royal Arches' and 'Crest Jewell' in Yosemite valley, but this blew that out of the water, with harder route finding, more sustained terrain, and contrary to the guidebook claims, a lot of loose rock. This was topped by a very long glaciated descent, no abseil piste like I benefitted from in Yosemite. The route we picked was described in the guidebook as 800 metres long, with 30 pitches. Climbing in one push, my friend Dave and I were awake for approximately 27 - 28 hours. Unlike Mr. Moran and co. we foolishly did not bivi. Those piddly looking finishing chimneys go on forever, trust me!



Our route. Photo nicked from the Martin Moran Foundation website

History of the route

The route we climbed is imaginatively called 'Vinatzer - Castiglioni' and was first ascended in 1936 by two guys called Vinatzer and Castiglioni, believe it or not. When trying to find out more about the route and first ascensionists, I came across a blog post from the Martin Moran Foundation, in which his daughter, Hazel Moran pieces together notes of his and his friend Ian's ascent. The blog post said

that 'Vinatzer Castiglioni' is widely considered the hardest prewar climb in the Dolomites, also mentioning that after completing the route, the 23 year old local guide, Hans Vinatzer gave up climbing, living to the ripe old age of 81. I would almost certainly quit while I was ahead too if I were him, with the gear of the day. The blog post can be found here:

<https://www.martinmoranfoundation.co.uk/post/marmalisedonthemarmolada>

In 1969, as he allegedly had no one to climb with that day, Reinhold Messner soloed a more direct variation of the Vinatzer, and gave it another creative name, the 'Messner Direct'. And I thought we was just some guy who did Everest without oxygen. Totally bonkers. I understand this variation is more commonly followed today, and for good reason as we found out.

Formulation of a plan

Owing to lingering cycle crash injuries sustained in May this year hasn't been my most performant on the rock. Prior to the trip, I had been out a couple of weekends in a row in an effort to get the ball rolling, but it is fair to say that Dave was going worse than me. It turns out that procreating reduces one's free time for climbing, having had his first child last October. Who would have thought? Anyway, Dave's employer provides a whopping ten weeks paternity leave, and he somehow got a pass to spend two of those weeks in the Dolomites. The first week was climbing with his friend Henry who resides in Switzerland, and the second one with me. I made sure to thank his wife Lily on our return.



Thank you Lily for letting Dave come out and play

To coordinate on gear and logistics, and test the fitness water (or lack thereof), Dave and I met up for a single after work indoor session at Ratho. It soon became clear our rather grand ambitions to have a go at 'Brandler-Hasse' on the Tres Cime were significantly out of touch with reality, and routes of more middle grades would be the order of the day. The south face of the Marmolada had been on our respective radars for years, a huge cliff and we ought to climb it if we are there. Picking a route on it became a priority, but which one? I think we were both more interested in a different route to the obvious classic 'Don Quixote', plus, if we went in for 'Vinatzer Castiglioni', we could then finish up the 'Messner Direct'. Two routes for the price of one.

Gear, logistics, and preparation

After a token sample of 'cultural shit' which is always nice to include in a climbing trip (I had a wander around Venice the morning I arrived), I drove out to meet Dave on Saturday evening. We did a short (for the Dolomites) warmup climb on Sunday morning, then headed to the base of the Marmolada that evening. We knew that early week would be our best weather window for a big route before I arrived, with weather forecast deteriorating Tuesday afternoon, Wednesday a write off, and it looking unsettled thereafter. Good to get the big one out of the way first I suppose.



The Grand Canal in Venice



'Finlandia', our warmup route

Dave has climbed a reasonable amount of long and serious routes in the past, so I was happy to take his lead on what to haul up this one, and strategy to an extent. Unfortunately this included both of us definitely bringing a backpack, which I hate if the climbing is anything more than easy. Unfortunately again, I saw that this was a necessity. We each needed to carry a full day's worth of food, water, warm(ish) clothing, an axe and microspikes to cross the glacier, too great a load to fit into one bag and swap at belays. Perhaps the most unfortunate strategy requirement was the demand to get up closer to my usual bedtime. I think we settled upon 2.15am with a view to start climbing around 3.30am. Excruciating. Well, I wasn't going to argue; it is probably worth stacking the odds in our favour as much as we can, that way we are more likely to make the last cable car down at 4.30pm, which would save us a hell of a lot of walking.

From the car, we slogged up to the hanging valley underneath the south face of the Marmolada (naturally downplayed by our Rockfax guidebook) to the 'plan b' bivi cave, which would be our home for the night. The ideally located Refugio de Falier seemed to be unable to respond to emails or phone calls. I later found out that the custodian's English is about as good as my Italian which could explain why. After a dinner of quick cook pasta, Dave shot right off to sleep. I got dripped on a bit in my spot, but the main problem was the snoring. In this discipline, Dave could give any of the Jacobites a run for their money and would make a fine addition to the Inver snoring choir. I moved my sleeping bag once, twice, thrice, each time further from the cave to get out of range. I got some sleep that night, but nowhere near enough for what was about to come.



Looking back down the valley



Our luxury accommodation for the night

The Big Day

When Dave's alarm went off, I obviously did my best to ignore it, dozing for a while, totally knackered. Dave: "Are you sure you are up to this?" Me: "Er yeah I suppose. I guess it's now or never. Just let me shut my eyes a little while longer". Dave dutifully made coffee, and I forced some sustenance in the form of fruit and granola into me. We packed bags, covered the bivi gear and cookware, and trudged to the base of the cliff.

Dave led the first pitch, which was both awkward and really quite hard, climbing diagonally up and out of an overhanging cleft via some back and footing, into a loose feeling and steep chimney. Bags and protruding ice axes scraped and caught on the rock, on ongoing theme for the day. On my first pitch, the obvious line went up a blank looking corner, surely way too hard for the reported grade. I traversed off right, seeing a two bolt anchor just a few metres across, with an open groove beyond it, maybe it goes up there? Just before the anchor, I pulled off a decent sized block (maybe a couple of foot wide). I fortunately did not go with it, nor did it land on Dave or the party below who were arriving. 'Ok then, I guess it's not that way' I thought to myself. 'Best pull my socks up and get up that corner.'

After the first 4 pitches, we were free of the initial awkward chimneys, and the rock quality improved. With dawn arriving we could see more of the route, and the sense of peril eased, but the sense of urgency did not. As soon as one pitch was done, a quick comparison of reality to the topo and exchange of gear was made, then we were off on the next pitch, and the next pitch, and the next pitch. No time wasted the magnitude of the task ahead of us was too great.



Dawn arriving, about four pitches up



Dave on the fifth pitch

Pleasant company

After I had led the sixth pitch and technical crux (I took a while to Dave's annoyance), the party below caught up, and we took turns chatting at the belays until we reached the midway ledge. They were a German couple, studying in Innsbruck, and clearly both much better at climbing than us, leading as fast as we could second on some pitches. They were not pushing to get past which was nice, a situation which can commonly get unpleasant on long routes, though I suppose we weren't going miles slower than them. I learnt from the woman that 'Don Quixote' is the recommended route to do first on the Marmolada (as I suspected). We expressed similar thoughts on Messner being a psychopath to have soloed this route over 50 years ago, and the limited usefulness of photo topos vs hand drawn diagrams on huge cliffs.

When we got to the 'midway' ledge at around 2pm and after something like 17 pitches, we took a well-deserved break for all of about 10 minutes and ate some lunch consisting of cheese, meat, veg, and haribo. The ledge was littered with bivouac detritus space blankets, mats, old bottles, etc. The water source (as promised by the guidebook), inevitably amounted to a couple of vague trickles, as could probably be expected by late summer. We bid farewell to the Germans, who shuffled across the ledge to the harder 'Messner finish' and promptly shot off.



The midway ledge, featuring ze Germans

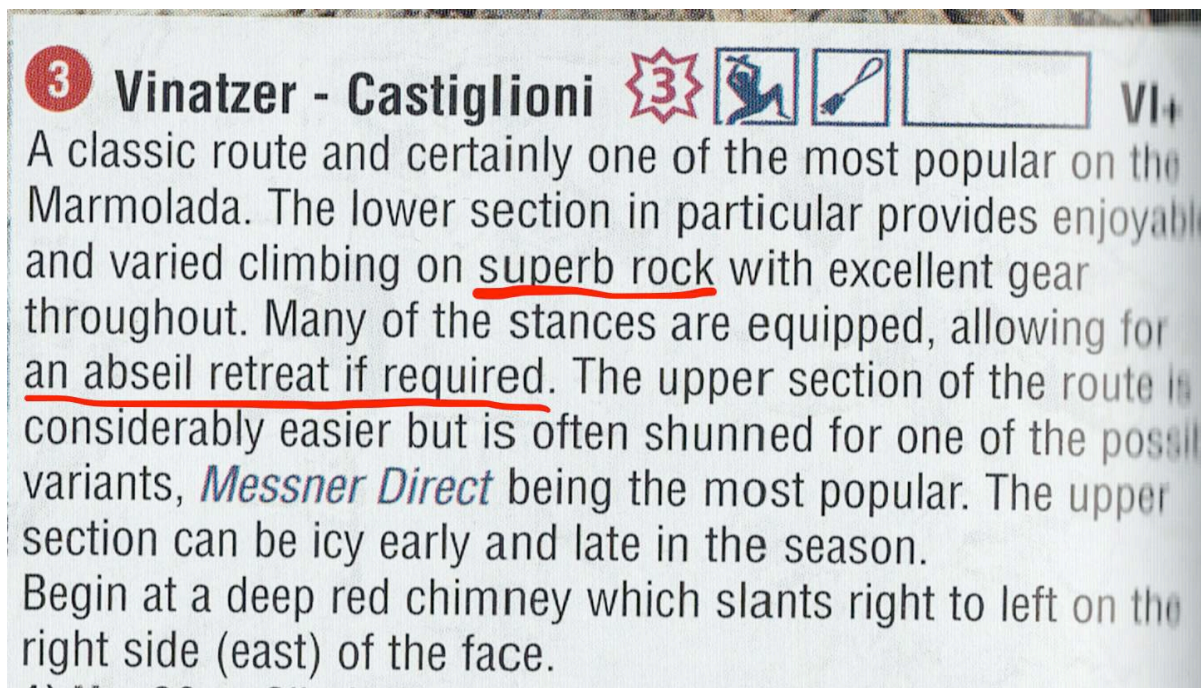
Storming ahead

From the ledge, our finish romped up an easy angled groove to the right of the German team, at probably severe to offer a UK grade. I got a bit puffed with the increased pace. 'Punta Rocca,' the part of the Marmolada we would top out at is at 3,309 metres, and I had been at sea level just a couple of days previously, whereas Dave was benefitting from a week in the mountains. I cockily began to entertain the thought that maybe we could make the final cable car down for a short while. Maybe we can cruise the next pitches of IV / V+ (maybe VS - E1) in a similar fashion to what we are doing now though 4.30pm would still be quite a tight deadline.

After passing the dogleg at the end of the easy gully and climbing a gentle subsequent pitch to the base of the exit chimney, our rapid upward progress slowed significantly. The climbing steepened, got looser, and became wetter. It looked like we still had quite a long way to go, with nothing resembling the top in sight. Hopes of making that last cable car soon evaporated.

Feeling frazzled

The next stage of the route is best described as the psychological crux. Earlier in the day, Dave reported chimneys to be his favourite thing to climb. I, on the other hand, had been up enough of them with my damn bag on to last several years, so offered to lead the next two pitches. A sometimes overlooked yet obvious issue with climbing loose chimneys is that the loose bits fall out of them and get funnelled in the direction of your belayer. I spent the next couple of hours hunkered down while the occasional rock flew close to my head, and Dave negotiated the suspect terrain in now dwindling light as best he could.



Standard misleading Rockfax nonsense. A retreat would involve endless abseils through loose chimneys and one very horizontal abseil (more like a downclimb) across a face.

After two pitches Dave's nerves were frayed, and now it was time for mine to get frayed too. There was just about enough light to get up one more pitch without headtorches, but we were now presented with two options for which way to go. Given the gravity of the situation, I started up the easier looking option, following the deepest part of the chimney. As I got to a steepening, the rock all acquired a

loose feel. A bit of rock broke and I backed off. "I think I am a bit chimneyed out actually", I announced. Moving back to the belay, the harder option involved a steep and bold start up the left wall to reach a groove with a couple of pegs. These marked a way up, then eventually back right to join the main line. I bouldered up and down a bit at the start and came back to the belay. There was a lunge to reach the ledge, and the consequences of falling off and breaking something here would not be good at all. Dave suggested I employ some Victorian tactics and stand on him to get past the start, so wanting to get on with my day, I did just that. I then apparently had a sense of humour failure as I teetered around on this ledge, brushing off a mixture of mud and rock in the hope a solid crack for protection might materialise. In the end I got a couple of pieces of gear out right, tested the rock (a bit but not too much), and convinced myself to delicately press on, as we had to get up this thing somehow. Hmm maybe we should try that slope off to our left, it must go up there. Over to you, Dave! A little while later, we topped out to a tidal wave of relief.

The rock improved, and after 20 metres or so I could get back onto the main line, which now looked a little more solid. Darkness descended, and the route just kept on going. Though the steepness was decreasing, the route continued to look and feel loose, the seriousness exacerbated by the dark and our weariness. We wondered if we had gone the wrong way; the description mentioned a left fork, but the picture showed the route going up a chimney which broadens and eventually leads off left. Where could have we gone wrong? The terrain gave way to easier angled, but still steep scree covered slopes on either side. The pitch I was leading ended up at a cliff; no mention of this in the description. Up and left looked like it might go, but I was spent, worn down by loose rock, and being on the go all day. I hunted around to get an adequate belay and brought Dave up. We had a discussion of what to do. Do we have enough clothes to spend the night out? Probably not. Shall we call mountain rescue? (Dave later mentioned he had forgotten to purchase insurance for the trip!) Hmm maybe we should try that slope off to our left, it must go up there. Over to you, Dave! A little while later, we topped out to a tidal wave of relief.



Not the top of the route, but close enough. A nighttime cloud inversion on the way down.

The Endless Trudge

For much of the final slog back down the mountain to the car, I was a sheep following a shepherd called Dave. The guidebook of course did not mention much about the descent beyond go down the glacier or get the cable car down. We found an abseil and traversed the ridge line to the cable car station, meeting the glacier just before it. We stopped and put on our microspikes, took out an axe, and roped up. We found that here and at another section further down, we had to traverse around large areas of white plastic sheeting, a measure apparently carried out by the local ski areas to slow melting of the glacier and protect their business. This 2024 article in the Guardian mentions surface area equivalent to 98 football fields have been lost from the Marmolada glacier in the previous 5 years, and that it could be no more by 2040.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/sep/10/italysmarmoladaglaciercould-disappearby2040expertssay>



The Marmolada Glacier from the Lagazuoi Piccolo to the north-east. Photo taken a couple of days later, while wandering around some WW1 trenches. More 'cultural shit'.

Anyway, we soon found the snow ramp 'highway' down the glacier, then picked our way down to horrible loose and endless gravel switchbacks through a ski area which led to the road, occasionally slipping over on the way, and wishing we had walking poles. As we came down to the road level we went through the cloud inversion we had been perched above. It was a lovely night, but I was totally brain dead. After reaching the road, a comparatively leisurely 7 mile walk back to the car remained.

When I wasn't walking with my eyes closed (too tired to keep them open), I was beginning to imagine faces and characters in the shadows of the trees.

Postscript

Well done if you made it this far. The slog of reading my account of the route is reflective of my experience climbing it, though I would like to think your eyes are still open at this stage. On reflection, I'm not sure what I learnt from the experience that I didn't already know. Dave and I have underestimated routes before, and that will almost certainly happen again, it's just part of the fun. I also know too well that Rockfax topos for big routes in foreign countries can be very good at providing adventure through economy of information, and that attempting to sleep near snorers impacts on next day energy levels. Despite making it sound like an ordeal, I was having fun most of the time, in a pressured sort of way, honest... One thing is for certain it was a day that I won't be forgetting in a hurry.

Wadi Rum

Michael Barnard

It was third time lucky for us. Firstly, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, then the Middle East kicking off again, as it is prone to do. We arrived in Amman in the early hours of a rather warm November morning, eventually locating the taxi driver and so beginning a pleasant four hours of broken slumber punctuated by the need to stop and savour the last good coffee we would likely get for a couple of weeks.

Martin, Stuart and I were first timers. At the other end of the Jordanian experience scale, our companion and Rum veteran Robert Durran was apparently on his tenth trip to the area (!) but had also been suffering from sore joints and would be restricting his activity based on how he was feeling on the day. On the plus side, having a total knee replacement booked in for a week after returning to Scotland would give him the perfect excuse for struggling on awkward cruxes.

On arrival in Rum village we met our host Hamdan, dumped our stuff in the relevant modern Bedouin tent and collapsed. After a day of book reading and dozing off we took a short walk to try and work up an appetite for dinner, and quickly realised we would have to up our game. At Hamdan's, the lack of variety in the no nonsense chicken and rice platters is very much made up for in quantity; I immediately gave it up as a lost cause, though I recall Stuart made a valiant attempt, if one ultimately doomed to failure. Fortunately, we all liked chicken and rice.



The Team, L-R: Stuart, Robert, Hamdan, Martin and the Author.

There had been a little discussion of potential routes to try prior to the trip. As it was our first trip to the area, Martin, Stuart and I were happy to prioritise quality over adventure and get down to ticking off the 'best' or most classic routes. As trip Alpinist, Stuart had proposed tackling the lofty-sounding The Pillar of Wisdom, a long route up Jebel Rum with a tricky descent. As crag rats, Martin and I were unconvinced. Wisdom is of course gained through experience, something which in the case of this route often seems to take the form of an unplanned bivouac, and so perhaps the wise decision was to remain ignorant? We would put it on the back burner (and then try to think of other routes to suggest instead).

After a leisurely start the next morning, Martin and Stuart went off on a Flight of Fancy, though I believe air time was avoided. I had tweaked my back the day before the trip and so joined Robert exploring a Bedouin trail in the local mountains. A lot of the interest in these routes is in the route finding – analysing which cairns to follow and trying to envisage where it might go next. Good fun though, and with my back feeling good I was keen to join the others the next day for some real climbing.

Rucksacks crammed into the ubiquitous Toyota Hilux, we began our first journey into the desert with our sights set on Barrah Canyon, an impressive defile, perhaps a few hundred metres wide and full of interesting rock features on either side. Many of the cliffs have the appearance of candle wax, reminiscent of limestone formation but in such an arid area almost entirely wind-sculpted. We dumped our kit and set off towards Merlin's Wand, a continuous vertical crack-line and a popular target. The

first pitch is nicely sustained and at E1/2 the route would give us a good introduction to Rum sandstone. Robert brought his book up and on reaching the spacious ledge above pitch 2 decided the temptation was too much and that he'd spend the rest of the day reading.



Barrah Canyon

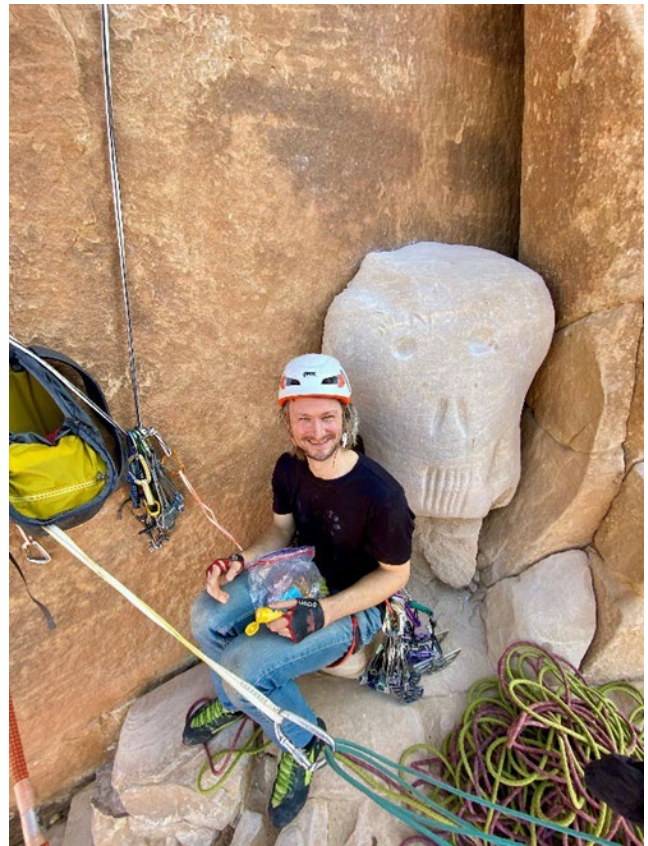
After climbing the route and abseiling off with only a little dodgy downclimbing (note to others – 60m ropes wouldn't go amiss), we settled down to tea and our first night in the desert. These trips out of the village fleshpots and into somewhere quiet and remote really make the trip I think, and certainly complement the hospitality found at Hamdan's. Next day Martin, Stuart and I had The Star of Abu Judaidah pencilled in.

An early start saw us at the foot of the cliff. Abu Judaidah takes a remarkable line, linking corner features up the side of a big alcove, and gives a fine mix of lovely corners, wee traverses and a bit of thrutching. It would be a great E2 were it not for the 'link pitch', a desperate boulder problem with some boldness thrown in before and after. Thankfully the hardest bit is easily aid-able, a tactic Stuart and I immediately adopted when seconding.

Back in the village, around this time Martin's friends 'The Brothers' showed up. Essex lads with the look of 70s Yosemite big wallers, known for dispatching big routes in double quick time and for creating highly sophisticated artistic impressions* on Welsh beaches. We were really looking forward to the next big classic, The Beauty. Robert had said this was a 'must do', and we quickly saw why as Stuart set off up an immaculate layback corner. A brilliant long HVS pitch follows this, and above is the superb wide crack pitch, capably dispatched by Martin and apparently led in the past by Alys Jepson with no big cams! Gulp. Hang on, wait a minute. In between all this quality is the 'link pitch' (another one), a short but tenuous wall graded f5c [7a+] and protected by two spaced drilled pegs. The slab boys scraped up this but I had no chance. Robert says this section has got progressively harder as the

small sandstone holds get more and more worn away with traffic; with this trend likely to continue, I would highly recommend a clip stick to future suitors.

The wide crack pitch led us up to another enticing feature, a vertical crack which I generously gifted to Stuart since it was now basking in the full sun. It did look a bit tricky but at least there were a couple of bolts to clip if placing gear proved awkward. He made good progress initially but suddenly ground to a halt - "Honestly guys, this is not the route". Apparently the crack had run out and there were no further bolts, but this still seemed like a poor effort. Nevertheless, Martin and I are nothing if not gentlemen and eventually agreed he could lower off and we'd take an easier way on the left; this led to the summit of a nice wee Jebel. Back in the village, we were itching to get back out into the desert. With a steady 25C each day, it had been rather warm for late November and we were starting to struggle for shady climbing options. Then Martin's research brought up Desert Rats in the Shade - perfect! Robert was also keen to do a little more climbing and knew of new route potential; we would investigate the new stuff the first day and do Desert Rats the second.



Martin on The Beauty



Rum Village

The Al Maghrar area lies further away than Barrah Canyon and is much less travelled, therefore we enjoyed a daily peacefulness not quite found on our first desert trip. We dumped our gear and headed off towards another World Classic – Robert's new route. The first pitch had a fine-looking crack up a wide pillar, but the angle laid back enough to give a more chilled experience than the other things we'd done thus far – La Grande Chameau went at about VS.



La Grande Chameau

Next day Robert was feeling the effects of multi-pitch climbing with time-restricted knees and was going to be taking it easy. Martin, Stuart and I walked into Desert Rats, a fantastic big shady corner-line on an impressive face, undoubtedly the route of the Al Maghrar area. This is much less frequently climbed than the big Rum classics but is up there with the best. After a warm up pitch, a techy corner for me and a thrutchy number for Stuart led to a superb thin slabby corner-crack for Martin, about E3 5c and probably the hardest pitch of the trip. I then led up a poorer quality continuation to the top of the corner feature, a fine pedestal. Next pitch was Stuart's; this was labelled on the topo as a 'crispy slab' and didn't look too bad. Twenty minutes later, Stuart was in an impressive position but announced that the crispy slab was "bad, very bad" – apparently the rock was either flaking off or looked liable to do so, and with gear you wouldn't hang your coat off. He downclimbed, slowly and carefully.

After a 'rest day' in Petra (the most walking we'd done on the trip thus far!), we again jumped in the back of Hamdan's Hilux and he took us round to the other side of the most extensive mountain in the region for the coveted Jebel Rum Traverse. A two day trip with a summit bivi was an experience not to be missed according to Robert, and regretfully he thought it would be a bit much for him on this occasion. That said, our route finding on the chosen Sheikh Hamdan's Route (our host's grandfather!) left a little to be desired and involved some pretty dodgy v-diff 'scrambling' in a no falls situation, so perhaps a good thing he wasn't there. At c1750m altitude the summit bivi provided the only cooler night of the trip but otherwise was most pleasant, with Martin's portable speaker providing additional

good vibes. The descent was challenging with tortuous route finding and multiple abseils, and I was thankful we hadn't arrived late in the day after a foolhardy quest for Wisdom.



Sunrise at Jebel Rum bivi

Our trip days were getting numbered, but a promised cooler day looked perfect for an attempt on one of our main objectives for the holiday, Lionheart. With Brother Matthew determined to see Petra, Brother Michael and Martin made up the A team while Stuart and I brought up the rear, hoping they'd chalk it up nicely. After his experience on Desert Rats, Stuart had carefully combed the description and happily found no mention of 'crispy slabs'.

Lying somewhere on the E2/3 boundary, this 6-pitch route is remarkably sustained and packed with quality. Techy corners, a full-on jamming crack, a wee bit of boldness and even a short squeeze section which thankfully was Stuart's lead. It's all great, but the long fourth pitch was perhaps my pitch of the trip. A bold start (totems useful) leads to an amazing sustained corner-crack, always interesting but never desperate. After a late return in the dark, the chicken and rice tasted particularly fine that evening.

We had time for one more desert trip and headed down to the Suweibit area further south. This more open stretch of desert lies barely ten miles from the Saudi border, and is one of Robert's favourite places on Earth, so if nothing else, the therapeutic benefits of such a hallowed place would make up

for him not being able to do much climbing on this holiday. Martin, Stuart and I romped up The Haj, a brilliant long VS route and a satisfying end to the trip.



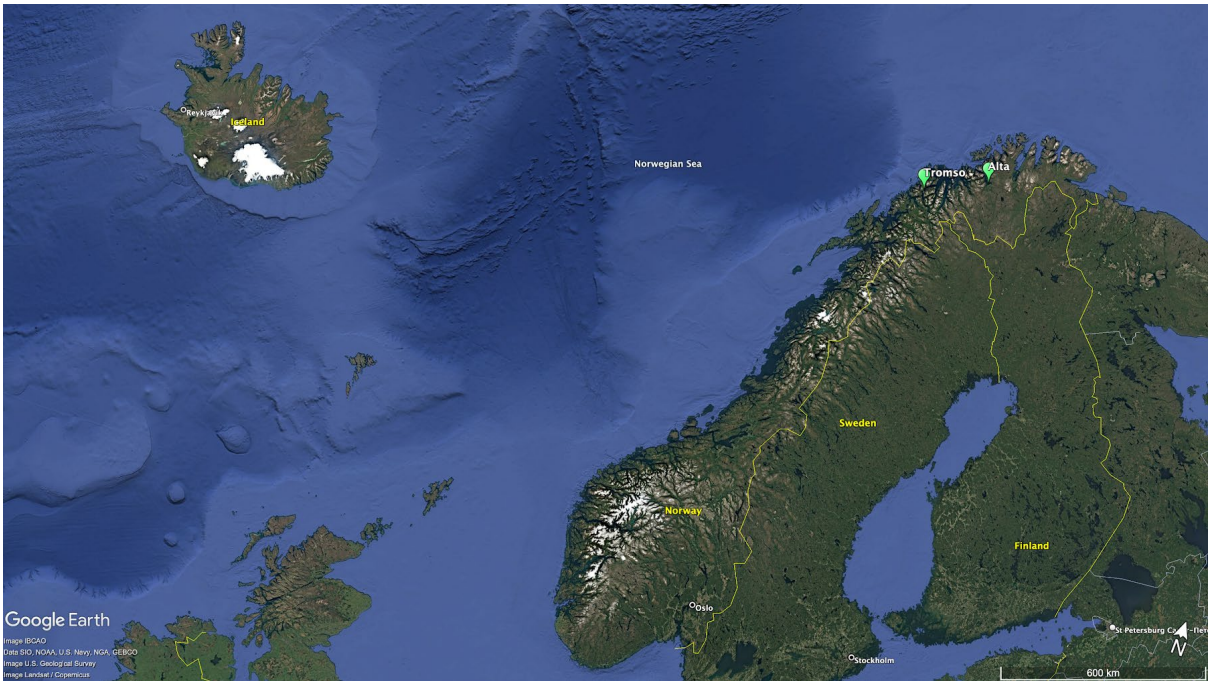
Unknown Route, Al Maghrrar

Sail and Ski in Finnmark and Lyngen, Norway

Martin Bella

Prologue

As the winter season of 2025 was coming to a close, with little action in the Scottish Highlands due to poor snow conditions and a couple of my trips having fallen through, I was starting to feel desperate about not having ski-toured as much during the season as I had hoped. I frantically searched at the end of April for a last-ditch attempt for some action, and knowing the lateness in the season, the northern latitudes of Norway seemed to fit the bill. A few days later, I managed to book the last space on a ski tour run by Norwegian operator SeilNorge. With a small twist: it would involve sailing, which I'd never done before. But having successfully braved rough seas on the Northlink Ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick the year before, where everyone looked like after drinking at least 8 pints, I was confident I would be just fine.



Map with the starting and ending destinations in Alta and Tromsø, respectively

Day 1 - Arrival to Alta

Skipping a couple of weeks forward, I found myself at the airport in Alta, with a ski touring and sailing kit. The next plane I would have to take would be from Tromsø, which would be the ending destination of the trip. Hopefully, with all my belongings dry after spending the next 6 days on the Norwegian Sea at the end of May. My first order of business after retrieving my kit, which was a rather speedy affair at an airport the size of a Tesco Extra, was finding the pier where the boat was due to depart from. I managed to find a stash of duffel bags and ski bags next to a pier with moored boats, so it seemed like I found the right place. Having a few hours to spare before the meeting time for the trip, I decided to head into Alta for a bit of sightseeing and alcohol shopping at the state-run liquor stores. While food would be provided, the drinks were BYOB, fortunately without a corkage fee.





Boat on the pier and the Cathedral of the Northern Lights in Alta

Before boarding the two sailing boats, Draco and Bien, all the participants on the trip got together, proceeded with introductions, and played a little game – the main point of which was to drill the fact that we would have to act as an efficient team on the boat for things to run smoothly. After going through this in the inhospitable weather of Arctic Norway, we were all more than happy to take our things and transfer them to one of the boats participating in the trip, which would travel in tandem. We were assigned berths, where we would sleep and keep our belongings. I quickly realised I had made the mistake of not “packing like a sailor” and had to think quite hard about how to store all my belongings in the little cupboard I was afforded. A little bit of OCD came in handy here, as I was congratulated by my bunkmate, a machinist for a F1 Team, when it came to efficiently fitting my things in.



Bavaria 50 Cruiser sailing boat: home for the next few days (credit SeilNorge)

A quick tour of the inside of the 2005 50' boat, named Draco, provided by our French skipper Marion took place. This included safety information and how the heads (a sailing-specific term for 'toilets') would not be used for showering, to conserve the 700L fresh water supply that would have to last us for the whole trip. One head was also reserved as a drying room. While on the topic of the heads, going to the toilet on a sailing boat is an affair worth exploring further. While the exact details are a bit blurry to me now, the process involves first pumping some salt water into the toilet bowl via a manual pump lever to make it easier for things to go down later on. Then you do your business, and at the end you pump things out back into the sea. Make sure not to do this when moored at a marina or when people are swimming around at an anchorage! The bowl is then pumped with more salt water and pumped out again, ensuring that all the business is fully flushed out. Not much different from doing the deed at home but including a decent tricep exercise. All good sport, until it needs to be done in conditions reminiscent of the inside of a washing machine.

The next part of the tour happened outside. Everyone was given their own numbered inflatable lifejacket to be worn by anyone stepping on the outside of the boat while it wasn't moored. This was very strictly enforced, which my safety-conscious self was more than happy with. We were educated about the sailing terms for the different parts of the ship, such as 'bow' being the front of the boat, 'starboard' referring to the right-hand side, and so on. A cheat sheet would have been useful. Some knots were introduced to us, many of them being familiar to me from climbing. There were some variations and different ways of tying, which my mountaineering brain would struggle with for the remainder of the trip.

As it was getting closer to supper time, the food delivery trucks had arrived. Two of them. A slew of labelled plastic bags were ferried onto the two boats, and my previous nightmare of fitting lots of things into small spaces was reignited. I was amazed at how many storage places there are on a sailing boat, whether under the seats, flooring, or pocket-sized cupboards around portholes. Then again, a sailing boat is an oversized campervan that's not supposed to sink.

The next order of business was to head out to our ski touring destination for the next day. On most days, the boats would sail in the late afternoons and evenings to the next day's skiing destination. As there was enough wind and enthusiasm for sailing, from a majority crew that had never sailed before, the decision was made to practice our nonexistent sailing skills. Our skipper, Marion, was extremely pleased at this, and I could see that our boat would try to sail with the wind whenever possible. A 5-minute crash course into sailing, lots of shouting of initially confusing instructions from Marion, and we were on our way.



Sailing out of civilisation with the other sailing boat, Bien, in tandem

At this point, the trip participants were already assigned cooking duties for breakfasts and dinners in pairs, with preset menus for the days ahead. Fish burgers were the first on the dinner menu, which were bravely cooked by the first pair of cooks under moderate seas. This came with plenty of shouting from the galley with comments about the challenging cooking conditions. An occurrence that would be repeated regularly. The food was promptly consumed on deck while on the move, as people rotated in and out of duties to keep the boat sailing along its intended course. This would prove to be the pattern for most days, as it would be rare for us all to be able to eat together in the galley at anchor.

Once we started getting closer to our bay for the night, the first anchoring dance began. First, we had to drop the sails and turn on the diesel motor, as the sheltered locations for anchoring didn't provide reliable wind, and the motor allows for more precise steering. The next step was to pay close attention to the navigational charts for depths, but even more so to the echo sounder, to find the right depth for dropping the anchor without scraping the keel. Alarm bells would have to start ringing anytime the number got below 7 meters. Once a suitable spot was found, the anchor would be dropped, the engine reversed for a bit to check the reliability of the anchor, and an anchor alarm would be set. The purpose of the alarm was to alert us if the boat moved beyond a radius from its original place, which would indicate an anchor failure.

I was sleeping in the top bunk bed of the berth assigned to me, which required me to first figure out how to efficiently get into it. Due to how narrow the bed and berth were, I employed a technique of propping my feet up against the opposite wall and slowly hoisting myself into the bed. I must have looked like a seal wrapped in wool and plastic, trying to get itself out of the sea on an ice floe.

The first night was cold with temperatures outside just below zero, resulting in a significant amount of condensation on the ceiling that needed sponging in the morning. We should have taken Marion's advice to keep the porthole open, but self-preservation by keeping warm won out. We wouldn't repeat

the same mistake. I also experienced the strange sensation of waking up, looking at the porthole, thinking it was 6 AM, only to be confused by the Midnight Sun and realise it was only 2 AM.

Day 2 - Koven (959 m)

In the morning, after a breakfast of tasty oatmeal cooked by the last evening's dinner team, we proceeded to learn how to get everyone and their kit on the shore for the day's skiing. This involved first lowering the dinghy into the water, moving all the ski and boot bags on the dinghy. Everything had to be transported in bags to prevent piercing the inflatable. One or two trips had to be done with all the gear, and a final two trips to get the people with their daypacks to the shore. Once on the shore, we kitted out and left all the bags safely out of the tide's reach for our return.



Boats at anchor on the first day of skiing

That first day, both boat crews met for a safety briefing. Our two Norwegian guides made sure everyone understood the plan for the day, and had all the required avalanche kits in fully working order. The two groups then proceeded to make their way up the mountain into claggy weather not too dissimilar from Scottish conditions. The main difference was the abundance of snow and a good snow base for skiing.



Way up through a forest and the view down

Upon our return, similar logistics took place for getting people and their kit back on the boats. The ski boot shells were kept under the seats on the deck with all sorts of random gear needed for running a boat, often coming out smelling like diesel the next morning. The boot liners would get to dry in the warmest place of the boat – the engine compartment. Afterwards, the usual dance of sailing to our next destination, cooking, and eating on the move would take place. Beers would sadly have to wait until reaching the next anchorage.



Dinner on the way and approaching the next anchorage

Day 3 - Seiland (1078 m)

The weather improved significantly, with temperatures still keeping close to the freezing point at sea level. We managed to get impressive views from the summit, unlike on the first day. After a short lunch break at the top the two groups split up, with the group from Bien proceeding to ski down the same way as for the ascent. Our Norwegian ski guide decided to take advantage of being able to finish our day elsewhere than where we started, as long as radio contact could be made with the skipper on the boat to coordinate this. We proceeded to cross the mountain and ski down the other side, which gave

us yet another perspective on the terrain. At the end of this, we probably had the sketchiest transfer to the dinghy of the entire trip, as it involved trying not to slide into the water by slipping on rocks covered with slimy algae. Perhaps the other group knew why not to follow us.



Looking back at the anchorage in the fjord and the way down

Day 4 - Tverrfjorden to Sørfjorden

The next day would turn out to be the best mountain day of the trip. Any clouds from the previous day completely disappeared, with a bluebird day ahead. The increase in temperature and sun made for t-shirt uphill attire, but trickier skiing due to the snow becoming more saturated with water.



Anchorage for the day with Øksfjord on the far side of the fjord



Ridge bootback with Øksfjordjøkelen glacier in the background, and me trying to keep up in the Arctic heat

I managed to join the group from the other boat, Bien, who were planning to have a longer day and cross over to the fjord on the other side of the mountain. My group would return the same way. I was glad to have done at least some conditioning before this trip by hiking in the Mamores. Once on the ridge, we had to do a bit of bootpacking as the terrain proved too narrow and steep for skinning, while the other Norwegian guide from the second boat made sure everyone was comfortable with this.



Herd of reindeer with calves on the ridge

On the way down we probably had what would have been the best descent of the whole trip – pristine ankle-deep fluffy snow. Until we got lower down, where the sun and warm southerly winds created what our ski guides dubbed as “Norwegian Cream”: wet, heavy, and sticky snow that tends to have a

habit of unexpectedly catapulting a fast-moving skier forward. This is also where I had the single fall that I tend to allow myself for trips, when one of my skis dug into deep wet snow while trying to avoid rocks and branches. Despite what the photos show, combat skiing had to be employed sometimes – a skill honed in Scotland.



The way down towards Botn



Relaxing on the empty Nuvsvågveien road

Once down we managed to find the one place that wasn't covered with snow or Norwegian bog, which ended up being the warm tarmac of a single-track road. Neither of the Norwegian crew, the ski guide

and the photographer who was pro-bono on the trip, had any concerns with us practically lying on the road in a bend. Presumably, the locals are better behaved on deserted country roads than in some other places. The pickup location was relayed over WhatsApp as the radios were out of range, while the boats decided to stock up on the dwindling reserves of alcohol.

I was eventually traded back to my boat Draco for some rum, questioning the value of my life, when the boats anchored up for a little get-together. While I was sorting out my damp kit, suddenly a lot of shouting and panic took place. A ferry passing nearby generated a significant wake, which interrupted this little seance and the boats had to quickly separate. After a disaster was averted, the usual inventory of bottles would take place and the awful realisation that we were missing a bottle of vodka.



Bow of Bien (top-left), Draco from Bien (right), islands and fjords (bottom-left)

Day 5 - Not quite the summit of Eggvind (1089 m)

Just as I had on the previous day, I managed to join the crew of Bien for a longer day. By the fifth day of ski touring, the dwindling energy levels were starting to catch up with the crew members of my boat. The summit was, however, denied to us by strong winds, and we didn't manage to get a close-up of the Øksfjordjøkelen glacier.



On the way down, we encountered yet more Norwegian Cream, which ended up catapulting one of the members of the group. Unfortunately for him, it didn't stop one of his skis from completing the full send down the slope. This resulted in the rest of us having an unplanned snack break. I have never seen anyone move so slowly in what appeared like a short distance, but I was glad it wasn't me who had to swim through waist-deep slushy snow.



Our Norwegian ski guide is assessing the conditions for descent

After getting back down to the boats, we set sail to our next destination, a sauna in Sandland. This was going to be our first and only shower on the trip, so we couldn't wait as the cabin's smell was progressively deteriorating. Getting to the mooring point in the tiny harbour of Sandland would also prove to be interesting. We had to wait for confirmation that we could raft the boat onto a ferry, as there was no more space on the dock. Marion then skilfully managed to position the boat, taking into account the very shallow waters, significant wind, currents, and the tide. If parking a car can be stressful enough at times, then I would never want to be in charge of "parking" a boat. There was an interesting collection of cars parked at the local lodgings of Sandland: a UK, Czech, and Dutch license plate.



Small settlement of Sandland with a sauna in the middle of the photo

One thing I've learned is that a cold beer can never be appreciated enough until it's consumed inside an 80°C sauna. And how excruciating the entire body feels when submerged in frigid 4°C arctic water for half a minute. Trying to swim proved to be a futile exercise due to the pain. The crew showed off their training of swimming in these conditions without a wetsuit, in case of emergency. Fortunately, the winds were warm southerlies. Coming out of the sea felt like being blasted by a hair dryer, which was welcome after the painful ordeal. After repeating this process about 6 times, a spinning head was the sign that my body had enough and it was time to take the much anticipated shower.

Day 6 - Sailing from Sandland to Nord-Lenangen

The decision to stay up north for most of the trip to take advantage of the more favourable snow conditions meant that we would have to spend one full day of sailing. With beautiful weather and a warm and significant wind, the decision paid off. After getting out of the harbour in Sandland, we put up the sails and proceeded to weave our way across fjords and islands.



Sailing towards the Lyngen Alps

After reaching the sea exposed from the fjords, the wind increased, and the waves got bigger. Being at the helm felt more natural than figuring out what to do with the sails, but it was also rather stressful knowing that I had the lives of 7 other people in my hands. This hits home even more when taking into account that the average person wouldn't survive in the water for longer than a few minutes in these conditions, and any helicopter rescue was at least half an hour away.

However, stepping away from the helm was the most dangerous thing I could do to myself. Since my mind was no longer busy with keeping my eyes on the horizon, I started being preoccupied with finding the sick bucket. Despite feeling brave from my ferry experience a year earlier, sea sickness had caught up with me in force, and I had a new yellow friend with a handle to keep me company for the next few hours.

10 hours and 60 nautical miles later, we arrived at the small harbour of Nord-Lenangen. By this point, I had managed to sleep a bit as a way to combat the seasickness. After forcing some food down for dinner, we headed out for our last short ski tour of the trip. Starting a tour at 9 PM in a dehydrated state and with a flushed stomach didn't seem like a good idea, but I wasn't going to miss my last chance to ski in 2025.



On the way down from the hill at 11 PM

Day 7 - Arrival in Tromsø

Compared to the previous day, there was no wind. Inside the shielded fjord, we ended up motoring all the way to our final destination in Tromsø. I hoped that we could relax on the last day by sunbathing on the deck, but instead we had to pack our belongings and clean the boat for its next adventure – just like leaving a hut after a Jacobite meet.



Tromsø Bridge with the Arctic Cathedral on the far side

All that remained was one last dinner with both crews at a restaurant specialising in Norwegian cuisine. I couldn't resist ordering a Minke whale stake, the only type of whale Norwegian fleets are

allowed to hunt. It tasted like a strange cross between beef steak and venison with a slightly fishy taste, and plenty of guilt afterwards. It was a complex end to a trip that had started as a desperate search for snow and ended as a total immersion in a new way of travel.



Clockwise: Aluminium/steel-hulled boats in the harbour ready for Svalbard, a constant tourist reminder about the latitude, and one of the million statues of Amundsen in the city

Route Summary

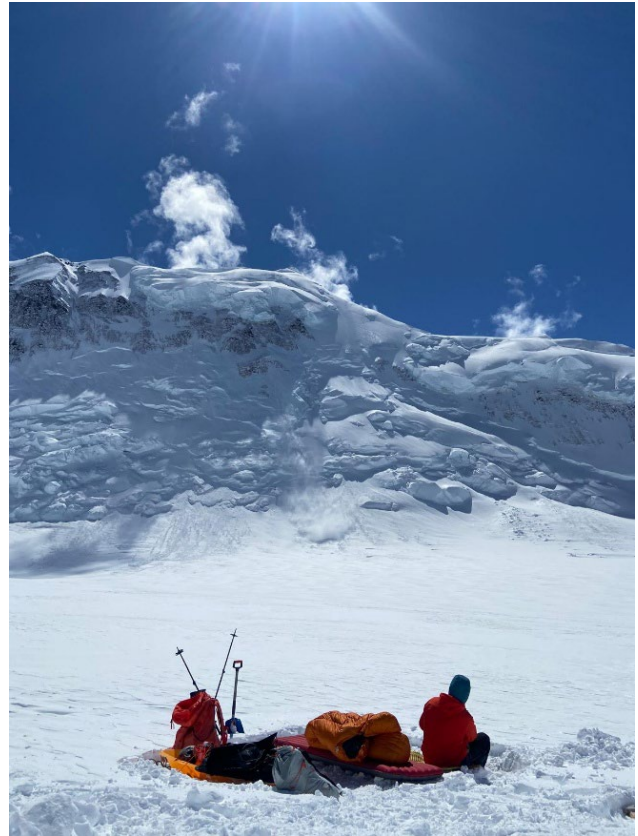
- Combined Distance: ~307 km between Alta and Tromsø
- 140 NM sailing
- 47 km of land travel on skis
- Combined Ascent: ~4500 m

Mount Logan Expedition 2025

Steve Turner

In May 2025, myself as part of a British 12-person team undertook an expedition to Mount Logan, Canada's highest peak (5,959 m), in the Saint Elias Mountains within the Arctic circle. The primary aim was to test skills, resilience, and decision-making in one of the world's most extreme and remote cold-weather environments.

Preparation was crucial. We completed a Mission Rehearsal in two phases: in the UK for foundational skills and in the French Alps above Chamonix to apply them under alpine conditions. This preparation laid the groundwork for operating safely and effectively on the glacier and in severe weather.



Preparation and Equipment

The MRX began in the UK with intensive kit preparation and equipment checks. Tents, stoves, climbing gear, and avalanche transceivers were tested and serviced. Medical training included prolonged casualty care in austere conditions, improvised stretchers, patient warming techniques, basic life support refreshers, and recognition and treatment of altitude illnesses. Dry land crevasse rescue established baseline skills before heading to the Alps.

In Chamonix, we applied these skills on snow and ice. We practised snowshoe movement, transceiver drills, crevasse rescue and hauling pulks (sleds). Medical scenarios were practiced throughout, simulating altitude illness and gastrointestinal issues. We also tested the load-bearing capacity of snow anchors and coordinated movement with loaded pulks on challenging terrain. Day-to-day conditions varied from bitter cold to intense sun, requiring constant adaptation.



On day four, high winds damaged two tents and carried away a repair kit. Some members descended to a nearby refuge, while the rest relocated and dug protective snow walls. The final day featured a complex medical scenario with two simulated casualties, requiring on-scene treatment, extraction, and prolonged care under remote guidance. Key lessons included rigorous equipment checks, scenario-based training, adaptability, and clear decision-making.

Casualty Care

Medical preparedness proved critical on the glacier. Early in the ascent toward Camp 1, a team member sustained an ankle injury, necessitating an emergency plan and partial descent for evacuation. Later, at higher altitude, a frostbite case required immediate attention and evacuation of three participants. Previous medical and technical training ensured both incidents were managed safely, highlighting the importance of preparedness in remote environments.

Operating in Extreme Conditions

Severe weather dominated the expedition. Flights to the glacier were delayed for five days, requiring kit preparation, ration organisation, and skill rehearsals during the wait. On the glacier, storms lasted five days, with winds up to 100 km/h, heavy snow, and whiteout conditions. Tents were repeatedly buried, and continuous digging was necessary to maintain shelter.



Navigating and moving pulks in these conditions was physically and technically demanding. At one point, a snow bridge collapsed under the weight of a loaded pulk, fortunately causing no serious injury. The team also had to split and reunite at higher altitude, testing communication and coordination under prolonged adversity.



Planning, Adaptability, and Teamwork

Throughout the expedition, adaptability was essential. Flight delays, severe weather, and the need for decisions forced constant reassessment of plans. The summit was ultimately not achievable due to prolonged storms, injury, and frostbite. The descent to Base Camp required careful control of loaded pulks on steep terrain, testing both technical skills and endurance.



Even without a summit, the expedition demonstrated the value of preparation, teamwork, and discipline under extreme conditions. It reinforced the importance of meticulous planning, situational awareness, and the ability to act safely in austere, high-altitude environments.



Reflections

While Mount Logan remained unsummitted, the expedition offered invaluable lessons in extreme cold-weather mountaineering, remote casualty management, and team work under prolonged stress. The experiences gained are directly applicable to future high-altitude or extreme environment expeditions.

Most importantly, it highlighted that success in such environments is measured not only by reaching a summit but by returning friends, safety and cohesion in the face of unpredictable conditions. Overall a fantastic opportunity being on the mountain with its stunning surroundings, the sheer scale of the mountain is humbling and I was grateful to be a part of such an expedition. It was common throughout all the teams that where there, Mt Logan did not want anybody on its summit this year.

All casualties have since made a full recovery and back at doing what they enjoy.





LEJoG 2025: The Story

Mike Snook

Years ago, I'd mentioned to my friend Steven, that I'd quite like to cycle Land's End to John o' Groats (LEJoG) sometime. In June 2025 out of the blue came a text, "*I was going to speak to you about the LEJOG, probably August. Would you still be interested?*" Yes! A couple of days later I texted back, "I've bought my rail ticket." He responded: "*Oh shit It's happening!*"

We had seven weeks to plan a route, book accommodation, sort kit and not least, get fit. I opted to go light, we were intending to use YHA and Premier Inns (where bikes are allowed in rooms) for accommodation.

Day 0: Getting to the start line.

I drove and stayed with niece Emma for a few days in Bangor where I was entertained exploring Anglesey's colourful moonscape heavy metal quarries, old hydrothermal vents, black smokers and derelict brick works followed by the equally spectacular slate quarries of North Wales. Then on to other niece Sarah's in Bristol where I left my car, taking a one-way car hire to Penzance Youth Hostel where we'd arranged to meet.

Local beers and food at the Penzance Youth Hostel then early to bed. A 0730 alarm for tomorrow's 79 mile run to Wadebridge via Land's End. It looked like being hot, or if you are from Orkney, insanely hot. We were at the start of a two week heatwave, not that we knew it at the time.

Day 1: Tuesday: Penzance to Land's End to Wadebridge 10+71miles, 900+4,800ft

Steven had set up a fundraiser for Cancer Research UK as we both had friends suffering cancer. As we started, we learnt that sadly our friend Mike Holmes had succumbed to cancer.

It was an extra ten miles from Penzance to the "Official Start" at Land's End. Oh boy, is Cornwall contorted! Up, down, short coastal flat, and repeat. We kept to unclassified roads, cycle-paths and bridleways wherever possible. Both Garmin and Komoot were required to keep us on track, when one was vague the other usually bailed us out.



We made it to Lands End for The Photograph then we were off on our escapade. Back to Penzance and on to Marazion with memories of childhood holidays, before heading north, stopping at in busy

town centre in Cambourne for our obligatory Cornish Pasty. Up through oddly named places from my childhood; Redruth, St. Newlyn East, St. Columb Major, before Padstow and finally Wadebridge for the night.

We had reckoned that we'd be finishing by six, but with more than half of the route's dozen major climbs being in the last 30 miles, the rather large Cornish Pasty for lunch and, oh the heat, we finished after seven. We were lucky with the weather, it was so warm that the 81miles and 5,700ft didn't seem too bad and we finished with smiles on our faces. Day one: tick!

Daily tip, book only the first week's accommodation, use Youth Hostels they have secure bike storage and Premier Inns – they allow clean-ish bikes in rooms

Day 2: Wednesday: Wadebridge to Okehampton 51miles 3,900ft

A more leisurely 10 o'clock start to the day. "We must avoid the rush hour muttered Steven", I just shook my head. The day was convoluted and characterised by repeated plummets into and grinds out of gorges, or long hills with easy gradients. Our trek took us through deprived Camelford over the flat and windless Bodmin Moor with its ponies, sheep and cattle, and on to Launceston with its picturesque Steam Railway station café serving fabby food. We stayed longer than we should have, but it was out of the searing heat and we needed re-hydrating big time.



River Kensey Launceston



Launceston with its picturesque Steam Railway station café

Onward, we nipped along an unpromising track: the "Two Castle Trail," which led into a wood then up onto a disused railway line for a six-mile traffic-free run to Okehampton Youth Hostel, another 5* place to stay. The Café next to the YHA in the reopened railway station closed at four, so with tired legs it was into Okehampton for victuals and a pint of Proper Job!

Daily tip, pack light – my entire luggage was 9kg +11kg of bike & fluid, that was quite enough on the steep Cornish and Devonshire hills thank you!

Day 3: Thursday: Okehampton to Street 82miles, 4,000ft

Another early start to miss rush hour and into Devonshire sunshine only to be hit by three short, sharp and very heavy showers. It was the only rain on the whole trip, not that we knew it at the time. More uppy downy in Devon before hitting the flat heart of the Somerset levels, which was a welcome change.



Somerset levels mirroring their name

We continued pleasurably travelling off the “A” roads most of the time. In the afternoon we had some good flat B roads and more than 10 miles on canal paths that helped us get our average speed back up after the mountainous Cornish and Devonian terrain. Lunch in Tiverton was a memorable roast piggy roll. We followed the Grand Western Canal for nearly ten miles until it abruptly ran out. There were a few afternoon surprises like the towering sandstone walls of the single-track road near Lower Wellisford, and the chopping board flat Somerset levels with their drainage canals. But then the Somerset levels ended with an 11.6% climb up to Street Youth Hostel, a brutal end to the day. Built as a Swiss chalet to live in by two sisters in 1914, a mile out of Street, they barely used it before handing it over the Youth Hostel Association in 1931.

I have to admit that I’d not carried out due diligence; no food whatsoever in the hostel so we called a cab to get into town. The Bear Inn can be recommended, great food and great beer.

Daily tip; one pair of shoes and two pairs of Sealskinz socks, instead of a separate pair for evenings

Day 4: Friday: Street to St Briavel's Castle YH 65miles 2,600ft

At last, after three days in the saddle we are heading north!! “65 miles and 2,500ft, it's like a rest day,” we thought at breakfast. Boy, were we wrong. We were too clever for our own good, changing the planned route for a GoogleMaps one that had less ascent. This initially worked well with agreeable trips on old railway lines and quiet roads, taking us to the Strawberry Line, (so called as it used to deliver strawberries from Cheddar), heritage railway cafe at Yatton railway station, but went badly wrong at Avonmouth.

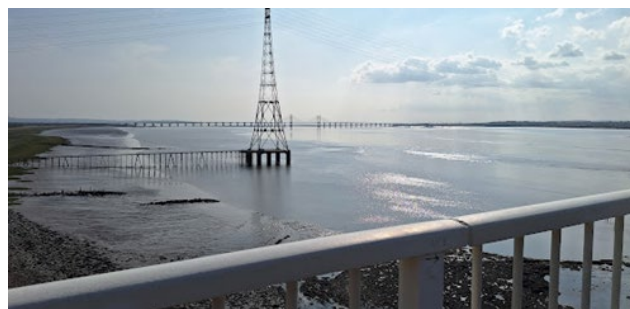
There were a few “Road Closed” signs in the levels, so we took to the well known motto, “He who dares,” and at our third such sign, we went on only to find cracked and cratered roads and a bridge across a wide river, “Under construction.” We can’t swim that with bikes! Then came a shout from a construction worker, “Come on through, we’ve almost finished the new bridge.” Big smiles and no 15miles of back tracking!

Avonmouth is close to my birthplace and a lot of changes can happen in fifty years of industrial desolation and development, what a bloody nightmare on bikes. Busy roads roaring with huge lorries or paths through desolate hellscapes designed mainly for fly tippers. Despairingly we stopped in an

industrial estate cul-de-sac, away from the incessant noise of heavy dual carriageway traffic. We pondered if the original route might have been better and where we could rejoin it. We picked it up after crossing a busy dual carriageway to Severn Beach village, not a beach you'd sunbathe on though. Onwards over the Old Severn Bridge and into Wales, albeit briefly.



Desolate Avonmouth



From the Severn Bridge to Wales

In Chepstow, Steven had a puncture and we ran out of water. It took ages to find the Tesco and Steven was desperate for a Coke but Chepstow had run out of it! His big bar of Fruit & Nut had also melted. We must have chosen the hottest and driest two weeks of the year. Chepstow's navigational stress meant we were hours later than we'd planned, and drained by the time we completed the relentless uphill slog to St Briavel's Castle Youth Hostel with its impressive entrance. We managed to catch last orders for food at The George, great food and great beer.

Daily tip; hygiene; rinse undies each evening, then roll them up in a towel and walk on the "sausage" to squeeze out water – as effective as a spin drier!

Day 5: Saturday: St Briavel's to All Stretton Bunkhouse 70miles 4,800ft

By day five, the days of the week had lost their meaning and so the question, "Where did we stay last night?" became more prevalent. Today is Saturday, I think!

It was a relaxed, rolling hills day, more sunshine and with a welcome head-breeze. It undulated through Coleford, Ross on Wye. Leominster and Ludlow on quiet hedgerow edged roads, plummeting into gorges before zooming back out again.

We were doubting that we'd find anywhere for lunch until an oasis appeared in the form of England's Gate at Bodenham Moor, a CAMRA pub, apparently dating to the 16th century.. Too bad that it was lunchtime with many miles still to travel!!

Full with bacon rolls and sweet potato chips, we pressed on with a detour to Church Stretton for evening meals, then a final steep uphill to get to the unmanned YHA bunkhouse. It took us 20 mins to work out the instructions to find the keys to the bike shed, by which time we were too tired to walk the half-mile to the pub.

Daily tip; find out what your favourite foods are before you start out – bananas and fruit pastels floated my boat

Day 6: Sunday: All Stretton to Widnes Premier Inn 79miles 2,700ft

A relatively early start enabled us to miss the Sunday rush hour. The country lanes with their hedgerows lessened the effect of the headwind, and the lack of really mean hills made for fairly rapid progress. Lunch arrived with fifty miles in the saddle. Sitting in the shade outside of The Wickstead

Arms in quaint Nantwich was a pleasure. The roast beef and a pud were even more pleasurable, gobbled up in quick time.



The Wickstead Arms, Nantwich, in the shade was a pleasure



The Gateway to Widnes, cross at your peril

With only 20 miles to go my rear tyre sprouted a bulge. So that's what the rubbing sound was at the rear. Further inspection showed that my tyre had partially delaminated, causing a 2cm diameter bulge that was rubbing my chain-stay on each revolution. I decided to lance the boil: now I had a slow puncture but with enough sealant to probably last three days of pedalling, albeit with sealant gently spraying the bike and luggage, and thankfully not me!

While we were inspecting my tyre we met Connor, our first fellow LEJoGer. He'd started the day after us and had also stayed in All Stretton last night, and was due to finish the same day as us.

On we went through some of England's finest industrial eyesores; Frodsham, Runcorn and finally Widnes Steven's comment on Widnes, "*Widnes is unlovely. Don't come here if you can avoid it.*" The Premier Inn was home for the night, the best cuisine that we could find was Nando's.

Daily tip; put twice as much sealant as is recommended so that if you do get a puncture that is slow to seal, you'll not be left deflated!

Day 7: Monday: Widnes to Kirkby Lonsdale 81miles 3,600ft

On the road early, we made good progress, escaping rush hour and yet more fine industrialised eyesores: Prescott, St Helens, Rainford, Parbold, Leyland. It felt good to have these behind us. Our morning caffeine stop was at a fantastic and very popular cycling café, "Yours Is The Earth" in Parbold

As my rear tyre still refused to seal we looked for a bike shop. We found "Preston Cycles." The assistant was at pains to tell us that he didn't live locally, "It's a little rough here, keep an eye on your things." Brilliant speedy service, fifteen mins later I had a new tyre and innertube. Out of Preston into country lanes, 8 miles and I had a pinch flat. The turnaround at Preston Cycles was a little too quick. New tube fitted, we were on our way again, albeit with only one spare tube. The country lanes were green and leafy, with twittering birds, the roads strewn with the over ripe fruit of the hedgerows.



The view before descending to Kirkby Lonsdale



National Cycle Path 69 to Gressingham

Kirkby Lonsdale is a small, picturesque town in Cumbria, surrounded by steep hills in all directions. This is more than we can say for our accommodation. Eight miles short of Kirkby Lonsdale we stopped for a drink but didn't notice a small bearded fellow sat on the ground. He asked where we were staying. When we said, "The Copper Kettle," he nearly choked with laughter and said, "Do not eat there!" We thought nothing of it until we arrived. Time had truly forgotten The Copper Kettle. One review from 2007 reads as true today: "I did not dare walk anywhere, even within the room without something on my feet first." "The furnishings in the room were a disgrace, most of them dating from the 60's." More recently in September 2025: "I'm surprised this establishment is still legally allowed to operate."

Daily tip; it's surprising just how many bananas one can smuggle out of a Premier Inn breakfast for later, when the need for energy is great.

Day 8: Tuesday: Kirkby Lonsdale to Ecclefechan 85miles 5,300ft

We were soon into the edge of the Lake District after leaving the steep rolling hills of the Howgills. A little bit of juggling the route was required to avoid even more steepness, swapping to the west side of the valley saved us 500ft of "unnecessary climbing." The picturesque views led me to describe it on Strava as "A Murderous Morning and an Amicable Afternoon."



Leaving Kirkby Lonsdale



Cycling inside of the central reservation of the M6 just north of Tebay services

With memories of cycling inside of the central reservation of the M6 just north of Tebay services, and then lunch at the high village of Shap fading, we finally hit Penrith after five and a half hours with just under half of the distance covered. At least we'd done two thirds of the climbing, which had been into a headwind.

The rest of the day was going to be interesting: it was 1530, we were beat and were racing a curfew of 2000 at the Ecclefechan Hotel. Thankfully the road was fairly flat and we took a more direct route from Gretna Green along the former main road. After hammering it we made it to the closed looking hotel. We called them, no answer. We wandered around the back to find a note on a door with a different phone number. The manager was on holiday but his daughter had been left in charge. We

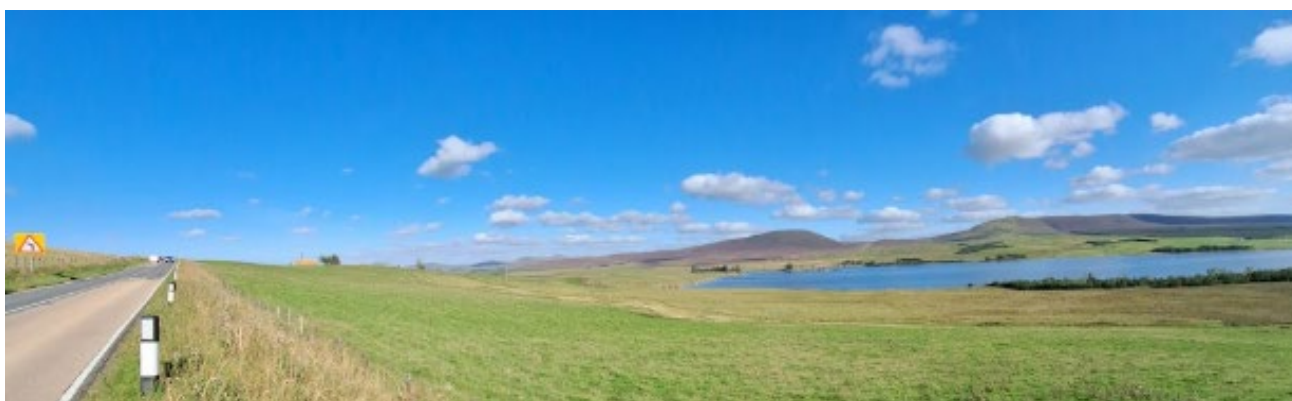
gave the Ecclefechan Hotel 10/10. The rooms were the best that we'd stayed in, paradise compared with last night's Copper Kettle yuckiness.

Daily tip; take a set of dry loose-fitting clothes for evenings.

Day 9: Wednesday: Ecclefechan to Edinburgh 82miles 3,400ft

Our third longest day, to home sweet home for the night, despite the dire warnings that I'd never start the next day's riding if I stayed a night at home. It was a cool start to the day, on the edge of being cold, we were into a tough headwind to the first stop at the luxurious Abington Services. The route largely follows the old M74, which was surprisingly picturesque, and flat! It was a head down day and the sooner I got to Edinburgh, the more time I thought that I'd have to relax and unwind.

After Abington the sun shone and it was warm again! We headed for Thankerton, Libberton and Carnwath, where Steven and I parted company. Steven had arranged to leave his bike at a friend's in Livingston and then catch the train to Edinburgh where he has a flat. I opted to have a night in my own bed and headed straight for home up the Lang Whang. I'd never seen it so busy, but I felt at home, I've ridden it many times. It felt strange riding on home turf, knowing the route without maps.



Harperrigg Reservoir, getting close to home.

Firstly, everything into the washing machine, out for a couple of ready meals, eat, and then to work. I thought I'd give my bike a quick wash and service. Why does everything grow arms and legs? Taking the chain off to clean it, half of the quick link flew off. (I still haven't found it six months on, I'll no doubt find it barefoot). Then Alan Yardley called, "Come out for a pint, or two." I got back in at ten with two hours messing about still to do to get the bike ready for tomorrow.

Daily tip, take a lightweight cloth tote bag to carry your evening's shop groceries and kit from the bike to take to your room.

Day 10: Thursday: Edinburgh to Pitlochry 78miles 4,500ft

Contrary to the warnings, I had no problem leaving home early to meet Steven and his pal's son Jack on the old Forth Road Bridge. Jack had baked some moist banana bread that went down very well. I can only use Steven's words for what came next: "*Over the bridge and into Fife, we struggled through Inverkeithing and Dunfermline due to pointless diversions onto useless pavement paths, when we could have just gone on the road. Clearly nobody from the guide publishers has ridden these routes.*"

In Dunfermline, and later north of Perth, we again encountered Connor, whom-we'd met when I had my tyre failure south of Widnes. We hoped to see him in John o' Groats on Sunday.



The vast phacelia fields of Perthshire

From Dunfermline we scaled the fabled Cleish Hills. Down into Kinross where we found Unorthodox Roasters, a fantastic coffee shop, then through the phacelia fields of Perthshire. The great cycle paths out of Perth took us north along the Tay. to the Backpackers Hostel in Pitlochry, via the grand entrance over the suspension bridge cycle path.

Daily tip; Use two navigation aids – Garmin and Komoot suited us, Komoot for it's audio – you have missed your tuning, go back!

Day 11: Pitlochry to Boat of Garten. 68miles, 3,000ft

A shorter flatter day, it started along the fantastic cycle path Route 7, shame that it's so close to the A9.

My best wildlife spot of the trip had Steven thinking that I must have crashed. I had to brake hard and swerve but sadly couldn't get my phone out quickly enough as the bright orange baby adder slithered into the undergrowth. That put a huge smile on my face, Steven was unimpressed.



Cycle path along the A9, the spot where I spotted the baby Adder



Cycle path along the A9

While sat outside the Dalwhinnie Deerstalker in the sun, we were joined by a couple of students doing LEJoG, "...in under seven days." Their coffee break was shorter than ours, and we never saw them again. Further on and who came out to invite us for tea and bananas but Jacobites Emily and Rod from Newtonmore. Thank you for the tea and cake, and I think we helped them out with their glut of bananas.

We caught up with friend Anne in her Kingussie gallery. Anne and Ian had kindly driven their campervan to a friend's house at Boat-of-Garten for our use, perfect for our ride to Helmsdale tomorrow. It was also very handy for Andersons fabby Woodfired Pizza just across the road. Thanks to Lesley and Mike for accommodating the campervan, and their hospitality and for the shower!

Daily tip: accommodation north of Pitlochry is akin to the rocking horse proverbial, sort your accommodation options early.

Day 12: Saturday: Boat of Garten to Helmsdale 103miles 4,300ft

Our longest day, just shy of 12 hours in the saddle. Up early in the campervan, we were off. Through Carrbridge on the old A9 to the hills south-east of Inverness with views to the Black Isle. The Kessock bridge cycle path was closed and the redirection convoluted and occasionally steep. I had just negotiated a hill of “Cornish steepness” when I realized there was no Steven. I could see nothing and could only hear the thundering of traffic. Then I saw wiggly legs pointing upwards, and was that screaming? Steven had been in the wrong gear when negotiating the “Cornish incline” and had toppled sideways off the track and into cushioning brambles. I could hear his ire but thankfully not all the words. His feet were stuck in his clipless pedals. He had apparently been fighting gravity for several minutes. I tried to keep a straight face, but failed.

North of the Beauly Firth, I’d never heard of the apparently famous “Harry Gow’s” doughnut fast food emporium. I was surprised at the size of the orders, and of the customers. We of course needed the calories.



The route here avoids the A9, with the cycle path following alongside it until Tore roundabout. I was not looking forward to Stevens, “John O’Groats by Sunday” route choice: the A9. I do not recommend this at all. At least we received some beeps of thank you when we pulled over at most laybys to allow traffic to pass. Over the Cromarty Firth we went, finally getting off the A9 at Evanton. At Tain we were forced back on to the A9 for more terror to cross the Dornoch Firth, then it was back to the back roads for more picturesque views. Brora was a haven for coffee and ice cream at the now world famous “Capaldi’s”. From Bora the A9 wasn’t so bad with far less traffic.

Only 11 miles to go, what could go wrong? The sound of a snapping spoke came 4 miles before Helmsdale. I bent it around its neighbour and carried on to Helmsdale. The Kevlar universal spoke that I’d been carrying for ten years finally came into its own. The hostel warden was so impressed that she immediately ordered one. Steven knew of a good sea food restaurant and we beat the final call from the kitchen by five minutes. When my plaice and chips arrived, I hadn’t bargained for the size of the two large fish on my plate, but still managed to finish, despite the

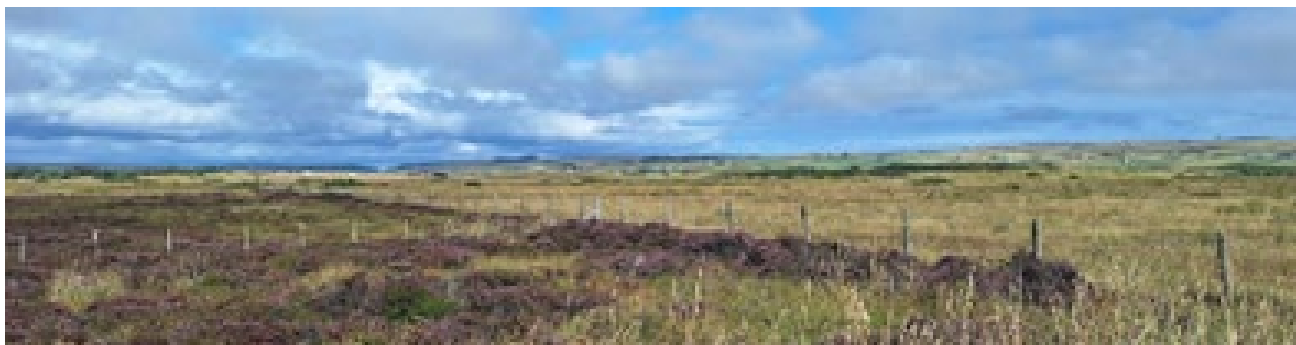
volume of my salt and pepper squid starter. I can definitely recommend “La Mirage.”

Daily tip, take a universal Kevlar spare spoke, you’ll never know when you might most need it

Day 13: The Final Push. Helmsdale to John o’ Groats to Gills Bay 59miles 3,200ft

Sunshine greeted us again; how lucky we were with 13 days of sunshine. The day started with an over-friendly German guy insisting that he would ride with us. With his four panniers and rucksack load, this seemed a tough task. The road ahead started with a steep hill out of Helmsdale, this was

the last we saw of our German friend. It was long, 3.5miles and 670ft.reaching 8.3% in places. This was nothing compared with the incline on Berridale Braes which is 10.4%. Hard work, but at least the A9 was quiet on Sunday morning.



The Caithness landscape, flat for twenty miles or more from Lybster/Occumster



Morning Coffee was in Lybster, a cul-de-sac village with one street. We only saw one person besides the man in the Spar. Adequate coffee, ice creams and sausage rolls and we were off for the last thirty miles. Here we parted from the A9 for the last time, taking a straight, 12 mile long single track road. We only saw two cars as we sped north past the wind farm at Bloody Moss. It was quiet single-track roads from here virtually all the way to John O'Groats. To quote from Steven "We arrived in good shape, no illnesses or lasting injuries, in fact in our best shape of the fortnight." Mission accomplished, finish line pictures taken, let's find coffee, chips and then beer!

My return journey started by heading further north to Steven's in Orkney where Donna had prepared a feast. I spent the Monday walking and eating my way around Kirkwall. Later, Donna had heard of my appetite and had cooked a huge meal which was most excellent. Steven kindly dropped me off at the ferry terminal, I woke up in Aberdeen, caught the 9:30 train to Haymarket and was home in time for lunch.

Daily tip, take two inner tubes for peace of mind, after you've used one tube, if you've only taken one spare tube, you'll be down to none, and that concentrates the mind!

The total raised for Cancer Research UK was £5,500. A very big thank you, to everyone who contributed.

<https://fundraise.cancerresearchuk.org/page/steven-and-mikes-lejog-august-2025?>

You Really Can Trust Your Feet: I learn to climb by breaking the skills down into components and tackling one at a time

Stephanie Droop

Last week after a fun day out moving fast and fluidly over three steep and broken limestone pinnacles, Ken said in happy approval, “I just can't reconcile you moving confidently on this horrible pile of choss, no trauma even though there's pieces crumbling off everywhere, with the woman who was freaking out walking on a broad, stable ridge a year ago”.



I have written before about my debilitating fear of heights and how I had become sensitised to the anxiety, meaning I was panicking with reliable frequency when I even went near a crag. I changed how I've been climbing and now I've had many excellent climbing sessions with no freak-outs. So what changed? I broke it into components and practiced one thing at a time. These principles should be broadly applicable to anything you need to change in your life: Break it down into components, and do one thing at a time, getting comfy with it before changing anything else. Go slowly and aim for enjoyment.

This article deals with two clusters of climbing sessions: first on the local crag at home, and then a handful of rock routes in the Swiss Alps.

I was freaking out before because I tried doing too much new stuff at a time. For one reason or another even climbs graded as easy were terrifying for me when coupled with the new and technical rope skills I needed to learn, and just not being used to moving on rock. Many people who get into climbing don't seem to mind heights, or have the mental space to learn the ropework at the same time. Good for them! However, some people, like me, have a natural aversion to it, but still want to go up hills.

So I got a cognitive behavioral therapy book and started working through the steps. In fact I haven't even started the program proper ("[Fear of Falling](#)" by [Dr Rebecca Williams](#)). I'm still on the preliminaries, (several months of easy climbs and hanging out on exposed rock) with the aim of associating climbing with having fun and feeling confident, and practicing noticing anxiety when it appears and working through the somatic steps to defuse it.



Three sessions at the same local crag

First I had three short evening sessions at a local crag, just Ken and me. It is so helpful to have a supporting partner! What changed in these sessions was:

- It was just us; no faster friends to compare to or feel embarrassed around. It has happened before that when introducing myself to someone from the club, down the pub, they've rejoined with "Oh I know you, at least I have heard you". I have a laugh about it too, yeah sure let's make light of it and defuse it by laughing, but basically I don't want to be known as the woman who is always weeping and wailing on a rock face.
- Ken stayed at the bottom belaying me on top rope. This obviously meant he was not climbing himself and was just doing it to help me out. What a man. The difference is that normally he'd go up first, leading, while I belay from the bottom, and then when he was safe at the top I would come up on the rope. That was something contributing to my stress, for several reasons: i) when belaying you have responsibility for the safety of the other person, ii) you are looking up and so your body is hunched in a posture that is the same as stress, shoulders hunched, so you are physiologically having the same signals as being stressed, iii) when coming up I need to stop and brace myself awkwardly against the rock to take out Ken's protective gear, which is always wedged tightly in the cracks and hard to move. I get tired in the awkward position trying to take it out, and my stress spikes worrying that I can't get it and might need to leave it behind. iv) while taking out the gear I am immobile and lose my flow, and the rock face feels at an odd angle, with space looming around me, proper vertigo. Then I find it hard to get moving again. v) It feels unfamiliar fumbling to put the gear on my harness; I worry I'll drop it; the space looms scarily around me; I can't balance properly to free my hands. For some reason when Ken was above me I was finding it very stressful to be starting to climb alone: I felt abandoned and worried I hadn't done everything I had to with the rope; I felt like I had to hurry to get up the climb and if I didn't manage it then I'd be stuck. So we removed this component: for some reason if Ken was below me then it felt like I was climbing for fun rather than necessity; I could stop any time and come down; I was being a pioneer and showing off my daring (lol, laughable) rather than being a slow little afterthought who was holding everyone back.
- I did each route twice, and downclimbed each time instead of being lowered off. The aim was to move comfortably on the rock and hang out, rather than rush to the top. It was fun and instructive to notice how some features I recognised on each way up and down, and some I didn't. Sometimes I found a different move on the way down vs up.
- I stopped every so often and took my awareness to several key parts of the body: i) widen and soften the gaze, relax the eyes, notice horizon and peripheral at same time, unfocus completely and let eyes cross. ii) breathe slowly using diaphragm and feel whole pelvic floor swelling on the in breath, accompanied by tingle and pulse of life, which is answered by corresponding tingle and pulse in the lips, tip of tongue and behind top front teeth at the start of the out breath. iii) feet: ball of foot, heel, each toe in turn, feeling pressure and grip of the rock.
- For these three sessions I wore approach shoes, so feet were comfy. My rock boots are an extra source of stress because they are so damn tight and sore. These routes were easy enough to get purchase in solid approach shoes with good strong edges. This built confidence.
- NOT LEAST: this was on summer evenings in an enclosed sheltered quarry. My stress levels rocket for any combination of lonely sea cliffs, mist, wind, COLD FINGERS. That will be something to incorporate later, once I've nailed the basics.

It was so much fun! I really felt it. At one point I ran out of moves and almost went down, but I hung out for a bit and then tried a different section. I went, what if I just reach for that thing, and omg it's good and it holds, and what if I next reach for that thing, and I felt my heart swell and the quickness rise but this time it wasn't panic it was flow and everything went bright and clear and I felt it, I felt what it's meant to be like. I can still feel it.

Then we went to the Alps and in the space of a few days I multiplied both my time on rock and my confidence by like ten times!

My first Alps trip

I went to a roadside sport crag twice ("sport" means there are metal bolts put in the crag, and defined, graded routes, like at a climbing wall). I heard from my companions about half ropes and double ropes. It was helpful here to practice taking out the "quickdraws" (two sidelock carabiners connected by a short strap, which the lead climber clips to the bolt in the rock and runs their rope through). This seems easy and obvious now, but at the start it was all merging with the trad gear in a big stressful ball of new stuff. I did two days of taking these out and clipping them on my harness while on the wall. This was a component. Now my fingers feel more practiced and confident at handling them and finding the loops on my harness one handed.

Also on the crag a new friend got me to move along a short section not far off the ground, "smearing" on the blankest hardest looking face, not just reaching for the easiest ledges. They always say, "Trust your feet" but the instinct is to look for horizontal ledges, places you would land a tiny helicopter, and to shy away from what looks like vertical wall. But the flattest, broadest piece of your foot can grip on what looks like a blank wall if you place it precisely and trust it. Actually it's not a blank wall: there are nubbins sticking out at different angles, but the eyes take a while to start to see them. When I started, my eyes just ran everywhere at once trying to pick out form and couldn't. The rock seemed like a jumble, a big mess of formless noise, like that time I was taken to a classical music concert when I was five: I couldn't hear any music at all; it was all formless noise. After a few days I started to notice more changes in the angles and notice where I could place a foot. I gained more confidence on the sort of faces you can get a foothold. I realised you really can trust your feet. This is very tiring on inexperienced feet and ankles, and sore on runner's toenails crammed into rock boots, but was invaluable practice to get this component in a safe, isolated way, not while trying to do everything else at once.



Then the best bit: I did three days of easy, sustained multi pitch rock routes. Even here the variety is stunning. Two of these days were defined routes, with “topos” (photos and diagrams in a guidebook, with lines showing the route). I was pleasantly surprised how easy these climbs were. Of course I was not leading any at all, and we did it in threes, with me going up as the middle person, always with someone below and above for company, never abandoned or alone. I didn't even belay at all. This removed that component of stress. One day soon I will start leading and belaying, but that was not my objective component here: I just wanted to get plenty time moving fluidly on easy, non-intimidating rock. But I was surprised and glad that most people were doing the same routes we were. It was not at all that I was relegated to some sort of nursery. It turns out that much of alpine climbing days out are of the class “plaisir” (for pleasure, bolted, not hardcore, just good fun days out with great views and fun rock problems).

Some of the time we weren't even pitching it in sections but rather moving together, where two people are tied together by a rope which they keep taught between them as they move in synch. The person in front drapes it over pinnacles and points and the person behind lifts it off as they advance. If either fell then the rope would catch on one of other of these rippled of rock. This feels much more like walking than climbing. It is recognisably “ground” rather than a vertical wall. It is fun giving the eyes and ear canals a balance workout of feeling space and ground in different orientations. It's all good practice, retraining your system for feeling where your body should be in different orientations. When I started, the crags were more like vertical and that felt completely alien, like my feet couldn't support

me in this gaping space. Now my feet and ears and eyes are getting more integrated with feeling weight and balance, and registering space around even as I trust there is solid rock under me. Moving like this is so fun, I didn't want it to stop. Every new slab or section is a beautiful rich textured new puzzle to solve and to respond to in a new and imaginative way. I love pressing the heel of one hand down as I move the opposing foot. Apparently much of alpine climbing uses moving together like this.

One day we had the adventurous day out I opened this post with: an “esoteric scramble” on a little-visited set of pinnacles, chosen by Alpine Club members Maria and Mike. No topos, no guidebook, no blue lines on Strava, no other people. This was of the class of climbs you could call “easy but dangerous”, where chunks were coming off in our hands and you had to test out each rock with your feet before committing each step. We found a summit book in a decayed plastic bag, with two previous entries: from 2015 and 2022. It was incredibly instructive to move with these experienced climbers and hear them discuss how to protect the route and negotiate how to tackle sections.

All in all I am delighted to have got so much positive time on rock under my belt, and very thankful to new buddies Alpine club members Nick, Maria, Mike, Alf, Andrew (and Ken of course) for doing the technical stuff so I could just relax and climb. I feel now that it's not completely out of reach for me to start leading one day and moving on to harder stuff, and progress with the actual hard task of managing my fear while climbing.



Alpensickness: Mountains bring out the worst in people

Stephanie Droop

There's a common trope in mountaineering circles that it's a heroic hobby and brings out the best in people. You learn how to communicate authentically in the mountains, people say, it brings out your leadership qualities, it strips away the froth of social niceties so you can deal in what really matters. You have to dig deep and tap into strengths you didn't know you had, that sort of thing.



In fact the opposite is (also) true. Mountains bring out the worst in people. Something about the presence nearby of dazzling jagged pinnacles of rock makes otherwise mature and empathetic people go completely insane in single minded pursuit of getting up them.

I would not have guessed this if I hadn't experienced it myself the other week but it makes complete sense. If you've spent your whole life on the small, round, old hills of Scotland, as dramatic and lovely as they can be, and you still manage to get high on them and want them and need them, then to get to the good shit finally brings on an intoxicating madness.

So what happened was: we've just been on a meet of the Alpine club. Ken's a member; I was a guest. He's been going to the Alps for years and it was my first time. I have traveled a lot in my life but I tend to choose further away places with less familiar cultures. Europe was always too close, too safe, and too expensive. For another thing, I like how in Scotland if you can read a map and keep your footing on steep or rough bogs then you can basically go where you like. You don't need special equipment or training. Even in winter these days you can largely get by without crampons. But it was time to pop

the lid on the Alps, so I went. I was anticipating some excellent trail running and a few rockier harder days. I was not prepared for what happened.

What happened was an all-consuming need to be on rock in my own right, and a furious rage at conditions that were conspiring to keep me away.

Before we went, I knew Ken would spend some of the time away on harder, longer, more technical routes. He's been going there for decades and knows the tools of the trade. I was fine with this. I didn't realise he was susceptible to the same sickness, and would be away every day in a row.

It was ok for the first few days... I put a brave face on and explored, did my first few hikes and runs, got the lie of the land. I even commented how impressed I was that Ken was taking time for himself and doing his part to give space in the relationship.

When lovers are apart for a few days, their hormones crash and they become despondent. This process was not helped by the fact I couldn't find anyone else to climb with or even talk to who wasn't 80 years old, the long-standing members who came along out of habit and to see old friends. They were very sound, wise and impressive 80-year olds, but still, everyone able to climb was up in the glaciers stretching themselves in glorious heroic celebration of the miracle of incarnation and I was stewing in the roasting heat of the valleys, getting mansplained how to do hiking.

Besides not realizing I wasn't an actual newbie, just new to ropes and ice, the old guard back at base were also gently and solicitously concerned about the health of my relationship. "Why did he want you here?" They enquired. "Why did he even bring you, if he's not going to attend to you?" Over the space of a day or two, this narrative took up more and more of my mind. "Why am I even here?" I ranted on Strava, after another hike through gorgeous scenery, looking at the same peaks I wanted to touch. "It's not like I have a thesis to finish or life of my own or anything".

Silly thing is - I knew Ken needed his own mountain routes. I definitely don't want him to have to babysit me all the time! For the first time in ages, perhaps ever, he's climbing with someone who's equally capable or even stronger. He's always had to climb slightly under his capacity in order to do it with his life partner. I want him to live fully and have nice things. Of course I can let him go sometimes in order to do that. He's a model guy the rest of the time, of course he can have a week to himself. (Although I'd have liked to know in advance it would be every day so I could make my own plans).

What really got me, though, was I don't have the same thing. Maybe if he'd introduced me before we arrived so I could make my own connections and find partners willing to take me and get me up to speed with this new environment. Maybe if I'd had the foresight to request and arrange access to the group in the weeks before. In any case, even at home I only climb with Ken. I've never got round to finding any other partner, partly because I didn't want other people to see if I lose my shit, and partly it would feel a bit unnecessarily intimate, like cheating, because that's a thing we only do together.

In any case, my bad mood was less about missing Ken than it was about being thwarted in my attempts to get up stuff. Sure, I went to almost 3000 metres on foot alone a few times. But it wasn't spiky enough. It was just hills, like larger scale Scotland. For the real ones, you need to be in pairs, and know your way around the gear, and crevasse rescue and all the rest of it, and although I could possibly have invited myself into a party, at best that would put them in a difficult position if they assumed me to have more skills than I do, and at worst it would endanger all of us.

So I stewed... I cast around for suitably hyperbolic analogies about teasing and torture. The best one I came up with was the thirsty shipwrecked sailor (water, water everywhere, and nary a drop to drink). I even enquired over email for a guided tour ranging from 800 to 1500 Swiss francs. It was mention

of this that actually got Ken's attention when he did come back. It showed him I was serious. "It's like skiing babe", I sighed, "You shouldn't have to be my coach. I'll just have to pay and let the professionals teach me the skills". He was horrified. He didn't think the guided tour looked any good. (I was relieved).

By then he'd got several big routes done and got it more or less out of his system for a while. His climbing partner also announced he was going home because the weather was deteriorating. By that happy chance we could climb together and in mixed groups for the next week, so all was well. The things we went up were not huge, by far not the biggest around, but they were spiky and dramatic and definitely counted as real routes. So all's well that ends well.



But it got me musing on that particular mental illness that I'm susceptible to, and Ken's susceptible to, and our wider culture is susceptible to in a more diffuse way: that drive. It's lauded as ambition but it's just plain old boredom, only for intelligent people. It's not good enough to be among the thing and look at the thing, I need to be on the thing. In narrower form it's wanting to go up spires of rock but broaden out slightly and runners get antsy when they can't run, and traders get vicious when they can't work. It sounds a bit more highbrow than womanisers who can't get laid or addicts who can't get their fix but that's basically what it is. It's a total failure to control your own mind.

I see too now why Ken is ruined for Scotland and doesn't much like to go up our wee mountains. They must smack of constant anticlimax, when all the time you know what is possible. Do I really want to outgrow my own backyard?

And yet it's not bad in and of itself. Why shouldn't someone honour their drives and do what makes them most alive? It's just interesting and instructive to have felt its power. I'll probably be unpacking its implications for a while, not least being more proactive about climbing with other people.

A Little Slacklining

Scott Sutherland

*“Slacklining, the neuromechanical action of balance retention on a tightened band, is achieved through self-learned strategies combining dynamic stability with optimal energy expenditure” **

On a couple of Jacobites meets I've taken my slackline along to provide some light exercise and amusement. Stuart, editing the Journal this year, who must have seen Alexey and me having a go on the line amongst the midges on Rum in 2022, asked if I could write a piece. So here it is, a couple of years down the line 😊.

As a skier working seasons in Austria since winter 2008-09, around 2013 I began to realise my balance was off; I was falling over too often. Not good for a skier, especially an instructor! Skiing is dynamic balancing, and simply concentrating on improving your balance was a top tip I had had from a British race team coach.

You climbers too, need a refined sense of balance so I understand, in transferring weight from limb to limb, and also for example, “flagging”: *“utilizing a flagging foot to counter-balance your body and keep your centre of gravity close to the wall and under control” ***

At the end of the season, April 2014, some Czech colleagues had got hold a slackline and were learning and practicing with it down by the lakeside in Zell am See. It was springtime, sunny, the skiing was all but over, we had some downtime. Such a warm atmosphere, is, I have found, the best way to learn. Slacklining doesn't work very well if you're in a rush, you need to be calm and relaxed. First attempts are difficult, not to say impossible; the line wobbles unnervingly when you first put your foot on it and you need help. So, while Lukas, a colleague, friend, ski racer and now race coach, also a climber, stood on the ground beside, I leaned on his shoulder, tried to stand up on the thing, and walk a few steps.

Later that summer I went to do a course in German at the University of Vienna summer language school. On Friday afternoons (while they generally begin work earlier in the morning than in the UK, some Austrian companies have a rather good custom of stopping work at lunchtime on Fridays), I found there was a slacklining group which met in Prater, the 'recreational oasis' near the middle of the city.

The Vienna Slackliners would have a few lines up, one long one, say 40-50 meters, quite high off the ground at about 2m, a beginner line, up to 10 meters long, about 60cm high, a low slung, very 'slack', line (I read today this is called a Rodeo line) and another medium length one or two. The lines were strung between trees using a couple of methods. The long lines used a pulley system, which looked complex, and the easy lines typically used a ratchet system to tighten them. The lines can usually be made looser or tighter. They're often made of a nylon webbing. They are not steel tightropes like in a Circus, and long poles for balancing are not used, or helpful, apparently.

There were not many people there the few times I visited Prater; it was easy to try it and get a tip or two to work on. I was very impressed with those who could do the long line. It was high off the ground for one thing, meaning further to fall, and two, unlike on the shorter lines, those on them didn't seem to fall! A stable, 'quiet', strong posture is required, with straightish back, knees a little flexed, hands held high, with which balancing adjustments are best made, and a minimum of movement in the head (look ahead, not down) and upper body. It looked cool!



Longline

I met an Austrian man called Igor Scotland 😊, an official of the club, who was selling lines at discounted prices. So, I visited his roomy flat in Vienna one day and purchased a *Slacktivity* line for €100. Igor said it was not a beginner line but was still fine to get going with. It was 35mm wide (typically they are 2cm to 5cm wide, the wider lines being a bit easier), had the necessary elasticity, came with 2 ratchets (beginner lines often only have one), a bag for carrying, and at about 35m long, it would give me 'room for growth'. Well, I could cut it in half now, years later, and sell the half to someone interested, such is the growth I have managed to achieve! 10-15 meters is plenty long enough, I have found, not least as the line moves more in the middle, the longer it is, and is also by necessity higher off the ground (given the drop when you stand on it), so making life more difficult.

Igor, who was about 30, told me since he had begun slacklining 5 years earlier, his skiing had improved, he could maintain balance on a stationary bicycle, and his health had improved as well. Slacklining needs focus and can, I have read, improve concentration. Similar to climbing? Seemed like a good idea to try and learn.



Highline

It is fair to say I'm still not much more than a beginner slackliner, but I haven't devoted huge amounts of time. When I've kept at it for a while over a month or two during the summer, I've made progress. Sometimes it's easier than at other times. After a long time, you must go back and almost relearn. But I enjoy it, it's quite satisfying when it works, and my skiing has probably improved. In a nice spot, like on the promenade near Cramond, or occasionally in the Meadows (slacklines are quite often up there, as many will have seen, and there is at least one Edinburgh Slackline organisation on Facebook, though when I tried to reach them a few years ago, it seemed like they were not very active, and I didn't get much joy), it's a great summer past-time, if you can spare a little time. Others may find it easier than me, or have improved faster (Lukas was on a long line when I last saw him a few years ago) but, as a former GB ski racer and top Trainer with BASI said to me when I started out as an instructor, perhaps with his tongue in his cheek: "When you're older, it takes longer".

One time in the Covid summer of 2020, in Austria, I sneaked out from lockdown and set my line up near a quiet stretch of road towards the end of the valley, where there was a picnic table next to the river. After about 45 minutes a police car passed. Oh shit. Fortunately, they didn't stop. Then, a few minutes later, they came back in the opposite direction, slowed down, stopped and leaned out of the window. Bugger. I was ready for a dressing down, but he said 'no, no, we want to see you do it'. Ok, alright. Fortunately, I managed to string together about 45 seconds without falling, they went away happy and I didn't get arrested.



Summer 2025, on holiday in Turkey, on my Elephant Pocketline (here only just high enough)

History

While balancing is an ancient skill, for example in Yoga, Martial Arts, Tai Chi and acrobatics performances in Greek, Roman and other civilisations, tightrope walking has long been popular in Circuses, the modern sport of slacklining began in the 1980s in the USA. Climbers in Yosemite started to experiment with balancing on chains in car parks and on their ropes. The trend in Europe took off about 2006, when kits became available to buy. The elastic nature of the usually nylon webbing lines has enabled greater possibilities and tricks, and there are now highlines, longlines, rodeo lines, novice lines, freestyle lines, waterlines, competitions and more throughout the world.

The International Slackline Association was officially founded in August 2015 by the [Swiss](#), [Austrian](#), [German](#) and [U.S.](#) national associations.

A Few Things I Have Learned, and more, in my slacklining journey, in case any are interested in learning:

- It is not always easy to find a good spot, with trees of big enough, but not too big, girth, suitable distance apart, flat safe ground beneath, ideally warm, no wind, sunny (Austria here has a distinct advantage over Scotland)
- Setting up and taking down the line takes more time than you think (I find most things do)
- Starting out after a long break I always find quite hard – physical and mental concentration is required, and it can be peculiarly stressful at first, without seemingly requiring much strength or energy.
- Tree protection, using some kind of soft material to wrap around, often supplied when you buy a kit, is recommended, because tightening the line can cut into the bark and damage the tree. We try to be environmentally friendly!
- Friends have said: ‘but I’ll fall and hurt myself’. Not so, because unless you are experienced, the lines are short and not high off the ground. I fall off all the time, and unless there are stones or tree stumps or holes etc, it’s usually completely fine.
- [Ester Ledecká](#) slacklining video – worth a watch, only a minute long, the Czech legend who won gold medals in 2 sports (skiing and snowboarding) at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang doing some fun training, and one for the boys – you can also see how she uses one leg in flagging moves. Link below.
- Elephants - I bought a cheaper, portable *Elephant Pocketline*, for about £30, which is easy to travel with. It is a shorter, thinner, lighter line and uses a pulley system. The YouTube video to set it up has a sleight of hand in it but is still essential. Link below
- Ratchets and rigging must be safe! Accidents have occurred because lines can be under much tension, and if a ratchet is not fully closed, or breaks or slips, it can be very dangerous!
- There are systems to rig lines indoors, and without using trees, which can be researched. But anchoring to a wall with bricks or concrete with some kind of embedded metal ring or bracket, may cause damage due to the strong forces.
- Slacklining over water may sound attractive, but it’s meant to be harder because the surface below is moving, and the brain/eye/ear finds it more difficult. Also, getting out of the water all the time to restart would be a pain.
- Slacklining under the influence is harder, unsurprisingly.
- Seems like some feel the need to move faster along the line (there are speed competitions), but for me it’s just harder. I try to keep moving slowly, without flagging. If I can walk along keeping both feet on, or close to the line, I’m more symmetrical and stable. Flagging helps, but on a slackline, necessary balancing adjustments should come ideally from arms/hands held high, and moving side-to-side.
- Simply being stationary, with both feet on or close to the line, and not flagging, is a skill to work on

- Lines can be used like trampolines, and there are competitions for tricks, e.g. bouncing off the feet, landing on the back, or bum, then up in the air and landing on the stomach etc, with twists and turns etc. Like a big Snow Park, not somewhere I'm going, but good to marvel at. Red Bull video link below
- Walking ALONG the line is easier. Trying to balance on a line with feet at right angles is nigh on impossible. Refer physics, your centre of gravity, base of support etc. Kneeling a tiny bit easier, walking backwards ok, turning round hard for me
- Bare feet or Trainers? – Trainers are a little easier I think, with a bigger, flatter base of support, less likely to slip, but bare feet can give more feeling
- Slackline Park in Hinterglemm (Saalbach, Austria), outside a mountain restaurant with a variety of short lines, fixed there for the whole summer. Great to learn if you don't mind the coffee crowd watching. On a couple of lines, there is also a line above head height you can grab to help. See photo below. The hiking is good too.
- Next summer I must do more. Any Jacobites want to join? Thursday evening before the pub in the Meadows? As climbers, I imagine some of you will have slacklined already.
- Unicycle – another step forward
- Unicycling off road – the final frontier



Slackline place, and Learn-to-Ride Area on the left, Mountain Restaurant out of sight right, Saalbach-Hinterglemm, Austria

Sources, videos etc:

- International Slackline Association website – tons of info
- <https://www.slacklineinternational.org/>
- “How to Slackline for Beginners” YouTube video (4 mins 55secs)
- <https://youtu.be/hxyAYxIAG6A>

- Flagging (** above)
- <https://climbinghouse.com/flagging-technique-guide/>
- "Ester Ledecká balance training" YouTube video (1 min 12 secs)
- <https://youtu.be/TibbRgfTaJY>
- "Top Slacklining Tricks from Red Bull Baylines" YouTube video (1 min 21 secs)
- https://youtu.be/fzaozz_zFYc
- "Slacklining: A narrative review on the origins, neuromechanical models and therapeutic use" (* above, for the many PhDs in the Club 😊)
- <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8223719/>
- Slacktivity
- <https://slacktivity.com/>
- Elephant Slacklines
- <https://elephant-slacklines.com/>
- "How to set up the Elephant Pocketline" YouTube video (5 mins 41 secs)
- <https://youtu.be/O2XM805h14>

Book Review: Climbing the Walls. By Kieran Cunningham

Neil Ogilvy

The premise of Climbing the Walls, by local Edinburgh climber (ed: Kieran's fae Fife) and writer Kieran Cunningham, doesn't take much for mountain people to relate to. The idea of being stuck indoors, unable to access the space that provides us with so much, is something that we all likely felt during the Covid pandemic. For some of us, the loss of that space, that theatre for our passions, had a particularly detrimental affect on our mental health. This is the basic premise of Kieran's book. Except that for him it is so much more than that. Climbing the Walls is a deeply personal retelling of that particular period of time for someone who's very state of mind relies almost entirely on his ability to access the mountains. In a day by day, blow for blow account, he tracks the impact that being trapped in a small apartment in Northern Italy had on his mental state, his bipolar condition, and his relationships both near and far.

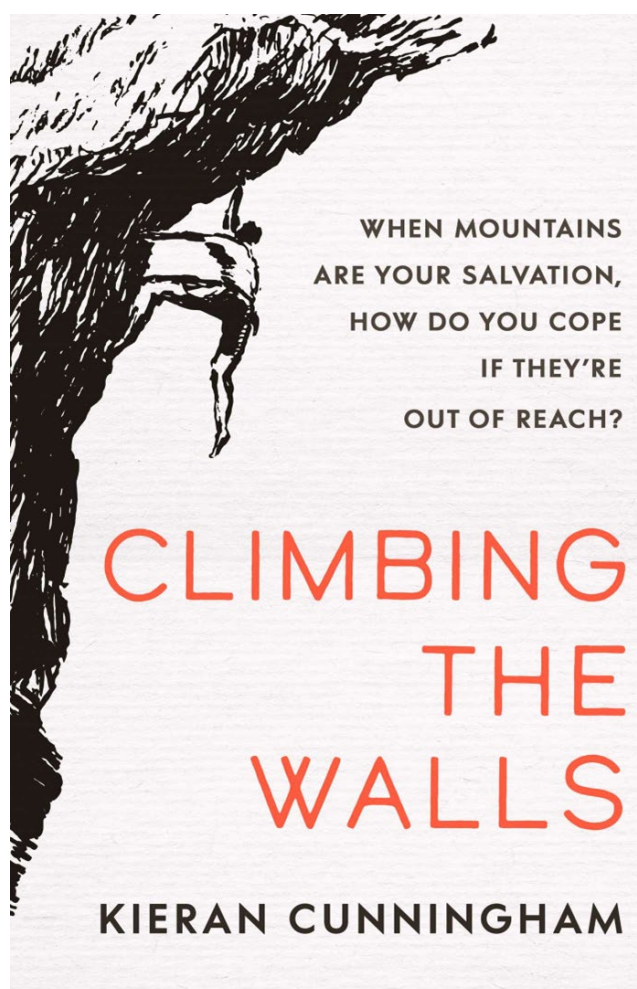
I first read the book in 2021 as the pandemic was still in full swing and we were all constantly moving in and out of lockdowns. At the time, I found it incredibly moving. You see the struggle to maintain connection and close relationships, and the ways he found to cope. I found a kinship in that struggle. I could understand him using the walls of his garden to create climbing routes (I had bought holds and hung them from door frames just to simulate some kind of climbing activity). The retelling of big days in the mountains in the Alps or Scotland felt like you were watching him reminisce to the glory days when it felt like the world we knew would never return.

There were touching moments in the book too, and I found myself laughing out loud on more than one occasion. The relationship that develops with his elderly Italian landlady, for example, and the way in which she adopts him into her, socially distant, family is particularly heart-warming.

Looking back on that pandemic time still feels like some kind of fever dream. Did it all really happen? Did we really find joy in watching movies together over a Zoom call? It's a time that is not often talked about anymore bar the odd humorous analogy of sourdough baking or fights over toilet roll. When Stuart asked me to write a review for the journal, I wasn't sure whether the book would stack up now that "normality" had returned. So I reread the book this year in a new light. This time it felt like an important snapshot into that period of all of our lives. At times it was a difficult read and it brought back memories that, perhaps, I didn't want to have, and the emotions I didn't know still bubbled under the surface. It felt cathartic to do so, and reflect on how much has happened since then, how many outdoor days have been enjoyed since. Maybe it is important that we do reflect and really appreciate the times we are getting in our mountains.

So yes, *Climbing the Walls* is a mountain book, but not in the usual sense. The retelling of some epic days at altitude or at the crag are an aside and the real crux of the book is showcasing the mental benefit of our hobbies and what can happen when they are taken away. In this way, it is a really refreshing take on a much-repeated genre.

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Obituary: Fiona Zeiner: 1972 – 2025.

On Christmas day, 2025, we lost a very special person. While it will be most keenly felt by her husband Karl, her family and many close friends, Fiona's passing is an unfathomable loss to the Jacobites, and it is difficult to overstate her significance to the club.

Born Fiona Margaret Milligan in Paisley on the 21st of July 1972, Fiona grew up initially in Glasgow and then Ponteland, Northumberland. As a child she enjoyed the outdoors and her sisters remember her strength, natural capability and confidence out in nature. Outdoor life mattered deeply to her, and she went on to achieve the Bronze, Silver, and Gold Duke of Edinburgh Awards.

Alongside this, Fiona was deeply interested in the world around her and was an avid reader. Her childhood home was musical, and Fiona learned the piano to Grade 6 and the clarinet to Grade 8. In her final year at school, she won Young Musician of the Year.

Fiona went on to read chemistry at Oxford and enjoyed her four years there. She rowed in a college eight for one year and played clarinet in the wind band, forming many close friendships particularly through a very active student church. After graduating, she engaged in charity work and went on to work with Birmingham City Mission, largely supporting the elderly through home visits and work at the day centre, as well as serving at soup kitchens late into the night. In 2002, she completed a master's degree in computer science at Newcastle University. Employment followed as a software tester at Atos in Edinburgh.

Away from work, Fiona became increasingly involved in mountaineering. She became a regular at Alien Rock and became a key member of a women's climbing group where she formed lasting friendships. After joining the Jacobites in 2004 she did her first Munro on the Ring of Steall. She also walked St Cuthbert's Way and the West Highland Way, and in 2006 went hiking in the Pyrenees with Graham Pearson, Gwydion Ball and John Williams. More Munros followed on the many Jacobites meets she attended.

In 2007, Fiona met Karl and they quickly bonded over a shared love of the outdoors; their first date was a walk on a misty Arthur's Seat. After joining their respective clubs, Fiona and Karl continued to pursue their own interests independently. Fiona headed off backpacking with her friend Sue, while Karl took on various endurance events, for which Fiona would not only become a dedicated member of his support team but a participant as well.

Fiona completed her first duathlon at the World Championships in Edinburgh in 2010. A year later, she completed her first Ironman in Austria with Karl coaching and supporting her throughout, with her parents travelling to watch her finish. She competed in the Glen Shee 9 and Stuc a'Chroin hill races, then turned her focus to marathon running, recording a fast time at the Lochaber Marathon in 2012. Certain that this would be her only marathon, she held to that decision until the prospect of a Good For Age place at the London Marathon in 2013 proved too compelling to resist.

Holidays and travel were shaped by cycling and running. In Vienna in 2016, seated in a café over a glass of wine, Fiona and Karl agreed on their engagement. Fiona's success in triathlon continued when she completed the European Championships in Kitzbühel just a few months before her wedding day. On the 21st of October 2017, Fiona and Karl were married at Dalmeny Kirk.

Fiona continued to work her way through the Munros and in 2018 ran the Ring of Steall Skyrace, a moment that marked how far her fitness and confidence had progressed since that very first ascent.

Aware that there had once been a hill race on Ben Lomond, Fiona also knew she had never climbed it, as her mountaineering club had always headed further north. With the race not expected to return after Covid, Fiona, with Karl, Sally and Stuart, travelled across on the summer solstice, reaching the summit, her penultimate Munro, just as the sun slipped below the horizon.

As she approached her 50th birthday, Fiona resolved to complete all 282 Munros by that milestone. She chose Spidean Coire nan Clach on Beinn Eighe near Torridon, climbing alongside Karl and his father, Elmar, then aged 82. At the foot of the mountain, Fiona's parents waited to celebrate their return.

Sadly, in February 2023, Fiona was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and underwent major surgery followed by six weeks of radiotherapy. Throughout her treatment and recovery, Fiona remained active in the hills and continued to travel with Karl to watch cycling events, refusing to allow illness to define the limits of her life.

In February 2025, Fiona was given the heartbreaking diagnosis that her cancer had returned and was untreatable. Chemotherapy was offered to improve her quality of life, allowing her to continue running and cycling for as long as possible.

With Fiona and Karl being members of Harmeny Running Club and later Musselburgh Running Club, they were able to participate in cross-country running, and Fiona did her last cross-country race after her terminal diagnosis. She went on the Skye meet last May and summited Sgurr Mhic Coinneach with Pam and Lucy. In the summer, Fiona and Karl took the train to Lake Garda, where they spent time with Karl's sister and her infant son before travelling on to Austria to visit Karl's family.

Adventures were never meant to stop for Fiona. Before cancer, there were always more events to train for and goals to set her sights on. Fiona passed away on the 25th of December 2025 with Karl and her mother by her side.



Fiona on the summit of Sgurr Mhic Coinneach, May 2025. Photo: Lucy Spark

A Reflection on Fiona's Mountain Life

The Jacobites formed an important part of Fiona's life for 21 years, offering friendship and community. Fiona had many talents, one of which was writing, so her mountain life is best described using her own words with extracts from articles she wrote for various Jacobites journals:

"I'd moved to Edinburgh to start a new job in 2003, and joined the Jacobites in the early summer of 2004, mostly picking the club because it had a decent website, as far as I can recall...Because I'd just moved to Edinburgh, I didn't really know anyone, and so I didn't have anything better to do than go on meets, so I did, a lot."

Twenty-one years of stories unfold, including a completion of the Munros in 2022, her many friendships forged in the mountains holding a special place.

"I've always tried to prioritise good days out spending time with people over simply bagging... '17 people joined me on Spidean Coire nan Clach, one of the two Beinn Eighe summits to see me finish my round. The most notable person was my father-in-law, Elmar, who was determined to take part and who demonstrated that being 82 is no barrier..."

And on where to go next after completing her Munros:

"Most of all I want to carry on enjoying the hills, and the people I share them with, whatever the weather."

An enthusiasm to learn how to climb led to her joining a women-only climbing group to complement the Jacobites, with a trip to Reiff, which she fondly recalls, maybe not with a climber's eye!

"There were wonderful views which left the hillwalker in me wondering why I'd come all this way to spend my days going up and down 10 metre cliffs... but it was a good weekend..."I have been grateful for the patience of a good many club members for getting me up and down all the Munros on the Cuillin Ridge – fortunately I did the Inn Pinn while I was still climbing regularly."

Club members were treated periodically to Fiona's hidden talents, always revealed modestly, such as her piano playing. On a trip to Rum, where those 'that could play' trickled out Frère Jacques, she saddled the Steinway in Kinloch Castle and what followed wouldn't have been amiss in the Usher Hall.

The mountains were a place of inspiration and wonder for her, appealing to Fiona's curiosity, scientific mind and metaphysical interest. In the early days, a trip to the Grey Corries left her spellbound:

"I'd never seen anything like this before. Out came the camera...the clouds billowed up against the mountains and poured through passes, it flowed and boiled along on a strong wind and above it the sun shone out of a clear blue sky. As we climbed higher and looked back, it lay in a great sheet over the lower ground. On we climbed. The cloud was clearing more... [we had] spectacular views of Aonach Mor with Ben Nevis beyond."

The mountains offered Fiona athletic challenge, channelling her tenacity, determination, discipline and athletic prowess. Remembering her early days, one recalls her remarking how she needed to get fitter so she wasn't looking at bottoms all day on the way up hill!

"I wasn't particularly hill fit to start with, and I hated getting left behind, so I started going to the gym and running on the treadmill set to maximum slope. That, and going on lots of meets, improved my ability to go uphill."

On meeting Karl, just as she'd invested in a full set of one-person lightweight camping gear, she remarks,

"I met Karl and while this was in general A Good Thing it did slow my rate of bagging Munros down somewhat!....."However, as a result of meeting Karl, I also started to get into triathlons, and running in particular, and I started to get fitter. A lot fitter."

Fiona's first Munros in 2003 had been on the Ring of Steall. She reflects:

"There's a photo of me on that first Ring of Steall walk, flat on my back in the sunshine, tired out. If you had told me then that I would be returning to run over those hills, and not just to run the route I was walking but starting from Kinlochleven, so that I would be climbing onto the ridge twice, I would not have believed you. Yet that is what I did in 2018, taking part in the Ring of Steall "Skyrace."

Fiona's life was enriched by the club and by the mountains, but she gave so much back to the club. Not just through the joy of friendships, but through her gift of time to the running of the club, serving on the committee several times in different roles.

She was key to inspiring former but still-active members to rejoin and was greatly welcoming and encouraging to the many new members during her periods on the committee. Her pragmatism and can-do attitude were influential, and indeed essential, when she came forward to take on the role of president in late 2019, just in time for a global pandemic and calmly steered the club through these times. Together with Karl, she was pivotal in keeping the club together socially when we couldn't get to the hills together. We all saw Fiona's quiet steeliness again during her last 12 months of life, when despite her personal challenges, she re-configured the club website, with a re-launch last autumn.

The mountains were a special place for Fiona. They are spiritual places for some, and we will, in our mountain steps from this day on, hear our friend call, *"Climb higher, my strength will pull you on."*

Her rocks, her hills, are kindled now.

Her nature and thy light combine,

And manifold in her art thou,

Her loveliness a part of thine.

(Nan Shepherd)





