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# WELCOME

Nicola Hardy finds solitude on Whiteless Pike (p32)



Photo: Nicola Hardy

## *Find your own path*



WE HAD THE TOP of England's second-highest mountain to ourselves. And in the time it had taken us to walk there – up Esk Gorge, with its booming waterfalls and diamond-clear plunge pools, and over the empty expanse of Great Moss – we had seen two or three people.

This was on a sunny Saturday. In July. We lingered awhile, peering over Scafell's plunging crags, admiring the view of Wast Water stretching towards the sun-hazed Irish Sea, and marvelling at the difference in numbers between this summit (us two) and the slightly higher one about half a kilometre away (40+). That other summit was, of course, the roof of England itself: Scafell Pike.

There is plenty of room in the hills. But it might not always seem like it. Even before this last year, when enjoyment of 'the outdoors' has surged as other liberties have been curtailed, the mountains seemed busier than ever. Every sunny Bank Holiday, it's almost become a national pastime to express outrage at photos of giant lines of people stretching up to the summits of Snowdon or Pen y Fan.

Personally, it gives me a kind of patriotic pride to see British people literally taking their love for queueing to new heights; but not everyone feels that way. Judging by Twitter, at least, reactions to such images range from incredulity to revulsion and even contempt. Clearly, these folk just aren't doing hillwalking 'right'.

Lurking somewhere is a fear of the countryside somehow being overwhelmed by the wrong 'sorts'. A commenter on Twitter recently responded to an article I'd written on alternatives to popular mountains by saying: "The more you tell them, the more certain mass invasion will happen". Mass invasion? What year is it, 1940?

I don't seek to downplay the challenges we face as the countryside opens up again (a survey this month, for example, found that 58% of people in Scotland intend to spend more time outside in the future). It sickens me as much as anyone to see abandoned tents and excrement-covered beauty spots. But education, investment and effective enforcement (rather than, say, blanket bans targeting all wild campers) are the solution, not knee-jerk and exclusionary attitudes.

Concerns about the overrunning of the countryside by the masses are nothing new. "Is there no nook of English ground secure from rash assault?" fumed Wordsworth in 1844, protesting against the construction of a railway to Windermere. Almost two centuries later, despite 20 million visitors coming to the Lake District every year, the region is still far from being truly overwhelmed. Know where to look (hint: go west) and you can still easily find levels of solitude that would make even Wordsworth feel cloudlike levels of loneliness.

So that's what this issue of *TGO* is about. My Scafell story is just one example of how concentrated the 'honeypot effect' can be: get off the beaten track, even by just a little, and you can often be amazed by how quiet everything is. For more inspiration along these lines, I commend to you excellent features by James Forrest (p12), Nicola Hardy (p32), Craig Weldon (p42) and Alex Roddie (p48), all of which show, in different ways, that there is more than enough room out there for all of us – even in little Britain. And for good measure, Faraz Shibli's awesome feature on his crossing of the Gobi Desert (p56) is a reminder that there are still places on the planet where space and sublime nature can be found in wonderful abundance.

**Carey Davies, Editor**

 @carey\_davies

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Photo credit: Dougie Cunningham



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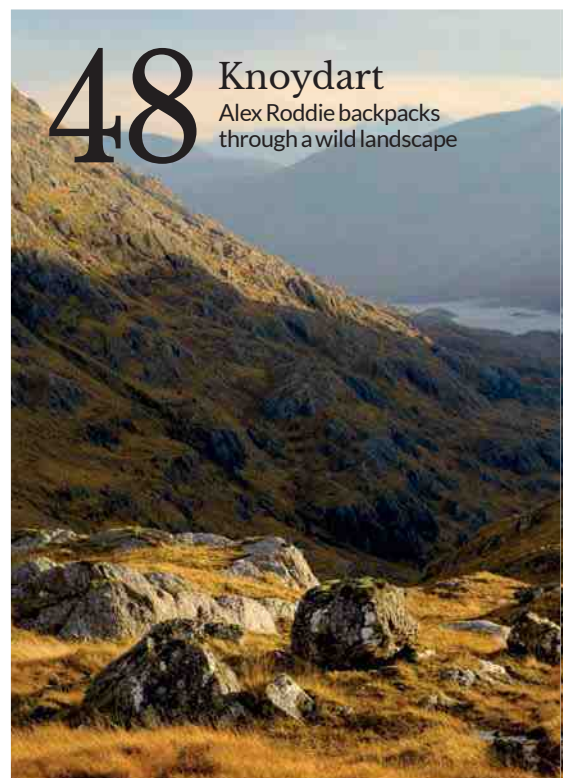
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**“Why do we search for solitude when we go into the mountains? Is it to get away from it all, or is it to connect with something else?”**

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# CONTRIBUTORS & CONTACTS

## Faraz Shibli

Faraz is a walker, writer and lawyer. Born and raised in Scotland, many of his adventures have been abroad: leading camels across the Mongolian Gobi Desert (see his feature on p56), climbing the Kyrgyz Tien Shan mountains and cycling around Laos and Thailand. During lockdown, however, he has been discovering local walks in Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire, as well as planning a big trip walking and wild camping around the Scottish Highlands later this year.



## Hanna Lindon

Hanna is a freelance adventure travel journalist who specialises in writing about walking, scrambling and all things outdoorsy. She's been locked down in the South Downs with two small children for the last few months, using night walks and far too many mountain-related YouTube videos to stay (semi) sane. Writing for *The Great Outdoors* on the topics currently making waves in the outdoors world helps too (read her feature on lynx reintroduction on p18).



## Craig Weldon

Thanks to the council's core paths network, author and regular TGO contributor Craig has found new ways to explore his Midlothian patch in lockdown. He's been up early for snowy sunrises, gone on snowdrop hunts, enjoyed moonlit walks, and undertaken muddy runs in the woods tracking deer and badger trails. In any normal month the re-release of his hillwalking memoir *The Weekend Fix* would be his personal highlight, but that could be topped if we get the green light to finally roam further afield.



## Nicola Hardy

Writer and komoot ambassador Nic worked in IT in South Yorkshire for a decade before diving into life as an adventurer and outdoor writer in 2019. She began by climbing all 282 of Scotland's Munros and – after her plans to hike 3000km in New Zealand were scuppered by Covid – she continued adventuring closer to home. In October 2020 she walked 330km from her birthplace in Sheffield to her new home in Cockermouth, Cumbria. On p32 she recounts this journey on foot across three national parks.



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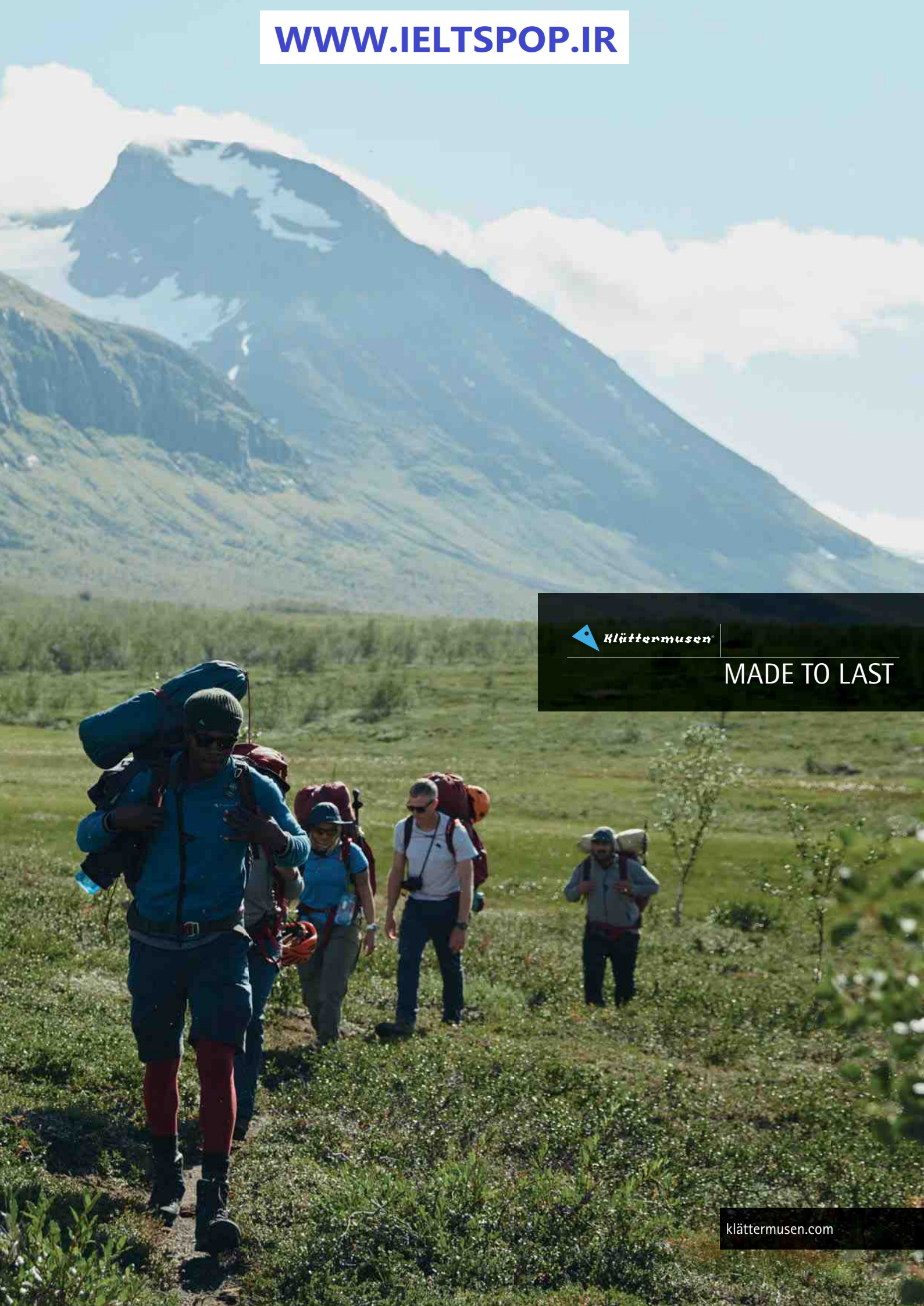
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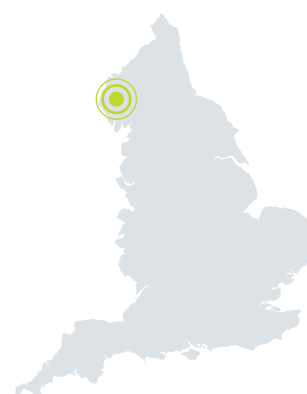


 Klättermusen

MADE TO LAST







## Buttermere, Lake District

“Every so often, the usually rewarding experience of mountain photography can be diminished to being a repetitive flit between failures. These failures are usually determined by either too much cloud or too little.

“Eventually, as on this golden evening atop Fleetwith Pike, the cycle breaks. Blue sky over the Helvellyn range behind me and waves of moodier cloud in front meant I had options, but I immediately knew which way I’d be shooting.

“I simply had to wait until the hidden sun lowered itself into a gap, flooding the Buttermere valley with glorious light.”

Photo by Stewart Smith  
[stewartsmithphotography.co.uk](http://stewartsmithphotography.co.uk)

# ALMANAC

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*in the hills*

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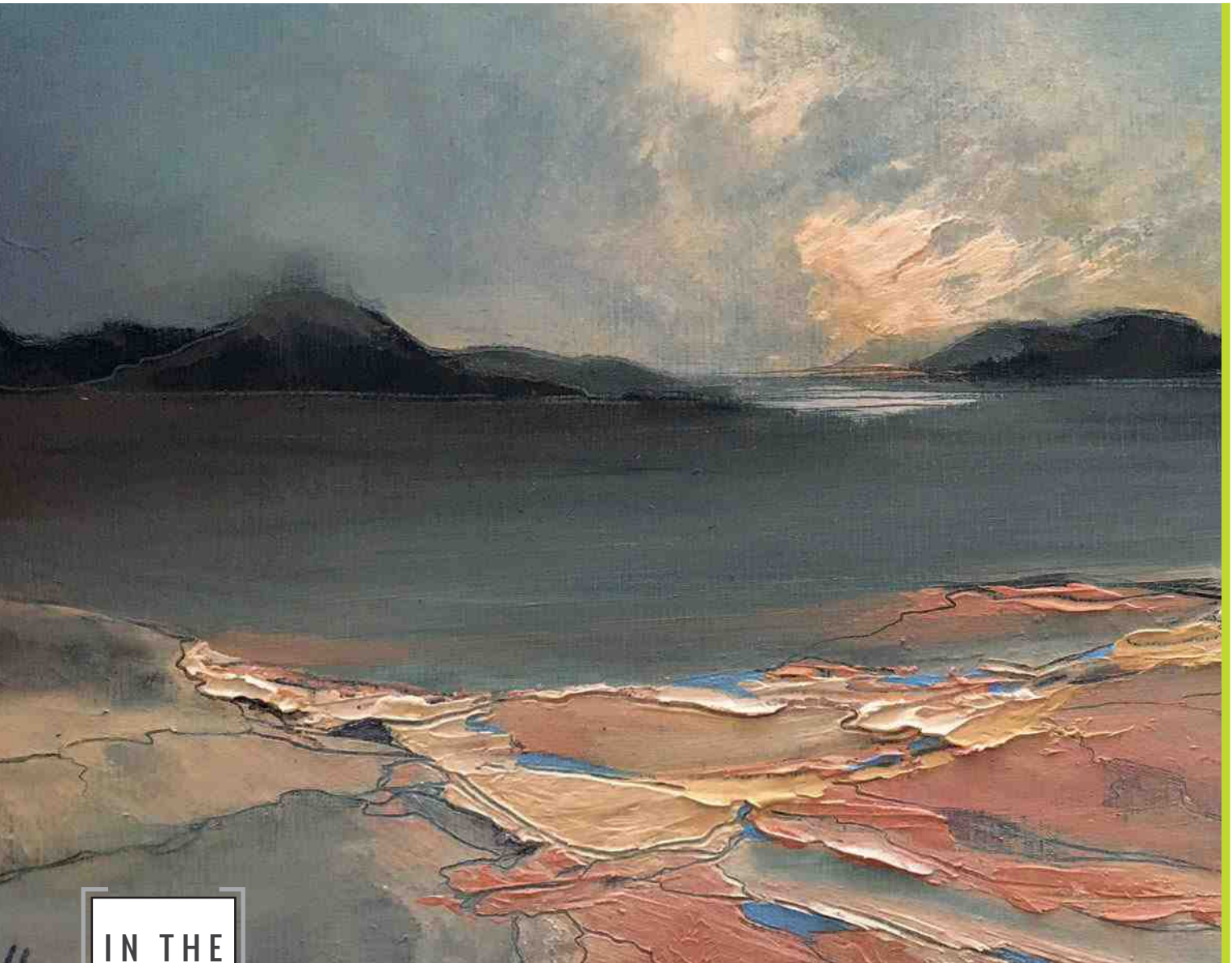
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IN THE  
FRAME

## Magic Light

*Lisa Houston*

Size: 15x21cm  
Medium: oil on board

THE SOFT, ALMOST SECRETIVE LIGHT captured in this scene on Loch na Droma Buidhe illustrates the wonder of discovering hidden spots along the wild and remote Ardnamurchan peninsula. “Since May 2013 I’ve been lucky enough to live here,” notes artist Lisa Houston. “Even after all this time I am still finding new places to explore. It has not lost its magic for me.”

The combination of the remote area and the rapidly changing weather keeps Lisa on her toes when it comes to her artwork: “I live amidst Corbetts, glens and lochs and not too far from the open sea. The changing weather, the light and atmosphere is what inspires me to paint. This painting was done from sketches whilst on anchor in Loch na Droma Buidhe at the end of Loch Sunart. One of the biggest challenges was trying to include all the compositional elements on such a small canvas without losing the sense of space and distance or the atmosphere and magic light. It is a small painting representing a spontaneous moment.”

See more of Lisa’s work on Instagram and Twitter, both @lhoustonpaints, and on her website [lisahouston.co.uk](http://lisahouston.co.uk)



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# 10 WAYS to get the mountains to yourself

The UK's hills and mountains are likely to be exceptionally busy this summer - but it's always possible to find quiet corners. **James Forrest** rounds up his top 10 tips for avoiding the summer crowds.



Watching the sunset from a Cadair Berwyn bivvy

**1 AVOID THE TRAIL 'RUSH HOUR'**  
Most hillwalkers are active between 9am and 5pm. But walk outside these hours and you'll find the hills are far less crowded places. In summer, hit the trail pre-dawn and you can be up and down a mountain before most people have even arrived in the car park. Or, if the thought of a 4am alarm is anathema, plan a mountain ascent at sunset or after dark instead. Rory Southworth, an Ordnance Survey GetOutside champion, says: "After the sun has set and everyone else is home, I grab my headtorch and get the hills all to myself - the perfect way to escape the crowds."

**2 PRIORITISE MIDWEEK AND OFF-SEASON**  
For obvious reasons, the mountains are always busier at weekends, on bank holidays and during the school holidays. Head to Snowdon on a Saturday in August and it'll be like Piccadilly Circus; but climb it on a random Tuesday in mid-October and the crowds will have dissipated. The shoulder seasons - April to June and September to October - are a good bet for quieter hills, while a Tuesday to Thursday midweek break is less likely to be heaving than a weekend getaway. Job commitments might prevent such an approach, but

**"If you've heard of the hill, avoid it' is a good mantra if you want to dodge the crowds."**

perhaps you can strategically book some annual leave.

**3 PICK YOUR MOUNTAIN RANGE WISELY**  
Those perennially-popular mountain ranges ➤



Wild camping  
on Low Fell in the  
Lake District

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Dawn views after a wild camp near Great Gable

– places like Glen Coe, the Ogwen Valley, Helvellyn and the Yorkshire Three Peaks – will be swarming this summer. So instead why not explore a less fashionable mountain range? For example, the untrendy bits between national parks, those out-on-a-limb peaks most people ignore, and that “I’ll do it one day” grassy hill you never quite get around to. Author Ronald Turnbull suggests the Cheviots, Mendips, Durham Dales, Welsh Marches, the Berwyns, Back o’ Skiddaw and the South Pennines – the latter being busier with ‘peaty sheep’ than it is with humans.

**4 SHUN ALFRED AND SIR HUGH** Peak-bagging lists like the Wainwrights and Munros have gone ‘mainstream’ over the past few years, adding to congestion on these tick-list mountains. A better bet this summer would be to avoid the famous 214 and 282 peaks respectively, and instead choose a lesser-known mountain checklist. In the Lake District try the 541 Birketts or the 116 Wainwright ‘Outlying Fells’; and in Scotland go for the Corbetts, Donalds or Grahams to dodge the Munros’ heavy footfall. Or, if you absolutely must bag a Scottish 3000-footer, choose strategically: when the famed Torridon trio are absolutely teeming, just to the south the Coulin Forest Munros will be all but empty.

**5 EMBRACE THE OBSCURE AND THE REMOTE** If you’ve heard of the hill, avoid it. That’s a good mantra if you want to dodge the crowds. Instead set your sights on remote, secluded hills in the middle of nowhere. “I used to focus on the popular, busy peaks,”

says Nuttall-bagger Adrian Conchie. “But after discovering a list of obscure and little-known hills to ‘bag’ in quieter areas, I found a greater sense of solitude on my walks. The list gives you the motivation to bypass the honeypot mountains and instead explore places you’d otherwise probably never visit, such as the Cheviots or Pennines.”

**6 CHOOSE A LESSER-KNOWN ROUTE** Climb Skiddaw from Keswick via the tourist path and you’ll be one link in a huge chain of hikers all marching the same way up the giant of the Lakes’ Northern Fells. But start from the north-west in Barkbeth, ascending via Randel Crag, and you’ll barely see a soul. The same is true of almost all mountains: some paths are well-known and popular, others feel hidden and less-frequented. Do your research and choose wisely. A technical route or scramble may prove less busy than an easier, well-maintained track suitable for tourists and day trippers.

**7 GO WILD CAMPING** Wild camping is perhaps the ultimate get-away-from-it-all tactic in the hills. You’ll hike up at dusk, spend all night under the stars, and then walk out at dawn – making the most of the quietest times of day. But finding a tranquil camp spot can be tricky, with tarns and summits particularly busy. “I find heading cross-country across moorland is the way to go,” suggests prolific thru-hiker Kyle Lintern (better known by his trail alias Impala). “I use Google Earth to locate secluded, peaceful camp spots and then hoof it through the heather until I find nirvana.”



**8 DO A LONG-DISTANCE WALK** Long-distance walks can be quieter than day trails, because you’ll journey across those ‘no man’s land’ sections between popular areas. Avoid well-known trails like the West Highland Way and instead pick an obscure route from the Long Distance Walkers Association’s 1600-strong list. Will Renwick, president of Ramblers Cymru, says: “Walking the 298-mile Cambrian Way made me realise how many gloriously wild places can be found in Wales, away from the honeypot areas.” Komoot ambassador Nicola Hardy adds: “Create your own unique, bespoke trail by linking public footpaths together into a quiet, crowd-free itinerary.”

**9 HEAD OFF-PISTE** Most hikers stick religiously to well-worn paths as they aim for a summit, but head off-trail in search of a random landmark and you’ll experience the quieter side of a mountain. Scott McAlister, of navigation firm NavTrek, says: “Learning the skills to interpret a map correctly will help you to head ‘off-piste’ and create your



Escaping the crowds on the Aran ridge in Wales



The views from the summit of Arenig Fach

own trail. It'll open up a new world of possibilities, such as ascending a pathless route, or planning a hike to an arbitrary or farflung point of interest, perhaps a waterfall, ruined barn or sheepfold, rather than plodding to the summit like everyone else."

## 10 DON'T BE A FAIR-WEATHER HIKER

When the sun comes out, so do the crowds – there's no avoiding it. But on grey, mizzly days the mountains are likely to be far quieter, and that represents an opportunity for the hardened hiker. If you're lucky, the forecast might unexpectedly improve and you'll get the sun-drenched ridges all to yourself. If the clouds never lift, well, at least you enjoyed some precious crowd-free hours in the hills. Obviously we're not encouraging you to go scrambling on Aonach Eagach in a blizzard; but armed with good waterproofs and a positive mindset, the overcast hills can still be a joy. ▲



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MOUNTAIN  
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## Dave Morris wins Scottish Award for Excellence

AFTER DEVOTING most of his life to protecting and promoting access to Scotland's wilderness, Dave Morris has won the Scottish Award for Excellence in Mountain Culture.

From the Lurchers Gully enquiry in the 1980s to masterminding the whole campaign for access in Scotland before the publication of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, the former Ramblers Scotland director has been a stalwart environmental and access campaigner. His painstaking work over many years enabled Scotland to enjoy the world-leading access legislation that so many benefit from today.

The award has been presented every year by the Fort William Mountain Festival since 2008. Former *The Great Outdoors* Editor Cameron McNeish (the 2018 recipient of the award) described Dave Morris as "the closest thing we have to a John Muir figure... a wild-country champion who could lift up the eyes of an uncaring public and show them that in wildness lies the hope of the world".

For eight years Dave also represented the interests of Scotland on a world stage as the President of the Mountain Protection Commission of the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA).

He is a lifelong climber, skier and hillwalker. Now breathing through a small hole in his throat following a laryngectomy operation due to throat cancer, Dave has climbed to 20,000ft in the Himalayas, gone ski mountaineering in Alaska and climbed alpine rock routes in Norway.

For more info, and to see past recipients of the award, visit [mountainfestival.co.uk](http://mountainfestival.co.uk).

### IN NUMBERS

## THE KNOYDART FOUNDATION

In February, news broke that the remotest pub in mainland Britain – the Old Forge in Inverie on the Knoydart peninsula – is going up for sale for £425,000. What's more, local residents are hoping to bring it into community ownership. Knoydart's reputation for isolation and challenging terrain is legendary, but under the current ownership the pub has received mixed reviews. If the local bid is successful, it would follow on from another successful community buyout 22 years ago by the Knoydart Foundation. We take a look at what it has achieved since...

In 1999, the Knoydart Foundation purchased **17,500** acres of estate land on the peninsula for **£750,000**.

It has since planted   
**500,000**  
 trees in Knoydart

*The only way of reaching Inverie - and its pub - is by walking 18 miles or making a*

**7 mile** 

**TWELVE**

new affordable homes have been built and 14 businesses have been helped to grow

The number OF RESIDENTS HAS GROWN FROM 65  to 111

### ARCHIVE

*"I love to camp for its own sake. Just to sit in the doorway of the tent, with the kettle coming nicely to the boil, is in itself an uplifting experience".*

ROSE MILLIGAN

*The Great Outdoors, August 1980*



THE  
*View*  
FROM HERE

Crow Park  
(Keswick)

Photo: Ronald Turnbull

# CALL OF THE WILD: is Scotland ready for the return of lynx?

A new study aims to assess public attitudes towards the reintroduction of lynx in Scotland. Could this be the first step in Britain's most exciting rewilding project yet? **Hanna Lindon** takes a look

IN JANUARY, conservationists launched a year-long study to evaluate the social feasibility of returning lynx to Scotland. Eurasian lynx were driven to extinction in Britain more than 500 years ago via hunting and habitat depletion. Now a group of charities – Scotland: The Big Picture (STBP), Trees for Life and Vincent Wildlife Trust – wants to assess public appetite for the reintroduction of Europe's third-largest predator.

"This isn't a campaign to reintroduce lynx, although we make no secret of the fact that we'd like them back," says Peter Cairns, Executive Director of STBP. "It's a social feasibility study. The aim is to accurately assess the public and stakeholder support for lynx – or indeed not. And also to identify any common barriers that exist and how they might be overcome with a collaborative approach."

## A key first step

The suggestion that lynx might be returned to the Scottish Highlands and other remote areas of Britain is nothing new in itself. The idea was first mooted in Scotland back in 2008, and in 2018 a proposal to release six animals in Northumberland was rejected by the government. Previous studies have modelled what the reintroduction of lynx might look like in Scotland and estimated how many animals the Scottish countryside could support.



A female Eurasian lynx in a Norwegian birch forest

However, this new study is a key first step towards securing an official licence for any reintroduction.

"The process [for reintroductions] is to make a licence application from the statutory licensing body – in our case NatureScot – and to do that you first have to prove there is social acceptance and tolerance for any species, particularly a large predator," says Peter. "So it's necessary in statutory terms as well as in philosophical terms, because without people's support the process is much more difficult – if not impossible."

## Lynx in the landscape

The 'Lynx to Scotland' study will initially focus on two areas that have been identified as suitable lynx habitat: the Cairngorms and Argyll. Both have large populations of roe deer, which are currently only controlled through human intervention.

"The cost of deer management across Scotland is huge," Peter points out. "Forestry

and Land Scotland spends huge amounts of money culling woodland deer. Then there's the cost of fencing deer in and out. But lynx are a free and efficient deer management service. They regulate herbivore numbers and ecologically they are recognised as vital drivers of healthy ecosystems."

By dispersing deer across the landscape and leaving the remains of kills for smaller animals to feast on, lynx could both control deer numbers and improve biodiversity across Scotland. Ultimately, this could even lead to visible changes to the landscape itself.

"They won't transform the landscape quickly and there is unlikely to be any radical impact we couldn't reasonably guess at," says Peter. "But over a period of time I think they would reinstate ecological processes that are missing across Britain – although in visual terms it will be nuanced and quite slow."

## Walking with wild cats

Lynx to Scotland researchers will be



[clockwise from left] Native Caledonian pine forest in the Cairngorms - an example of lynx-friendly habitat; lynx are famously secretive; the creatures are woodland animals, relying on trees and foliage to stay hidden



Photo credits: Scotland: The Big Picture

consulting with stakeholders such as farmers, landowners, ghillies, gamekeepers and tourism operators – but the plan is also to canvass the opinion of those who visit and enjoy the Scottish countryside.

Most organisations agree that lynx pose no threat to humans. According to the Lynx UK Trust, there are no recorded attacks on humans by Eurasian lynx anywhere in the world. So what interaction would walkers have with these secretive creatures if they were to be reintroduced to the Highlands?

“A sighting would be a rare event,” says Peter. “You could walk the hills for many years in lynx country without seeing a lynx. They are woodland animals – they rely on cover to stay hidden. That’s not to say you wouldn’t see evidence of them. They tend to stash their prey, so if you were walking up a mountain path you might get a sniff of a roe deer that had been stashed by a lynx. It’s also possible that you could see tracks.”

Despite the low chance of a sighting,

evidence from other countries where lynx have been introduced suggests that the charismatic wild cats are a big tourism draw – another argument in support of their reintroduction.

### The long road to release

While previous surveys have suggested that the wider Scottish public is broadly in favour of reintroducing lynx, there’s likely to be resistance from local farmers and landowners. NFU Scotland has previously said that “any proposals to re-introduce predators such as lynx or wolves are of huge concern to Scottish farmers and crofters.” The organisation cited reports from Norway of hill farmers giving up stocking sheep due to lynx predation.

Peter believes that these concerns are misplaced. He points out that Norwegian sheep range in forests and that predation is therefore exponentially higher in the Scandinavian country than it is anywhere

else in Europe. “A more comparable example might be Switzerland,” he suggests, “where they lose something like 70 sheep per year across the whole country.”

Whether or not such opposition is well-founded, it’s still the greatest barrier that proponents of lynx reintroduction must overcome. According to Dr David Hetherington, author of *The Lynx and Us*, reintroductions to Bavaria and Austria in the 1980s failed because local hunters were against them and many of the released animals were shot. Similar concerns would exist if lynx were returned to Scotland without the support of the rural communities. Could they suffer the same fate as Wales’ last golden eagle?

“This is a conversation that’s been rattling around for many years and various people have tickled it around the edges,” says Peter. “But the bottom line is in order to move it forward this study is an essential step.”

# ALMANAC

## Top 10 WALKS IN GLEN COE

From classic Munros and legendary ridge scrambles to hidden valleys and lochside strolls, Glen Coe is a veritable walking paradise

It is probably the most iconic mountain landscape in Scotland: a glen of impossibly craggy peaks, razor-sharp ridges and lush hidden valleys. Glen Coe runs east to west from Rannoch Moor to the shores of Loch Leven and Loch Linnhe, dissected by the noisy A82. Either side of the road is a dizzying array of striking, eye-catching mountains, whose names alone are often enough to set the hearts of hillwalkers racing with excitement and anticipation.



### 1. AONACH EAGACH

Aonach Eagach is a blade-like crest of frightening proportions, with perpendicular drops on either side of the 'Notched Ridge'. It is a Grade 2 scramble along this snaking, serrated spine of monstrous pinnacles, knobbly turrets and fangs of rocks – about as gnarly and vertical as it gets without being actual rock-climbing. But for the confident scrambler, it is a magnificent day out. You'll bag the two Munros of Meall Dearg (953m) and Sgorr nam Fiannaidh (967m) – and almost certainly end up toasting your derring-do with a pint at the Clachaig Inn.

connoisseurs. The ascent from the A82 is romantically rugged, while the summit views to the Nevis range and the barbaric spine of the Aonach Eagach are Scotland at its finest.

### 4. PAP OF GLENCOE

What it lacks in height, it makes up in drama. The Pap of Glencoe (742m), or Sgorr na Ciche to use its Sunday name, is a conical peak rising above the village of Glencoe, at the western end of the Aonach Eagach ridge. Said to be breast-shaped (in Gaelic it's the 'peak of the breast'), the Pap of Glencoe is commonly climbed from the village – a steep ascent over rough terrain culminating in expansive views across Loch Leven and Loch Linnhe. It's a fantastic introduction to the glen.



### 2. BUACHAILLE ETIVE MOR

Guarding the head of Glen Coe like a colossal sentry, Buachaille Etive Mor is a domineering mass of knobbly outcrops and precipitous rock faces, gashed by vertical gullies. It has a handsome pyramidal profile, like a child's drawing of a perfectly triangular mountain, and looks almost unclimbable from many angles. But from the achingly idyllic, white-washed mountaineering hut at Lagangarbh, The Buachaille is a relatively simple walk via the Coire na Tulaich gully before bagging the mountain's two Munros: Stob Dearg (1022m) and Stob na Broige (956m).

### 5. BEINN A' CHRULAISTE

"I'd rather live in a hovel with a view of a palace, than live in a palace with a view of a hovel." This is how it works with Beinn a' Chrulaiste (857m), a rounded, bulky Corbett on the north-eastern edge of Glen Coe. In its own right, it's a forgettable hill; but it has one utterly redeeming feature – a grandstand view of Buachaille Etive Mor. Perfectly framed and eye-wateringly handsome, you'll be trigger-happy with your camera here, snapping hundreds of pictures of The Buachaille's distinctive profile.



### 3. BIDEAN NAM BIAN

'Chief of the Hills' in Gaelic, Bidean nam Bian is the highest peak in Glen Coe at 1150m – a dark, mysterious, craggy place, towering above the rocky bulges known as the Three Sisters. Even in a valley blessed with The Buachaille and Aonach Eagach, Bidean nam Bian is a favourite of many hillwalking

### 6. BUACHAILLE ETIVE BEAG

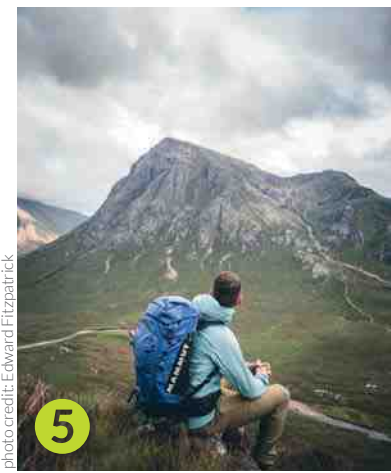
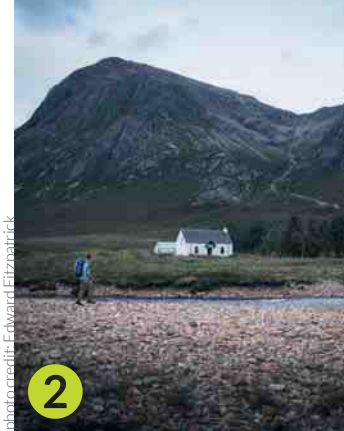
Forever destined to be overshadowed by its famed neighbour Buachaille Etive Mor, Buachaille Etive Beag – 'The Little Herdsman of Etive' in Gaelic – still offers superlative hillwalking with a shapely ridge and delightful

views. A comparatively easy 8km outing from the A82, involving an out-and-back route with 900m of ascent, will see you bag Beag's two Munro summits of Stob Dubh (958m) and Stob Coire Raineach (925m). Or, for a more enjoyable circular, start in Lairig Eilde, bag the tops and walk out via Lairig Gartain.

### 7. THE LOST VALLEY

If you don't fancy bagging a summit but want to experience Glen Coe in miniature, this is the walk for you. The Lost Valley, or Coire Gabhail, is a hidden, glacier-carved hollow in a sublime location. On each side of the valley rise the shattered crags of Three Sisters, while to the rear towers the sprawling mass of Bidean nam Bian and Stob Coire Sgreamhach.

Photo credits: James Forrest (unless otherwise stated)



Here in the 17th Century the MacDonalds of Glen Coe hid their rustled cattle, but now it's a place for picnicking day hikers.

### 8. SGOR NA H'ULAI DH & BEINN FHIONNLAI DH

Often billed as the forgotten hills of Glen Coe, Sgor na h'Ulaidh (994m) and Beinn Fhionnlaidh (959m) see far fewer visitors than their celebrated neighbours. That's because they are hidden to the south-west, tucked away out of view by the bulk of Bidean nam Bian. Somewhat inaccessible from Glen Coe without a long walk-in, a better bet is to drive down Glen Etive and tackle the duo from the east at Invercharnan. While the scenery isn't a spectacular as elsewhere, the sense of remoteness and escapism is greater.

### 9. GLENCOE LOCHAN TRAILS

Glen Coe isn't just about petrifying ridges and exhausting Munros; it also has plenty to offer for family-friendly ambles, wet-weather bimbles and Sunday afternoon strolls. The Glencoe Lochan trails, for example, are three waymarked paths (up to 2km) suitable for all ages and abilities. Located just to the north of Glencoe village, these trails explore a beautiful lochan and its surrounding North American pine forests, and serve up vistas of the isle-dotted Loch Leven, Ballachulish bridge and the hills of Morvern.

### 10. BEINN A'BHEITHIR

Detached from the main Glen Coe hubbub, the twin Beinn a' Bheithir Munros – Sgor Dhearg (1024m) and Sgor Dhonuill (1001m) – dominate the landscape south of Ballachulish, at the join of Lochs Leven and Linnhe. The duo offer first-rate hillwalking terrain featuring deeply etched corries, sweeping ridges, densely forested flanks and fine views towards Ben Nevis and the Mamores, with Loch Linnhe stretching out towards the Atlantic. From Ballachulish it's a 16km (10-mile) circular with almost 1500m of ascent to bag the two Munros – an arduous but rewarding day's walk.



More ideas at [gomagazine.co.uk](http://gomagazine.co.uk)

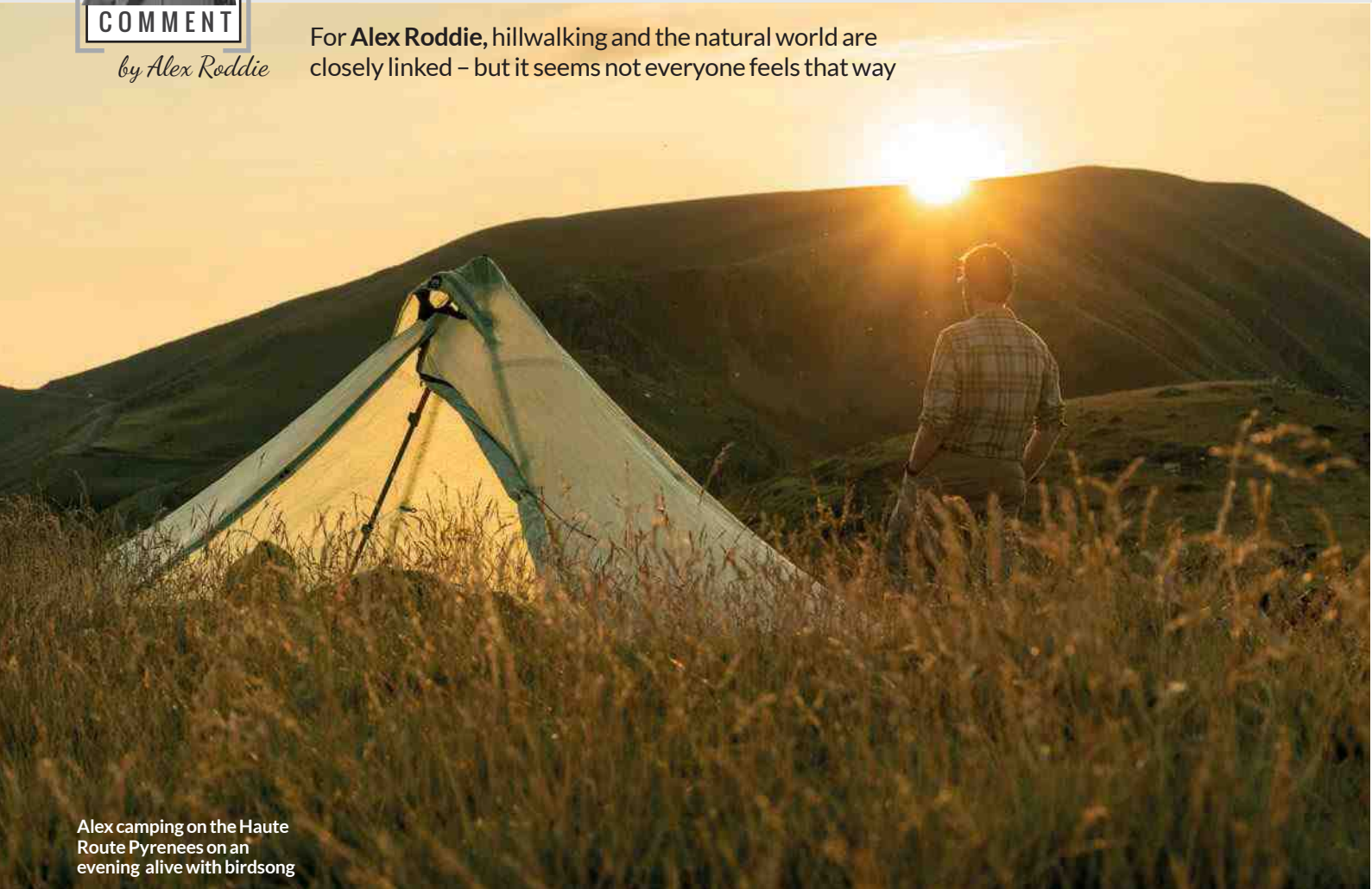


COMMENT

by Alex Roddie

## Has outdoor culture become too detached from nature?

For Alex Roddie, hillwalking and the natural world are closely linked – but it seems not everyone feels that way



Alex camping on the Haute Route Pyrenees on an evening alive with birdsong

A FEW WEEKS AGO, I opened up my inbox to find a message that astonished me: “I enjoy reading your mountain writing. But what’s with your recent digressions into nature, wildlife etc? I don’t follow you for that, I follow you for the outdoors. Please return to writing about outdoor subjects.” After I managed to get over my initial shock, I found myself pondering what this might say about the state of outdoors writing – and how we treat our wild places.

Like many people, since the pandemic began I’ve been spending a lot of time in my local area, walking the same few local walks. In an average year, I’d spend at least two months out there on the trail in wild, remote places. My response to 2020 was to develop my skills as a wildlife photographer and begin a detailed study of the wildlife in my local nature reserve – which I soon found was a place of true

riches. My writing and photography have broadened to reflect this change, and on my Instagram feed you’ll find pictures of barn owls next to images of snowy wild camps. In my mind, there’s no fundamental difference. The reason why I go to the mountains is to enjoy time in wild nature. Rural Lincolnshire may lack the outdoors cred, but it can scratch the same itch – to an extent, at least.

What does ‘the outdoors’ mean, anyway? One of the reasons why *TGO* has captured my attention, as both reader and writer, for longer than any other walking magazine is the fact that contributors are motivated at some level by a deep love and respect for nature – and this shows. Even features about adrenaline-fuelled mountain challenges are built on this foundation. But what about the outdoor world in general? Have we forgotten that there’s a direct connection between

bagging that Munro and the golden plover we admired on the way up?

### Outdoor elitism

In recent years, I’ve seen more evidence that the world of ‘the outdoors’ seems to be gradually drifting away from that fundamental appreciation for nature. Of course, there’s gear, which for some becomes an end to itself – and I love a shiny new waterproof or rucksack as much as the next walker. New ways of experiencing the mountains have emerged, too, from new sports to new ticklists. I’m not going to tell anyone that they’re enjoying the hills the ‘wrong’ way, but – before the pandemic, at least – these occasional puzzling interactions had begun to add up. I’ve met people on the hill who betrayed indifference or even hostility towards the idea of enjoying nature whilst in the mountains. I once chatted with a climber



[clockwise from above]  
 Snipe at Gibraltar Point;  
 A red squirrel spotted  
 on the way up a Scottish  
 hill; Three images taken  
 while wandering in  
 Rothiemurchus Forest;  
 Common whitethroats  
 in Alex's local area in  
 Lincolnshire: "Watching  
 these very special birds  
 helped to get me through  
 lockdown", he says



on a belay ledge in the Northern Corries, and remarked that I'd seen a ptarmigan with half-and-half summer and winter plumage. He looked at me as though I'd grown an extra head. "What the hell's that got to do with winter climbing?" he'd said. "Everything," I didn't dare reply – ice axes are sharp – but I certainly thought it.

We don't always like to acknowledge that, for some, an element of the outdoors is about setting ourselves above others. Hierarchies abound in the world of mountaineering: higher summits are deemed 'better', as are more challenging routes. Even the grading system for rock climbs seems tailored to separate the wheat from the chaff. "How hard do you climb, then? I'm seconding Hard Severe." "Oh, I'm leading Hard Very Severe." Of course, every pastime has its own brand of elitism. Even twitchers can get competitive with their lists of birds.

### A way of seeing

We all know that scrambling on Great Gable counts as 'the outdoors', but what about a gentle walk around a lowland nature reserve with an hour spent doing nothing but birdwatching? Is it on the same spectrum, or is it a different thing altogether? A year ago, I suspect, many hillwalkers would have viewed them as different. Now, after a year of separation from the mountains, the line is fuzzier than ever; and I believe that many people are starting to embrace a broader, more inclusive definition of the outdoors. Perhaps it's a return to an older way of seeing the mountains.

In the 19th Century, pioneering climbers often saw no distinction between mountaineering and nature. In the famous visitors' book at Pen-y-Pass, pipe-smoking chaps with names like Owen Glynn Jones would list the Alpine herbage they'd spotted

whilst questing up some new Diff-graded gully on Y Lliwedd – often followed by a verse they'd composed on the way down. At its best, outdoor culture has always been a fusion between physical activity, mental challenges, learning about (and helping to protect) the natural world, and even music and poetry. It's all connected.

One of the most damaging ideas in history is that humans are above nature. But we aren't. The natural world is more than just a playground or a gym; it's a home for countless other creatures, and it's under threat as never before. That includes our mountains. Gear may be more sophisticated than ever, our ways of enjoying the hills more varied; but, for me, a mountain without nature is just a pile of rock – and if you're obsessing over the summit without stopping to appreciate the wildlife on the way up then you're missing the wood for the trees.

Q &amp; A

## JESSICA J LEE: Writer

*Hanna Lindon talks to the Boardman Tasker Award-winning writer about inspiration, identity, and the changing face of nature writing*



Photo: Ricardo A Rivas

BORN IN CANADA to a British father and a Taiwanese mother, Jessica Lee has always been fascinated by the relationship between landscape and identity. In her latest book, *Two Trees Make a Forest* – winner of the 2020 Boardman Tasker Award – she explores the mountains, forests and waters of Taiwan, combining reflections on her own ancestral connection to the island with insights into its geography, culture and political history.

**Congratulations on winning the Boardman Tasker Award! *Two Trees Make a Forest* is more thematically diverse than some of the past winners, but the mountains of Taiwan are always present in the background. Did you make a conscious choice to have the mountains a central theme of the book, or did it happen naturally?**

In a way it was unavoidable – there was no real way of writing a story about Taiwan and its landscapes that didn't focus on the mountains. The mountains are the backbone of the country in so many ways and such a big part of the cultural identity. But they

were also a really compelling choice of subject matter because Taiwan is so geographically precarious. The mountains are getting taller all the time and there are so many landslips and earthquakes... That paired well thematically when it came to writing about gaps in family history and the upheaval of migration.

**What inspired you to write *Two Trees*?**

I had been trying to write my grandparents' story for well over a decade when I started the book. I knew they had lived through some really difficult history, and I knew I wanted to write their story but never found a way to do it. Then I found a letter of my grandfather's. It was a memoir of his life, and he wrote it when developing Alzheimer's. I was going through a bit of an identity crisis, as many of us do in our late twenties, and thinking that I hadn't really paid enough attention to my mum's side of the family (she grew up in Taiwan and my grandparents were from China). I thought, this is the moment to devote some energy to this.

*[above]* The landscape is a central theme in Jessica's writing *[right]* Taiwan's mountains - such as these in Nantou County - are "the backbone of the country"

**In your first book, *Turning: A Swimming Memoir*, you write about your attempt to swim in 52 German lakes over 52 weeks. You've said that wild swimming is cleansing and that it helps focus your attention and clear your mind... do you find the same about getting out into the mountains?**

Absolutely. I find it just so meditative. That's partly because of the continual movement of hiking in general. But I really like being in the mountains because you can never wander off into daydreaming; you really do need to stay focused. I can get overwhelmed by my own emotions, so I find that material focus – being forced to pay attention to what's under my feet – really helpful for me.

**In both books, you explore your own life and backstory through the medium of nature**





*“For so many of us, landscapes shape what we think of as beautiful, what we look for in the world and how we move through it.”*

**and the environment. Is your identity intertwined with landscapes you've known?**

My sense of identity is hugely tied to land. I've moved around a lot, but I'm also an environmental historian so I tend to pay extra attention to land! But I think that, for so many of us, landscapes shape what we think of as beautiful, what we look for in the world and how we move through it. And so paying attention to the land in that regard allows us to understand so much more about ourselves and our families than we can otherwise articulate. It's easy for people to forget that the environment isn't separate from human concerns. We shape it and it shapes us.

**You've talked before about finding home in the landscape. Is the search for 'home' partly what drives your explorations?**

It's possibly been the strongest theme of my work, the question of home and what home means. For a long time I was occupied by that idea – where is your home? You must pick one! You must choose! But the more I've thought and written about it, the more I think I will never pick one home. There will always be multiplicitous homes in my life. I think this often applies to people with migration stories – they may have more than one home, and that's valid.

**How have the restrictions on exploration imposed by Covid -19 lockdown in the UK affected you?**

It's been a mixed bag. I got a dog a couple of years ago and I have to get out every day, so that's really helped – to be out and walking. I'm definitely missing the freedom of being able to go where I want and swim, though. I was living in Germany a few months ago and one of the real blessings there was that, even in lockdown, I could cycle out to the forest, jump in a lake and be on my own. Now I'm back in the UK, that's not possible. In balance, though, I've been lucky – I can get out every day, although I definitely miss that freedom of the long day out on my bike in the wind.

**Have you managed to do much walking in the UK's mountains?**

Only a little bit. I've lived here on and off for most of my adult life and I have spent a lot of time in Snowdonia and the Brecon Beacons. But most of that exploring has been done with my family, which is a different kind of experience to getting out by yourself! My dad is actually from Wales, although I haven't written much about his side of the family yet.

**That's clearly a theme for your next book! Have you got any more ideas in the pipeline?**

I am trying to work on a new book proposal. I took a bit of a break after *Two Trees* – it's done well, particularly in Canada, so I've had to do quite a lot on the promotion side of things – but I'm starting to think now about what to do next.

**You're also the founding editor of the Willowherb Review. Tell us a bit more about that...**

I set up the Willowherb Review in 2018 with the aim of creating a space that would celebrate nature writing by writers of colour. There's a lot of talk about the lack of diversity [in writing] and why we're not hearing enough voices, so I thought: why don't we just create a space that platforms writers of colour and puts their voices out into the world? We publish fiction, non-fiction, poetry – anything broadly related to nature, place and environment. And it's not just about platforming writers of colour but creating a space that feels inviting to them. In the first year of the Willowherb we received around 60 submissions, and in our most recent year that increased to over 300. There's momentum there, a real sense of change. I'm optimistic that we're going to hear from so many more writers who haven't yet entered the nature writing space.

# Readers' page

Share your views, your experiences and your favourite photos  
[tgo.ed@kelsey.co.uk](mailto:tgo.ed@kelsey.co.uk)

## Postal address

The Editor, The Great Outdoors, Kelsey Publishing Ltd, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Kent ME18 6AL. Please include a phone number and postal address.

## More people getting outdoors is a good thing

I feel there is a melancholy - for a past that in all probability never even existed - among the old guard like Roger (Smith) and Andrew (Hardy) and along with it a regret that their once select world of hillwalking has moved from the margins to the mainstream.

Andrew's letter (April TGO) talks of meeting 'like-minded individuals and groups with a genuine love of the hills'. Well Andrew, is the ever-growing popularity of people being drawn the outdoors such a dreadful prospect?

Look, this isn't personal, but I think that some of the points are becoming lost from Roger's original article, which I found hectoring and unfair (especially when placed next to a photo of a busy Snowdon on a bank holiday). However, Andrew has now moved the debate from individual responsibility to social media,

which was never mentioned in the original article or my letter.

It's obtuse to suggest - as Andrew does - that people are going outdoors as they are being 'pushed to' do so by social media.

People are heading to the hills in record numbers - not as some fad as Andrew suggests because it's the 'next best thing we should all be doing' - but rather (I believe) that we are trying to find some meaning to our lives; however trivial. I simply feel that more people getting outdoors and on the summits is a really good thing.

What we can agree on is that with the growing popularity of hillwalking must come with it heaps of individual responsibility - on most days on the hills my pockets come back full of other people's litter - it's a real bugbear of mine.

Colin Fraser

## New Forest Year-Round

As a New Forest resident for decades now I miss the proximity of the Lake District's mountains to explore but couldn't ask for a lovelier place to live. Fiona Barltrop (The Great Outdoors April 2021) has discovered the quietness of this area in winter but even on high days and holidays in mid-summer it is possible to avoid the "hot spots" and escape the crowds so I would like to encourage Fiona to return when the fresh greenery of the leaves clothe the bare branches in Spring, when Bluebells carpet the dappled shade in Roydon Woods, when lanky legged foals take their first shaky steps, when the summer's shimmering heat warms the New Forest's rare reptiles and when Autumn colours blaze the trail ahead.

Anne King



## Social media



It all kicked off with some lively debate on our Twitter feed when we asked for opinions about Cat Bells — a classic Lakeland fell with real charm, or an overly-crowded tourist camp? Our followers gave their thoughts:

**Eileen Jones (@CumbriaPR):** It's gorgeous. I once named a cat after it. Stop being snobs about tourists.

**Marek Bidwell (@MarekBidwell):** On a quiet day it is one of my favourites - many happy memories.

**Baz Orton (@BazOrton):** True, it can be both but you can still find fantastic quiet days out in the winter months.

**Phil Aldridge (@wragbags):** Have to agree Marek - also a good addition if you are doing the Derwentwater round that includes Walla Crag on the other side.... if and only if I could convince my girls to do Catbells -> Maiden Moor with me!!!



## Your adventures this month

It's that lush time of year when one minute we find ourselves being tagged in wintry, snowy scenes up north and the next we'll be shown a wonderful, vivid, springlike scene from elsewhere on the hills. Here are some of the highlights from this month.



Adrian Wright (@frightenedtreephotography, Instagram)

"One of North Wales' most popular landscapes: Twr Mawr, Ynys Llanddwyn"



Fleur (@fleurrbie, Twitter): "Awesome lunch spot yesterday on the north western side of Muckle cairn... incredible views over the Lochnagar circuit and down to Sheiling of Mark"



Richard Webb (@Fasgadh, Twitter): "Beinn an Dòthaidh is my only big hill this winter... cracking day!"

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# Spring dreams

Spring brings optimism, anticipation and dreams of adventures. For TGO Challenge coordinators Sue Oxley and Ali Ogden, that means it's time to plan a backpacking trip!



IT STARTS WITH THE SNOWDROPS and the sense those long winter nights are getting shorter. You forget your gloves, but find a bit of March sunshine is enough to keep your hands warm even before the first daffodil trumpets the arrival of spring. Those first signs of renewal bring with them optimism, anticipation and dreams. Every year we look forward to the release spring offers, but this year it seems all the more important. It is time to turn some dreams into reality and, for us, that means a backpacking trip (Covid restrictions permitting, of course!)

Every plan needs a dream at its core – a kernel of ambition that will drive you through the inevitable tricky bits. It might be a long-distance trail guidebook, a TGO Challenger's blog, or a good old-fashioned map with a pleasing horseshoe of hills or a remote unfrequented corner to explore that forms the nucleus of a route.

## Life's jigsaw

For us, the best come from plans that are savoured and allowed to mature. They may be put aside for a while when others take precedence but are often returned to. Parts of challenge routes, where hills have been missed due to bad weather, never go away but sometimes morph into future Challenges or other adventures. Various hills around Loch Monar persistently escape us, so a plan is being hatched to take them in over a three- or four-day route this spring. Quite probably by the time we are allowed out the plan will have changed shape again.

We have some ideas that are decades-old, just waiting for the right pieces of life's jigsaw to slot into place and make them possible. That might never happen, but it doesn't matter – the dream has a life of its own and just having something to look forward to is what matters most. We know the prospect of the TGO Challenge sustains many through winter, and the plotting and planning is a vital part of that.

This might seem strange to many who have to submit a route sheet to us for the TGO Challenge, but we don't advocate planning every step of a route. We have so much information available now, from guidebooks, websites, social media and blogs, that you can probably find an image

A wild camp on Great Gable. Now spring is here, these flights of fancy could soon become real...



for almost every kilometre of your walk. The odd photo is inspirational, but too many images fixed in your mind makes it harder to dream and, for us, that takes away some of the excitement. There haven't been many positives in the last year, but going back to basics and rediscovering old crafts and the pleasure of slowly building or making something have sustained many of us who are lucky enough to have time on our hands. We usually plan our walks using maps alone, leaving aside the internet and concentrating purely on those wiggly lines – another skill maybe worthy of rediscovery.

## Leave room for discovery

It requires some time and effort but there is a joy in interpreting the contours and features, working out where the easier ground might be, where the best viewpoints are and where you might find a comfortable pitch. It's not as instant as trawling the web but maps leave room for anticipation and discovery. Will that bow on a stream leave a nice flat patch for a tent, or will it be a boggy mess and you will have to move on? A blog

or a guidebook might tell you but that means you share someone else's experience rather than discovering it for yourself. There is a sense of satisfaction if you are right but it adds to the adventure if you are wrong, as adapting to your environment is both a skill and pleasure too. There is bound to be a good spot just around the next bend... or two, or three.

Yes, we aim to know where we plan to go, be sure the distances are manageable, know how many nights we expect to be out and where we can resupply – but we don't want to know what is around every corner. We need surprises, good and bad, to make the experience memorable, and we have certainly had both! Walking to a minutely planned timetable creates stress and doesn't release you from the pressures of daily life so we like to ensure some leeway.

If that perfect pitch presents itself sooner than anticipated, take it, savour it, lounge around in the sun outside your tent. If you need to, you can always stretch your legs a bit further tomorrow. Spring is no time to rush.

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## MOUNTAIN PORTRAIT

# B U A C H A I L L E E T I V E M O R

Jim Perrin praises one of the mightiest, most photographed British peaks – and advises you to pick your ascent route carefully...

“We stepped on to the open mountainside at 7.15pm and came face to face with a cloud-racked, starry sky. The ring of low crags under the summit, the ground beneath our feet, and all the rocks around were buried deep in fog-crystals. Although night had fallen, yet up there so close to the sky there was not true darkness. A mysterious twilight, like that of an old chapel at vespers, pervaded these highest slopes of the Buachaille. We stood at the everlasting gates, and as so often happens at the close of a great climb, a profound stillness came upon my mind, and paradoxically, the silence was song and the diversity of things vanished. The mountains and the world and I were one.”

*W.H. Murray, Mountaineering in Scotland (1947)*

THAT WAS WRITTEN by the man I regard as unquestionably the finest of writers on British mountain activity, W.H. “Bill” Murray. That his description of the mystical experience – for it is that, as the religious imagery in the passage underlines – took place on the Buachaille Etive Mor, and was the last he had before leaving Scotland to join the Middle East Forces in Egypt and subsequent internment in Germany, is appropriate. He couldn’t have located it on a finer hill, for “The Buachaille”, as it’s often referred to – “The Great Herdsman of Etive” to translate its Gaelic name – is one of the outstanding peaks in the British Isles. A craggy pyramid apparently, it confronts you as you head west along the A82. That distinctive shape is probably one of the most photographed sights of all our mountains, and deservedly so, but it does rather misrepresent, for The Buachaille is actually a five-kilometre-long ridge with a Munro at either end and two other tops running north-east to south-west from a couple of miles west of the Kingshouse to Dalness, where the Lairig Gartain merges with Glen Etive. It lies between those two lovely glens of the Coupall and Etive rivers, and this, together with its imperious location above the lochan-jewelled expanse of Rannoch Moor, give it a sense of uplift and apartness unique amongst the more easily accessible Scottish mountains. If you’ve not yet climbed it, then as soon as circumstances allow, check the weather and if the omens are good head out for what should be one of the memorable experiences of your hill-going life.

My first experience of it was in the 1960s. I’d driven up overnight from Worcestershire with a girlfriend. We’d pitched a tent in the dark by the River Etive, close to the waterfalls near the confluence with the Allt Gartain, and woken in the morning to the

splendour of what reared up all around us. We swam in fabulous pools in the river, dawdled over breakfast, and at mid-morning set off along the good path through the Lairig Gartain until we were almost in Glen Coe. My old Scottish Mountaineering Club guidebook to Glen Coe had recommended that the easiest ascent of the highest peak, Stob Dearg (1022m/3345ft), was to take the path up Coire na Tulaich to gain the gable ridge of the mountain. If maximum ease in gaining your objective is your prime reason for choosing a line of ascent, then as far as The Buachaille’s concerned, this is the way to go. Though, if that is the case, you might ask yourself why you bother going hillwalking at all? It’s an awful way up the mountain. Coire na Tulaich is an enclosed, drab and view-occluding hollow with a back wall below the ridge of the mountain that’s composed of horrible, ever-steepening, large, blocky, shifting scree of the kind that sensible hill-walkers avoid like the plague. But this is to air a prejudice. Dreadful though the route may be, it still brings you by what isn’t quite the easiest route to the sublime summit ridge, and a left turn along that will bring you in no great length of time to the summit cairn of Stob Dearg. From which, that day in our far-distant youth, we turned straight round and walked into the south-west, which is generally a sound aesthetic decision in British mountains, especially when the view then ahead is along the length of Glen Etive to the great loch that snakes its way inland from just east of Oban.

That view’s worth a deal of suffering to experience, but the suffering’s unnecessary. There’s an easier, more open, grassier path from the Lairig Gartain that gains the ridge between the tops of Stob na Doire (1011m/3316ft) and Stob Coire Altruim (939m/3065ft). If you have any sense you’ll use it. On our first acquaintance we’d noted it in the morning and came down that way. But I’m leaving the best option to the last, because I don’t want to urge on you on a scrambling route, albeit one that’s straightforward (except under winter conditions, of course, when all bets are always off).

Here we go, then: the best of the hillwalker-friendly routes up The Buachaille is the Curved Ridge (Grade 2/3) – and it’s magnificent. You reach it by crossing the stepping stones over the Coupall Burn near Jacksonville (the low dive that’s the long-time headquarters of the legendary Creag Dhu Club), flog across a moor to the Water Slab, gain the ridge proper beyond, enjoy the glimpses across the Rannoch Wall, and finally, with the frightening cleft of Crowberry Gully down to your right, you scabble up the Crowberry Tower to the top. I challenge you to name a better or airier way up a British hill!

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** MAP: O.S. EXPLORER 384: GLEN COE AND GLEN ETIVE

**FACILITIES:** THE KINGSHOUSE, OBVIOUSLY – COULDN’T BE MUCH MORE CONVENIENT. AND THERE’S THE CLACHAIG INN DOWN-VALLEY.

**FURTHER READING:** W.H. MURRAY’S TWO BOOKS, *MOUNTAINEERING IN SCOTLAND* AND *UNDISCOVERED SCOTLAND*, ARE GLORIOUS, ROMANTIC EVOCATIONS OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF SCOTTISH CLIMBING BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS.

Buachaille Etive Mor is a towering presence as you cross Rannoch Moor and enter Glen Coe

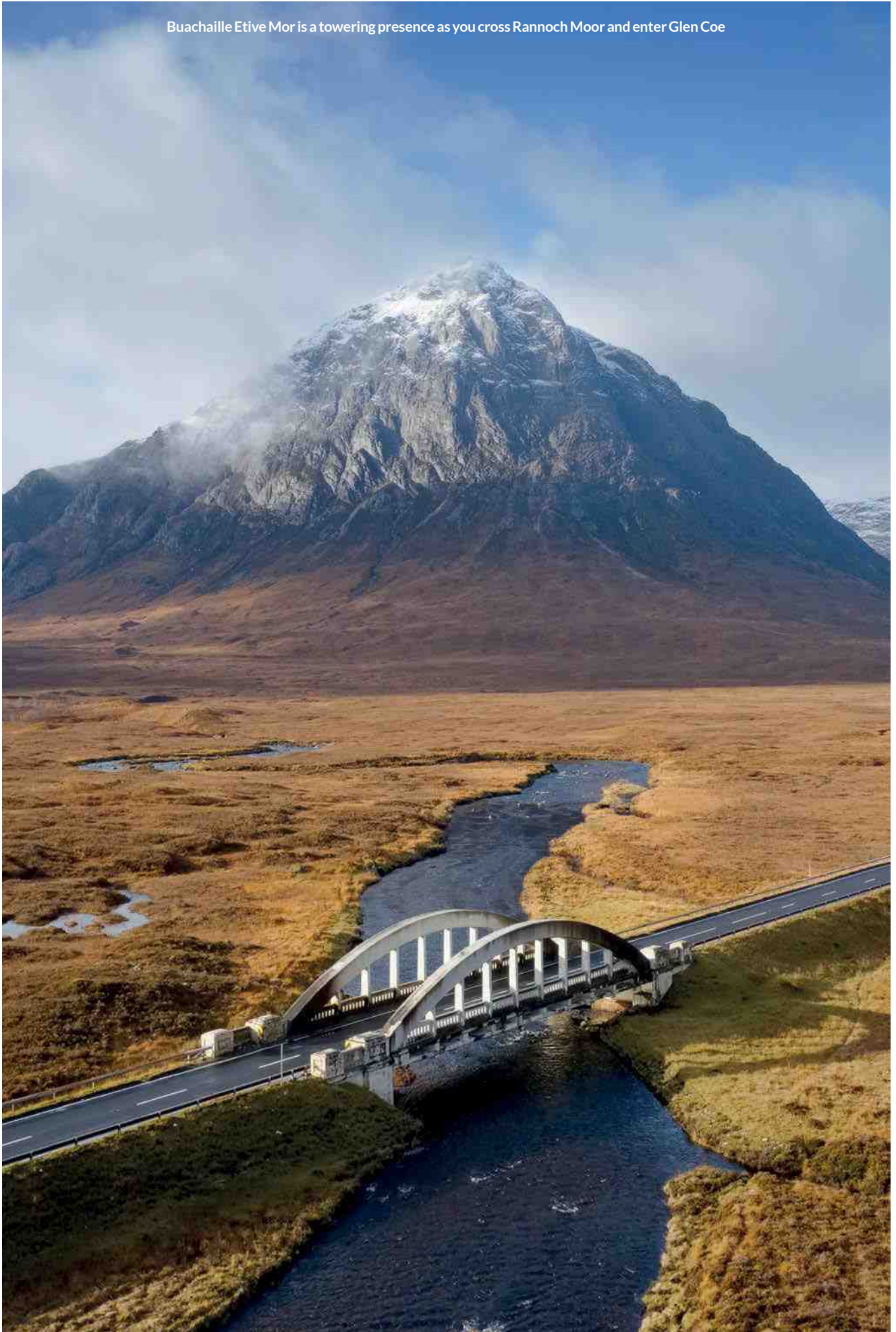


Photo: Shutterstock



“I WANT TO ENCOURAGE in others the ambition to devise with the aid of maps their own cross-country marathons and not be merely followers of other people’s routes: there is no end to the possibilities of originality and initiative.”

So wrote Alfred Wainwright in 1972 in his pictorial guide *A Coast to Coast Walk* – and almost half a century later I find myself striving for that same sense of individuality. This is more than just a walk; more than just miles and days and camps; more than the sum of its parts. It’s something personal, intimate and intangible. It’s a pilgrimage – my long walk home.

I think about Richard, the backpacker in Alex Garland’s *The Beach*, who laments “I just feel like everyone tries to do something different, but you always wind up doing the same damn thing.” There’s nothing wrong with well-trodden trails of course – I’ve walked and loved many of them – but for this fortnight I’m after something bespoke. I want to taste that spirit of exploration. I want to walk a walk with a deeper meaning.

## STRIKING OUT

My plan – concocted during the boredom of lockdown, and as an alternative to a Covid-cancelled walk across the length of New Zealand – is to hike from my birthplace in Sheffield to my new home in Cockermouth, north-west Cumbria. The route is plotted, with my trademark stamp of precision and obsession, on the *komooot* app. Ahead lies a 325km (202-mile) walk, over 10,000 metres (32,800 feet) of ascent and 14 camps, crossing the Peak District, Yorkshire Dales and Lake District. I’ll set foot on sections of four well-known long-distance trails – the Pennine Way, Ribble Way, Dales High Way and Wainwright’s Coast to Coast – but this patchwork route is unapologetically mine and mine alone. It feels like a special, never-before-walked itinerary, and I love that.

The route is symbolic too. It represents the way my life has changed so dramatically over the past few years. Sheffield, my starting point, depicts my old life: where I was born, went to school, studied at university, worked in IT, and spent my entire adult life in a normal, city-based, office-centric existence. The walk itself



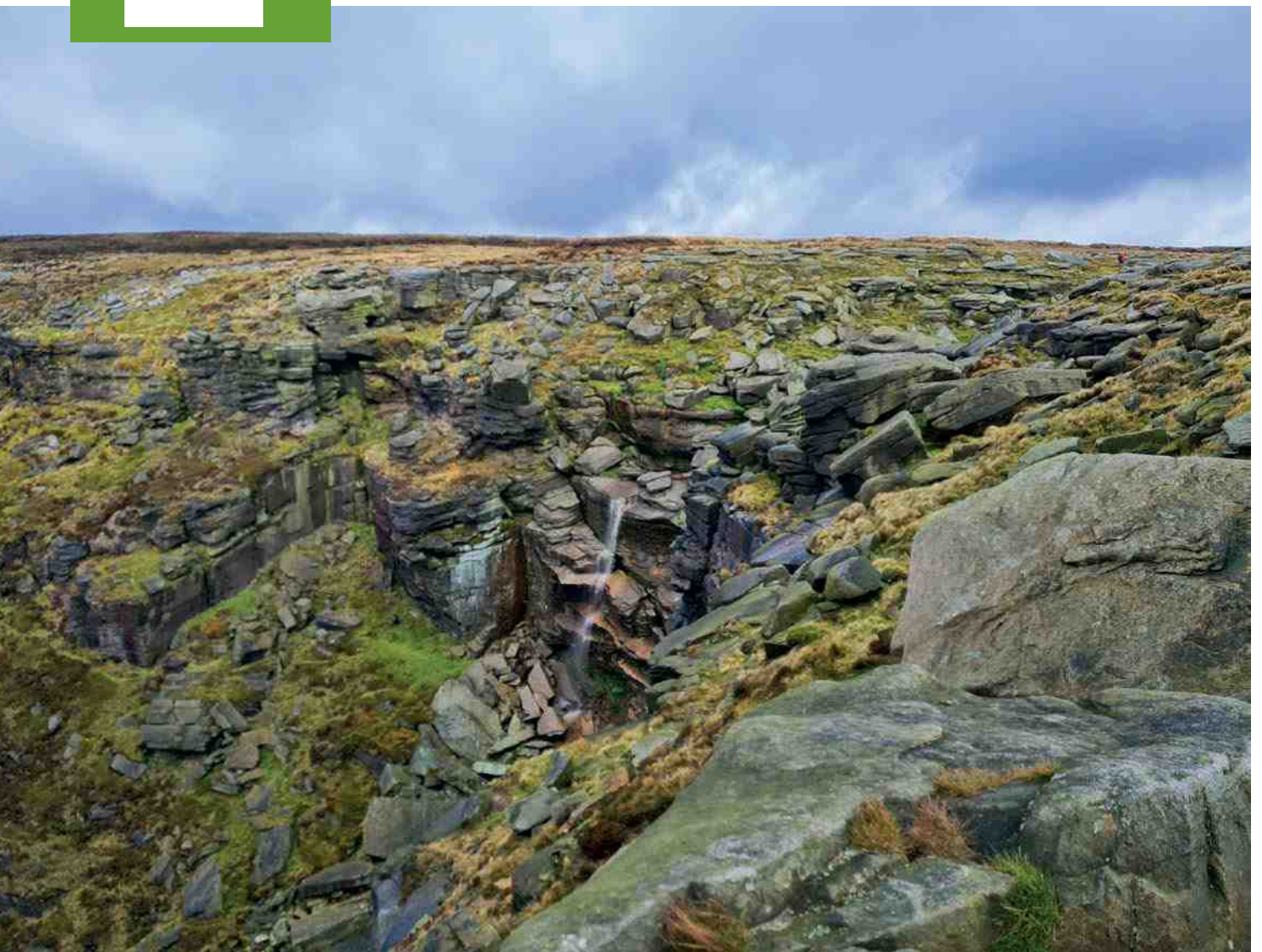


# A LONG WALK HOME

In search of a long walk with a deeper, more personal meaning, Nicola Hardy hikes from her Sheffield birthplace to her new home in Cumbria – a 325 kilometre pilgrimage across three national parks

PHOTOS: NICOLA HARDY

[WWW.IELTSPOP.IR](http://WWW.IELTSPOP.IR)



[Opening spread] A surprise treat left on a fence near Stanger Spa by a *komoot* user who had been following Nicola's journey [above] Kinder Downfall [right] Approaching Stoodley Pike

symbolises my journey since 2017: discovering a love of hillwalking, realising I want more from life than just sitting in an office in front of a computer screen, and, ultimately, navigating the tricky path (with gruelling ascents, rough terrain and progress-hindering storms) towards a new, different existence. And Cockermouth, my destination, represents my future: a life closer to the hills I love, with better balance, less worry and more hiking.

"I'm so proud of you – you can do this," says my mum, giving me a cheesy thumbs up as torrential rain soaks the grey pavement on Leavygreave Road, Sheffield. Here at 2.58pm on 6 August 1984, in the old Jessop Hospital for Women, I entered this world and cried for the first time. I feel like crying again now, as I wave a rushed goodbye to Mum, who dives into the car with my dad to escape the downpour. This is hardly the sun-drenched start I'd envisioned. The skies are dark and menacing. Rain drips depressingly off the visor of my waterproof jacket. My feet slosh in puddles on the paving slabs and my 15kg backpack suddenly feels crushingly heavy.

A delayed train means I'm behind schedule already, so I march purposefully west past the botanical gardens, through Endcliffe Park and along Porter Brook to beyond the city limits, cheered on by my old friends Heather and Kate along the way. A few hours later, with darkness descending, I pitch my one-person *MSR* tent next to a wall on the edge of the Peak District. The grass is soggy and squelchy. A rain droplet trickles down my neck and I shiver slightly in the cold

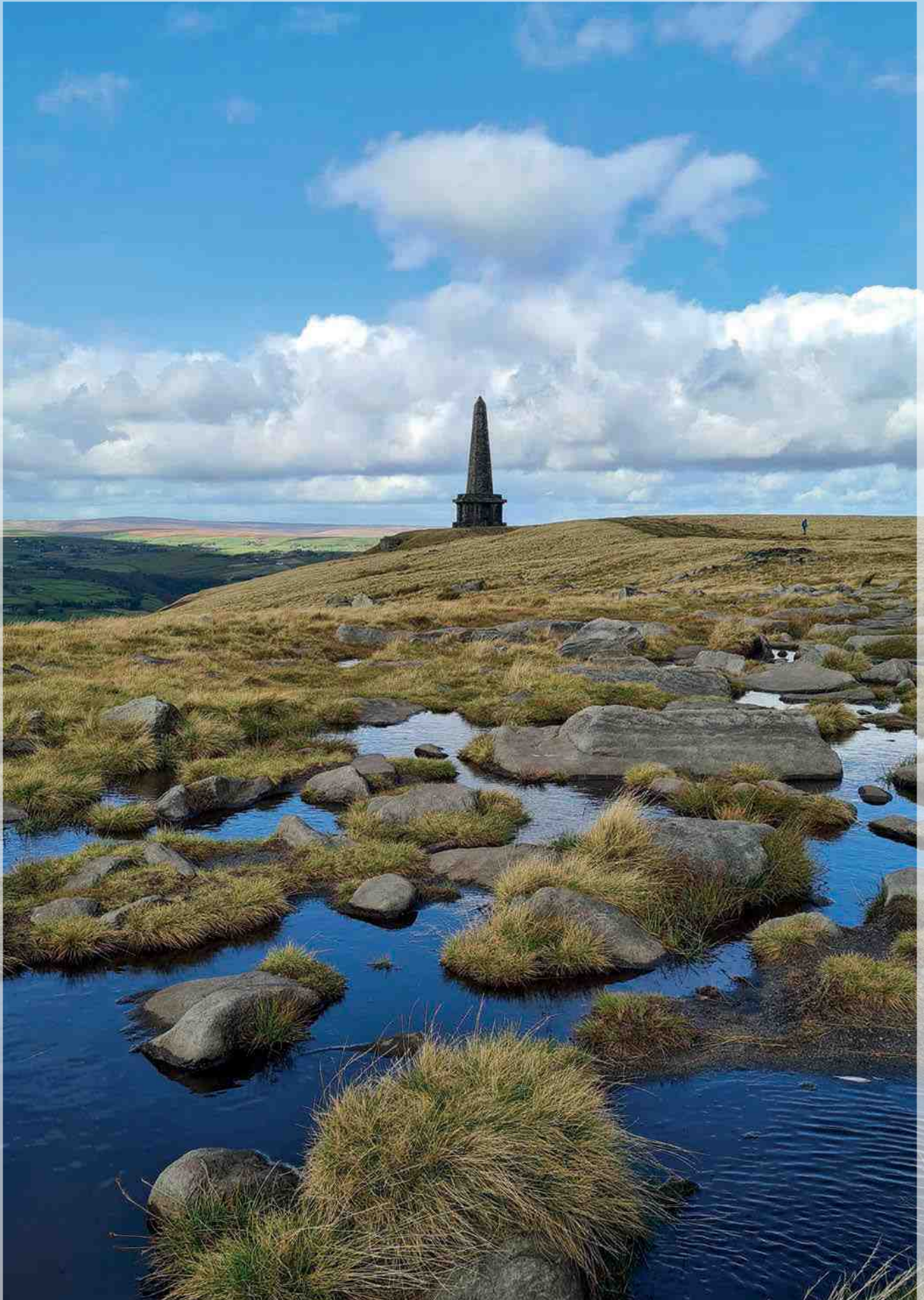
wind. Below me the bright lights of Sheffield flicker in the darkness – a teasing reminder that cosy beds and hot baths exist, yet I've chosen to hunker down in this dreary quagmire. "Was this a good idea?" I ponder to myself, worryingly unsure of the answer.

### MAGIC MOMENTS

"I can't believe it; I used to live near Cockermouth!" says David, a litter-picking Peak District national park volunteer I bump into the following morning. "But then I moved over here. It appears I've done the exact opposite of your pilgrimage."

It's a jovial encounter that dissipates last night's lingering doubts, and I spend the day in a good headspace, ambling along the Stanage Edge gritstone escarpment to Ladybower Reservoir and beyond over Win Hill to an Edale campsite, taking photos and capturing *komoot* 'Highlights' (see p40) as I go. These are the hills I first ventured to when I took up hillwalking as a hobby; the places I cut my teeth as a rambler. I learned so many vital lessons here: the thrill of a pack of Fruit Pastilles on a summit, the pain of horizontal rain in your face, the anguish of a blister on your heel. It feels wonderfully apt that I'm spending my first full day of walking with these old friends.

For the next six days, joined by my companion Becky, I settle into the routine of a long-distance hike. The weather is mixed, often grey and dreary, sometimes utterly miserable, but I don't mind. I enjoy the back-to-basics simplicity of it all. Walk, lunch, walk, dinner, set up →





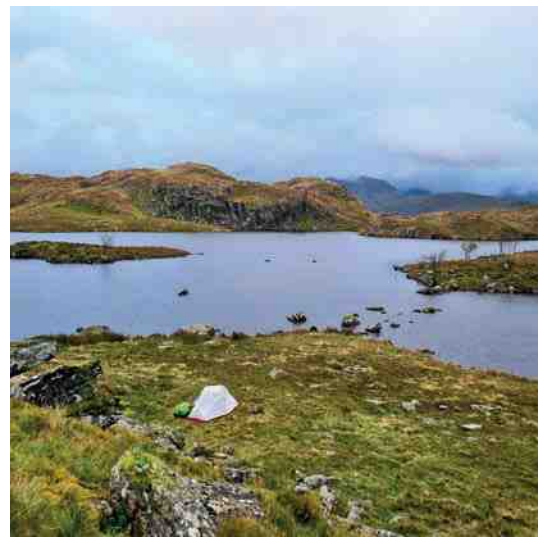


Photo credit: Ben Hales

[left] Nicola at the end of a long day taking a breather before the descent into Malham [above left] Becky, Bryony and Nicola walking in Malham [top right] Fell Pony in the Howgills [above right] The tent pitched by Angle Tarn

camp, sleep. Wake up, walk, re-supply at village shop, walk, dinner, tent, sleep. Every day my sole aim is to walk from A to B. Every night my only goal is to find a patch of flat, dry, soft grass to sleep on. And in between – joined intermittently by friends Ben, Jess, Megan, Bryony, Adrian and Carla – I aim to make the most of this precious fortnight away from work.

We walk 25 to 30 kilometres each day, sticking loosely to the Pennine Way. We climb Jacob's Ladder to Kinder Low, cross Snake Pass and ascend to Bleaklow Head, before dissecting Torside and Woodhead Reservoirs and heading ever north to Hebden Bridge via Black Hill, Stoodley Pike and what seems like innumerable other reservoirs and edges. Next we plod across the windswept uplands of Wadsworth Moor and Ickornshaw Moor, disturbed only by the gargling calls of the grouse, and press on into the Yorkshire Dales via the limestone amphitheatre of Malham Cove and the rocky summit of Pen-y-ghent. Sadly the clag all too often denies us views of these classic landscapes, but other moments – silly in-jokes, random wildlife encounters and inexplicable trail anthems (we can't stop singing Eddy Grant's *Gimme Hope Jo'anna*) – keep us entertained.

"There's a caterpillar in my tea!" shrieks Becky one morning. "You what?" I reply, bleary-eyed in my sleeping bag cocoon. "Hang on, my tent's infested with slugs too!" True enough, the bulbous, gooey gastropods are everywhere,

leaving behind a trail of mucous grossness. I laugh so hard that the karmic universe listens and the next morning it's my turn for misfortune. I wake to find my tent flysheet doused in bird poo, almost as if a flock of loose-bowled chaffinches and blackbirds all flew over my shelter simultaneously. Becky laughs uncontrollably this time around – and we're both reminded of those calamitous, quirky little moments that make multi-day hiking so special. I don't know it yet, but many more of these unexpected 'trail magic' snippets – especially one of my *komooot* followers leaving me a surprise congratulatory message and box of chocolates next to a gate – await along my journey.

## HOME ON THE HORIZON

With Becky now back at home, the weather brightens up – and so does my mood as I skirt the bulk of Whernside with my friend Liz. The path traverses north-west and, suddenly, we're greeted with a first sight of the distant Lake District fells. "I can't believe it, I'm getting closer," I say, smiling. Nine days and 200 kilometres on the trail have led to this moment, and it feels poignant. In my immediate vicinity is the quaint rural charm of the Yorkshire Dales – wobbly drystone walls, cottage-flecked valleys, rickety wooden fences and fields of placid Swaledale sheep. But in the distance is the looming drama of Lakeland: towering, rugged massifs with distinctive



[above] Sunset wild camp on Whiteless Pike [right] View from Fleetwith Pike over Buttermere

peaks, craggy flanks and piercing arêtes. My new home.

From Dent I follow the Dales High Way to Sedbergh before taking a high-level traverse of the Howgills' rounded, grassy knolls including Arant Haw, Calder's and The Calf. After a wild camp in the swirling clouds above Bowderdale, I traipse across a no man's land linking the Howgills to Shap, and – courtesy of my friend Eeva – indulge in some much-needed rest at the delightful New Ing Lodge. Suitably refreshed the following morning, I cross the threshold into the Lake District national park and spend the day heading south-west along the shores of Haweswater, steadily climbing up to High Raise and wild camping at a moody Angle Tarn.

As I sit in my tent's vestibule, boiling up some couscous and sipping on a hot mug of tea, I find myself feeling a little underwhelmed to be in the Lakes. Something is missing. I've loved so many things about my walk: the clarity of purpose of an A to B hike, the sense of journeying through a landscape in an intimately personal way, the camaraderie of my wonderful friends, the serendipity of the people I've met along the way, and – of course – the beauty of the hills. But I haven't yet experienced a pinch-yourself, take-your-breath-away kind of moment. The weather gods have cruelly denied me, masking every vista and hiding every sunset.

Two days later, however – after 45 hard kilometres to Patterdale, over St Sunday Crag, along Far Easedale and down Greenup Gill into Borrowdale, across Honister and Fleetwith Pike into Buttermere, and eventually up Whiteless Pike for a wild camp – that special moment arrives. Wispy clouds eddy over the Buttermere ridges and the setting sun infuses the sky with shades of peach, salmon and deep orange. Mellbreak holds Crummock Water in its embrace; Rannerdale Knotts rises like a sentry above the lakeshore; and the flanks of Robinson and Grasmoor soar paternally above it all.

I know I have 20 kilometres left to go tomorrow, including a nerve-jangling scramble down the slanting slabs of Hopegill Head. But this feels like the crux of my pilgrimage. Cockermouth might be where my house is, but this journey was always about walking home – and, here amongst the high fells, it feels like home. ▲



### NIC'S ROUTE: Essential information

**START:** Leavygreave Road, Sheffield

**FINISH:** Cockermouth

**Distance:** 325km (202 miles)

**Ascent:** 10,738 metres (35,229 feet)

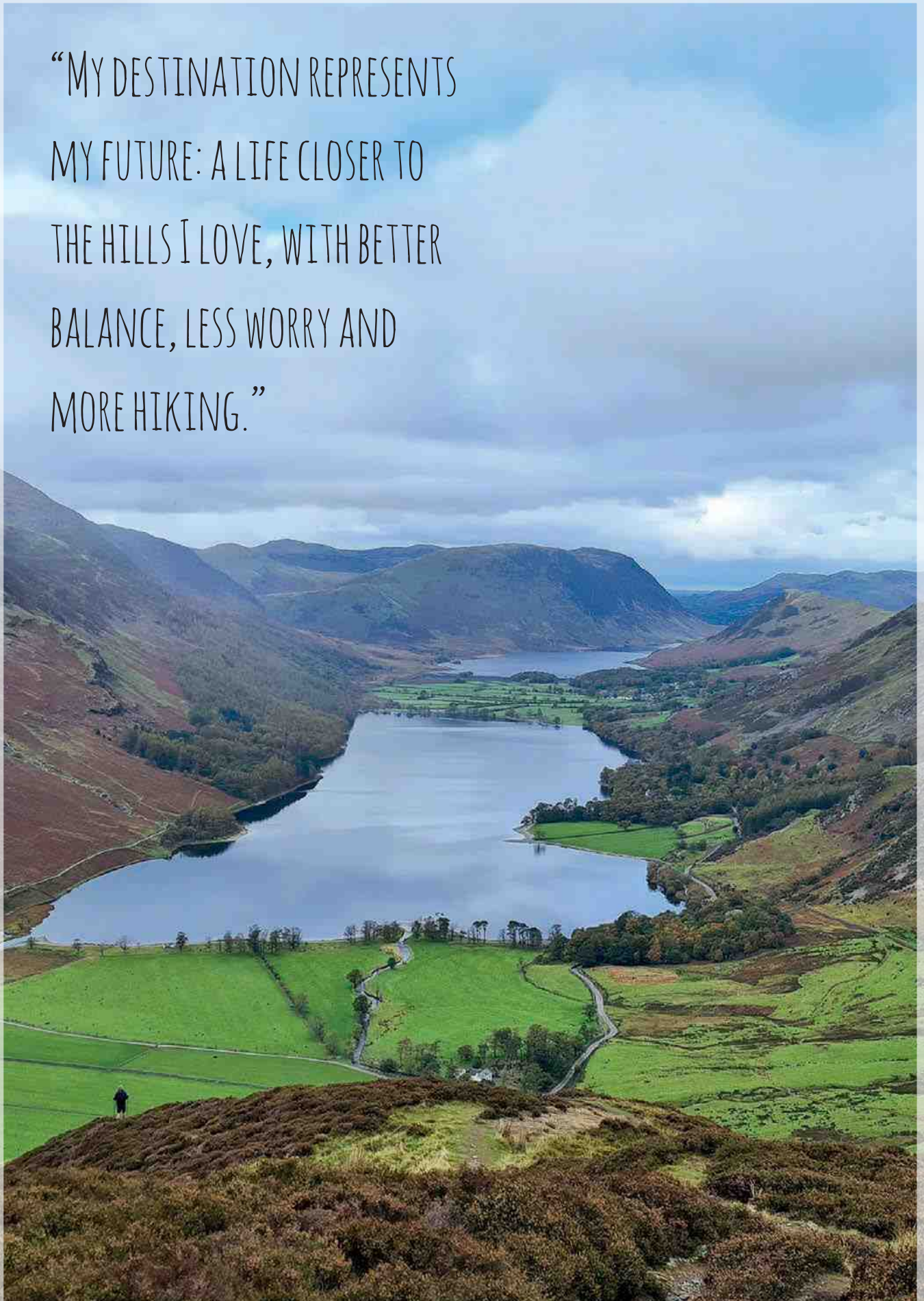
**Duration:** 15 days

Nic's self-devised walk took her from her birthplace in Sheffield to her new home in Cockermouth, north-west Cumbria. The route, which she planned on *komoot*, crosses the Peak District, Yorkshire Dales and Lake District national parks, and sets foot on sections of four well-known long-distance trails – the Pennine Way, Ribble Way, Dales High Way and Wainwright's Coast to Coast.

Check out Nic's route on *komoot*: Scan this QR to see a day-by-day breakdown of Nic's walk on the *komoot* website or in the *komoot* app.



“MY DESTINATION REPRESENTS  
MY FUTURE: A LIFE CLOSER TO  
THE HILLS I LOVE, WITH BETTER  
BALANCE, LESS WORRY AND  
MORE HIKING.”





# HIKING HIGHLIGHTS: 10 of the best spots on Nic's walk

HERE NICOLA ROUNDS UP some of the most impressive and memorable places she encountered on her personal pilgrimage – and shares them for you to enjoy with the help of the *komoot* app.

One of the most enjoyable things about any long-distance walk is the way you uncover gems along the way: fascinating landmarks, natural wonders, expansive viewpoints and hidden surprises.

Here I've rounded up 10 of the best discoveries on my personal pilgrimage across the north of England. All of these are marked as 'Highlights' on *komoot*, an app that lets you find, plan and share adventures by tapping into community knowledge and recommendations – then bring your journey to life with its easy route planner.

## 1. Jacob's Ladder, Peak District

In the Bible Jacob's Ladder leads to heaven, but in the Peak District it's an ancient track with steeply cut steps – built by local farmer Jacob Marshall in the 18th Century – that leads to the Kinder Scout plateau. It's a popular route offering views to the hamlet of Upper Booth and across the Edale valley. Once atop the plateau, you're treated to some of the Peak District's true highlights: strangely sculpted rocks, a lofty gritstone escarpment and the Kinder Downfall waterfall.

[komoot.com/highlight/538062](https://www.komoot.com/highlight/538062)

## 2. Stoodley Pike, South Pennines

This 402m grassy hill, located along the Pennine Way to the east of Todmorden, would be utterly unremarkable without the dramatic memorial adorning its summit. But crowning the pike is an impressive 121ft stone monument, a needle-like landmark dominating the skyline above the upper

Calder Valley. It was designed in 1854 to replace an earlier lightning-damaged plinth commemorating the defeat of Napoleon. Reaching Stoodley Pike Monument felt like a real milestone along my journey and I thoroughly enjoyed the views across the surrounding moorland.

[komoot.com/highlight/254863](https://www.komoot.com/highlight/254863)

## 3. Top Withens, West Yorkshire

One for the literature buffs, Top Withens is a ruined farmhouse said to have been the inspiration for the location of the Earnshaw family house *Wuthering Heights* in Emily Brontë's 1847 novel. It is located on the Pennine Way, in the rather desolate hills to the south-west of the village of Haworth. There is a rustic bothy attached to the ruined farmhouse, which provides welcome respite from the windswept uplands. I'd love to go back and sleep there one day.

[komoot.com/highlight/514633](https://www.komoot.com/highlight/514633)

## 4. Malham Cove, North Yorkshire

Malham Cove is a humongous, curving face of limestone shaped like an amphitheatre. Located to the north of Malham village, its vertical cliffs rise to about 250ft. Climbers are often seen testing their skills against these sheer rockfaces, while hikers tend to veer west around the cliffs on the Pennine Way. This is the route I took during my walk – and the views from atop the deeply notched limestone pavement, above the cliffs, were some of the best of my entire journey.

[komoot.com/highlight/575725](https://www.komoot.com/highlight/575725)

## 5. Pen-y-ghent, Yorkshire Dales

One third of the famous Yorkshire Three Peaks, Pen-y-ghent is a classic Dales mountain. What it lacks in height (at 694m it's the shortest of the trio), it more than

makes up for in rugged charm. The heavens opened when I climbed it on day eight of my expedition and I was battered by heavy rain and gusting winds – but I didn't mind. Making it to the summit trig felt like another massive step towards my ultimate goal of walking home.

[komoot.com/highlight/362394](https://www.komoot.com/highlight/362394)

## 6. Bowderdale Valley, Howgills

Lost in a no-man's land between the Lakes and the Dales, part of Cumbria but located within the expanded Yorkshire Dales National Park, these grassy, domed hills above Sedbergh are less frequented than their more famous neighbours. Tranquil and almost secretive, the Howgills are an ideal choice for a peaceful hillwalk away from the crowds. I wild camped near West Fell, high above the long and lonely Bowderdale Valley – perhaps the remotest night of my adventure.

[komoot.com/highlight/2778559](https://www.komoot.com/highlight/2778559)

## 7. Shap Abbey, Cumbria

Located in the secluded valley of the River Lowther, Shap Abbey was founded in the late 12th Century as one of 32 religious houses belonging to the Premonstratensian order of canons. Under the protection of English Heritage, today you can explore the historic remains for free, and the 15th Century tower is particularly impressive. But, for me, Shap Abbey represented something more poignant. It felt like the exact point I was entering the Lake District for the final leg of my journey.

[komoot.com/highlight/147476](https://www.komoot.com/highlight/147476)

## 8. Flock In Tea Room, Rosthwaite, Lake District

Homemade cakes, fresh scones with jam and cream, steaming bowls of soup, mugs





Nicola at the foot of Pen-y-ghent

## WHAT IS KOMOOT?

komoot is an app that lets you find, plan and share adventures with the easy route planner. Driven by a desire to explore, and powered by the outdoor community's recommendations, it's komoot's mission to inspire great adventures, making them accessible to all.



■ New to komoot? Use our TGO voucher code to download a free region bundle of offline maps (worth £8.99). Visit [komoot.com/g](https://komoot.com/g) and enter the voucher code TGO2021.

Heading towards Malham Cove



Looking into the Bowderdale Valley



Shap Abbey

The Flock In Tea Room in Rosthwaite



of hot chocolate or scrumptious ice cream cones – whatever mid-hike treats you desire, the delightfully quaint Flock In Tea Room can accommodate. Nestled next to a bustling sheep farm in the heart of Borrowdale, the setting can accurately be described as idyllic too – a romantic land of soaring fells and blankets of oak and birch. On my penultimate day I stopped here for some mouth-watering cheesy crumpets – yum! [komoot.com/highlight/2756215](https://komoot.com/highlight/2756215)

### 9. Hopegill Head, Lake District

Often ticked off as part of the popular Coledale Horseshoe, most hillwalkers don't think much of Hopegill Head – it never appears in lists of the best Wainwrights. But, for me, it's massively under-rated. From the north it is a handsome and dramatic peak, flanked by a massive crag and dissected by a

shapely ridge crescendoing to a pointy, rocky summit. I found scrambling down the wet slabs of this summit rather petrifying, but completing it safely gave me a dizzying high. [komoot.com/highlight/1097993](https://komoot.com/highlight/1097993)

### 10. Stanger Spa, Cumbria

This seldom-walked final leg of my adventure – a riverside stroll from Lorton village to Cockermouth along the snaking River Cocker – was a real surprise. Views across the Vale of Lorton towards Buttermere and towering Grasmoor gave a sense of walking away from the mountains, while the river itself was a calming influence. In the middle of nowhere, I also stumbled across Stanger Spa, a former saline holy well from which a doctor sold 'curative water' in the 1800s – a quirky find. [komoot.com/highlight/2480368](https://komoot.com/highlight/2480368)

## Check out these Highlights in komoot



Scan the QR code to see all of Nicola's Highlights in our komoot Highlight Collection. Also find thousands more user-generated Highlights on komoot – and maybe even use them to start planning your own personal pilgrimage!

# SO WRONG IT'S RIGHT

WHAT BETTER WAY TO AVOID POST-LOCKDOWN CROWDS ON POPULAR PEAKS THAN BY TAKING A ROUTE LESS TRAVELLED? **CRAIG WELDON** ARGUES THAT THE 'WRONG' WAY UP A HILL CAN SOMETIMES BE THE RIGHT ONE

Photography: Craig Weldon



'WRONG' ROUTES



# 'WRONG' ROUTES

LET'S TALK ABOUT climbing hills the wrong way. It's something I've been doing all my life without even realising it, because I've been going up hills the right way just enough times to mask the fact. By the 'right' way, I mean the route that the majority of walkers take – most hills have one. It's the way recommended in the guidebooks. It's usually the easiest way. It's the way any sensible walker would go, the route laid out in advance with paths, signposts and the sociable company of other walkers. If you've climbed the 'tourist' path on Ben Lomond, walked up Scafell Pike from Wasdale and tackled Snowdon via the Llanberis Path, then – like me on those hills – you went the 'right' way.

But the right way hasn't always been my way. The map itself would suggest intriguing routes, and I'd investigate them. What's 'wrong' with that? Well, you can get into trouble by not following the recommended route. You can end up floundering in bogs, taking the wrong turn in a forest and getting lost in a sea of pine needles, or heading up a slope that becomes a bit more exposed than you're comfortable with.

But the only thing really 'wrong' with taking a maverick route is that it's not the way everyone else goes. It is no more wrong than preferring heavy metal to Ed Sheeran. And if you're doing the wrong way really right, you'll still need the guidebook: because you want to refer to it, so you know the routes to deliberately avoid. This elevates the approach to a consciously anti-social practice: The Wrong Way, if you will. It is the way that spreads the load on a hill and increases your chance of seeing wildlife, practising navigation, having an adventure, and getting in tune with nature.

## THE ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

Take Creag Meagaidh. The normal route is from the nature reserve car park

[previous page] On the Carn Mor Dearg Arête [below] The eastern summit of Suilven, seen from a high camp [right] Approaching the summit of Creag Meagaidh [right] The eastern summit of Suilven, seen from a high camp





## HOW TO PLAN A 'WRONG WAY' ADVENTURE

*Want a more imaginative hill trip? Here are a few ways to buck the trends and find your own path...*

### **DITCH THE GUIDEBOOK FOR A MAP**

The gateway to doing hills wrong is through OS Landranger and Explorer series maps. Without consulting a guidebook or the Internet, your imagination is free to roam over the landscape. Ridges, tarns, gorges, pockets of forest, interesting wrinkles in the terrain can all be included in your route.

### **GET INSPIRED BY NAMES**

Names can inspire your route too. Who wouldn't want to visit a place called Loch Brandy? Hell Gill? Or, in a more juvenile strain, Great Cockup fell?

### **SEEK OUT NATURAL WONDERS**

Did you know that the River Nidd bursts fully formed from the ground at Nidd Heads at Lofthouse, having disappeared into a pothole upstream? Or that, in the Galloway Hills, there's a lake within an island within a lake? Whose interest isn't piqued to see these natural wonders?

### **CLIMB THE WRONG HILL**

A more advanced way of going the wrong way is to climb the 'wrong' hill entirely. The Rhinogs or Arans rather than Snowdon; Black Combe, Martindale, or Marilyns like Top o' Selside or Holme Fell rather than the Central Lakes; spectacularly situated Corbetts like Carn na Nathrach rather than the Munros. We don't even need to concentrate on hilltops: why not make your destination a water feature? The spirits of the mountain lurk as much in remote waterfalls and crag-girt tarns as they do on the summits.

at Aberarder to the east. It's a walk through beautiful native forestry, gradually revealing the awesome cliffs of Coire Ardair, which can be safely climbed to the north via The Window. When the standard route is so lovely, it seems crazy to ascend from Glen Roy to the north and west, twice as far from the road and several trackless miles over bog and tundra. But to me this route said: adventure!

The first attraction on setting off is the Parallel Roads – ruler-straight lines of ancient shores from when this glen was once damned by glaciers. The path leads up onto the Parallel Roads, which were once believed to be hunting aids created by Fingalian warriors. We imagined a troop of 18th-Century redcoats trudging through the glen, nervously looking up at the hillsides for Fingal's claymore-wielding descendants.

Now the only evidence the route was used was the footprints of deer; spider webs strung across the path suggested nobody else came this way. And then the Dog Falls: a perfect skinny-dipping spot, but too early in the day to tarry. We trudged across the bog for the sun-softened snowfields of Meagaidh, views opening up with each step. Dirty avalanche debris-streaked Beinn a' Chaorainn, and mighty Ben Nevis heaved above the Aonachs. Then the summit dome and, suddenly, having seen nobody all day, a score of people: groups of twos and threes crossing the snowfield from the common-sense direction of Aberarder.

We headed as close to the cliffs of Coire Ardair as we dared, joined the May bank holiday crowds as far as The Window, and left them again for the solitude of our unconventional route back to Glen Roy, only wheatears for company.

### **DARK PATHS**

What if it is harder to find a 'wrong' way up a hill? There are other ways to go wrong, of course, such as doing the popular route but going at the wrong time: climb before sunrise or descend after sunset. It's less safe, especially in winter. Yet these times of day are quieter – and, as landscape photographers know, more spectacular and rewarding. A way to mitigate the problem of descent in the dark is to carry all you need for a successful camp and sleep out on the mountain. ➔



[above] Sunrise from the Pentland Hills [right] View from Top o' Selside

That's the approach friends and I took on Suilven, when lockdown eased for a while last summer. I argued for a quiet hill, as I suspected the popular routes would be busy with eager walkers. But my companions were set on Suilven, as sure a totem of freedom during our confinement as had been the old postcard of this hill in the film *Edie*. So, if we were doing Suilven by the popular route, a late start and high camp gave us the best chance of avoiding the midges and the crowds. A spectacular sunset and sunrise from the top would be, I said excitedly, "a once-in-a-decade experience!"

It didn't quite work out like that. Having fixed the day in advance, the weather was wet with low cloud and high wind. I apparently snored: "the worst night's sleep of my life," complained one companion. We climbed out of our tents to thick mist. But as the morning advanced, the cloud lifted, revealing tantalising glimpses of Suilven's superb situation. We still had the place to ourselves, only encountering the day's dozens of visitors strung along the path as we walked back out to Lochinver and a takeaway coffee.

## WARNING SIGNS

Of course, the wrong way sometimes goes wrong. I'd always been intrigued by a sign that used to sit at the road-end in Glen Nevis. 'This is not the path for Ben Nevis', it warned. It may not have been *the* way, but it was obviously *a* way, and one day I decided to investigate it on my descent from Ben Nevis' summit, via the neglected top of Carn Dearg (the one south-west of the summit).

Ben Nevis may be a popular destination, but this southern side of the hill is completely deserted. Understandably so: the angle of the slope in descent wills you into Five Finger Gully, something you have to make a conscious effort to resist, whilst the 'path' alongside the Allt Coire Eoghainn is steep and loose, an ankle-twisting nightmare. I'd learned a lesson and would be unlikely to come this way again. But even here there were unusual views of the Steall Falls and Nevis gorge, and a real sense of exploration.

You've seen the alternative to the wrong way: overflowing car parks and crowded paths. We can't get far afield thanks to Covid-19 restrictions, and when we are allowed out again the most popular routes, hills, and coasts will become very busy. If ever there was a time to spread the pressure and start climbing hills the 'wrong' way, it is now. 🚩





## SIX ALTERNATIVE ROUTES UP POPULAR HILLS

### 1. Ben Nevis: An unusual approach to the CMD Arête

**START/ FINISH:** End of Glen Nevis Road (GR: NN168691)  
**Distance:** 14km (8.6 miles)  
**Ascent:** 1360m (4461 feet)  
**Time:** 7-10 hours

Park at the road end for Glen Nevis and walk up to the spectacular Steall Falls. Continue up the River Nevis for another kilometre then strike N alongside the Allt Coire Guibhsachan. Follow it to the col then head W to Carn Mor Dearg. Follow the Carn Mor Dearg Arête to Ben Nevis. Return down the steep, blocky slopes you've just come up to the head of Coire Leis, then head S towards Meall Cumhann. From the col descend to the Nevis Gorge path and back to the car park.

### 2. Creag Meagaidh: A long way, but worth it

**START/ FINISH:** Parking area near Brae Roy Lodge in Glen Roy (GR: NN336914)  
**Distance:** 27km (16.7 miles)  
**Ascent:** 930m (3051 feet)  
**Time:** 9-11 hours

From the parking area, cross two bridges towards Annat and head up the traversing path to the Burn of Agie, enjoying the view of the Parallel Roads of Glen Roy and the beautiful swimming pools on the Dog Falls. Follow the burn upstream to Bealach a' Bharnich then E to Creag Meagaidh. Descend E and NE to The Window and a spectacular view of Coire Ardair, then return W to pick up the way you came.

### 3. Scafell Pike: Wildness and waterfalls

**START/ FINISH:** Brotherilkeld in Eskdale (GR: NY212011)  
**Distance:** 16km (10 miles)  
**Ascent:** 1180m (3871 feet)  
**Time:** 7-9 hours

Head upstream from Brotherilkeld to the beautiful pools and waterfalls by Lingcove Bridge and Throstle Garth. Continue over Scar Lathing for a wild panorama of the highest hills in England. In wet weather you want to avoid the Great Moss, in which case detour round it via Gait Crag and continue up Little Narrowcove for Scafell Pike. Return over Scafell, dropping back down towards Eskdale for 150m at Mickledore to avoid the cliffs of Broad Stand. Head back S from Scafell until a path following Cowcove Beck can be picked up to Taw House and a bridge over the River Esk to your start point.

### 4. Pen-y-ghent: The lesser-trodden way from Littondale

**START/ FINISH:** Halton Gill (GR: SD880764)  
**Distance:** 17km (10.6 miles)  
**Ascent:** 520m (1706 feet)  
**Time:** 5-7 hours

Follow the River Skifare to Nether Hesleden and follow paths up delightful Pen-y-ghent Gill. Cross the moor at Giant's Grave to pick up the Pennine Way: follow it up the steep nose of Pen-y-ghent, then walk down over Plover Hill back to Halton Gill.

### 5. Kinder Scout: Quiet cloughs and empty edges

**START/ FINISH:** Edale (GR: SK122856)  
**Distance:** 24km (15 miles)  
**Ascent:** 560m (1837 feet)  
**Time:** 7-9 hours

From Edale, head up Golden Clough or Ringing Roger (possibility of a very mild scramble at the top) to Kinder Scout plateau. Head E on a path that sticks to the 550m contour and takes you round to the quieter northern edge of Kinder. Eventually, at the far NW edge of the plateau, the path meets the Pennine Way. Follow the Pennine Way SE. Admire Kinder Downfall; if full of water, continue via Pennine Way, but if the river is low, follow it up onto the plateau, taking the largest-looking stream at each junction. You will end up a few hundred metres from the summit of Kinder Scout. Good luck finding the exact top! Head S to the plateau rim and E down Grindsbrook Clough back towards Edale. If you don't fancy the mild scrambling downclimb, descend via Grindsbrook Knoll.

### 6. Cadair Idris: A Welsh giant, from the west

**START/ FINISH:** Llanfihangel-y-pennant (GR: SH525448)  
**Distance:** 16km (10 miles)  
**Ascent:** 1050m (3444 feet)  
**Time:** 6-8 hours

From start, follow road N. A signpost points for Cader Idris: follow it on to a hill path, and up to the wllch W of Cyfrwy. Drop N on the Pony Path for a few metres till you can pick up another path contouring E under cliffs of Cyfrwy into cwm of Llyn y Gadair. From here take E ridge of cwm to summit of massif at Penygadair. Head SW then S for Craig Cau, then W along Mynydd Pencoed. The ridge drops steeply towards a farmhouse at Pencoed; aim just S of Pencoed, pick up path going NW, then at Pencoed go directly downhill on a path back to the start.



# Isolation and connection

**Alex Roddie** finds a new perspective on solitude while backpacking through the beautiful but history-haunted peninsula of Knoydart





WHY DO WE SEARCH for solitude when we go into the mountains? Is it to get away from it all, or is it to connect with something else?

In late 2018, when I started to plan my winter Cape Wrath Trail from Fort William to the far north-west tip of Scotland, the first big question mark was Knoydart. Depending on your point of view, this wild and uncompromising chunk of mountainous landscape in the West Highlands is either an irresistible lure or an awkward barrier to the long-distance walker.

Knoydart's roughness and remoteness are the stuff of legend. It is sometimes described as 'Britain's last wilderness', although it contains 100 or so residents – concentrated in and around Inverie, which is cut off from the main road network and can only be accessed by a 17-mile walk or a boat from Mallaig – who might have something to say about that (and it contained 10 times more than that before the Clearances.) In any case, it is certainly one of the most sparsely populated and intractable landscapes in Britain. Many Cape Wrath Trail walkers prefer to avoid it and take a long, easier detour far to the east instead; but I already knew that I wanted to journey through this land again, and in winter. Although I was concerned about the missing bridge over the River Carnach, to avoid Knoydart would be to avoid why I was doing this in the first place.

I decided that Knoydart warranted a reconnaissance. A prelude to the main event, an exploration to find a high-level route avoiding the difficult Carnach crossing, but more than that: I wanted to immerse myself in Knoydart, spend time exploring the landscape for its own sake. As I soon discovered, something as simple as a missing bridge proved utterly transformative, showing me a wild and beautiful side to this place that I could never have imagined.

## **A landscape holding its breath**

My reconnaissance walk began at Glenfinnan in early December. Snow



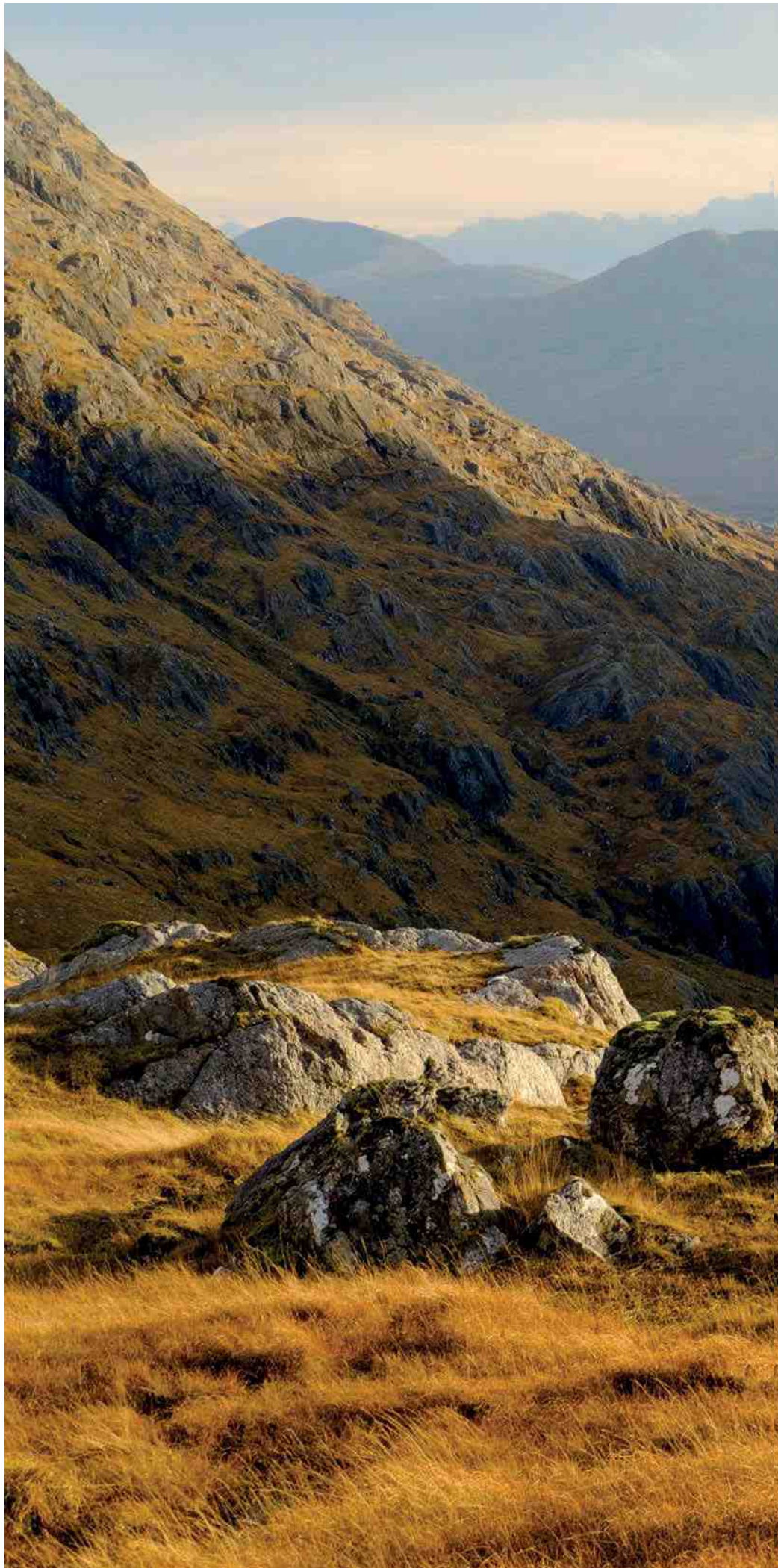
had not yet touched the mountains, and the landscape felt more autumnal than wintry as I began the gentle pull up from Corryhully bothy into the quiet snowless glow. There was a tranquil stillness – a sense of breath held between Atlantic low-pressure systems. A few deer munched placidly by the side of the river. The water seemed low as I crossed the first of several fords on the ascent. That colour I loved was everywhere all around me: the textured russet copper-gold of autumn. I soon found myself lulled into a meditative trance by the ripples of wind in grass.

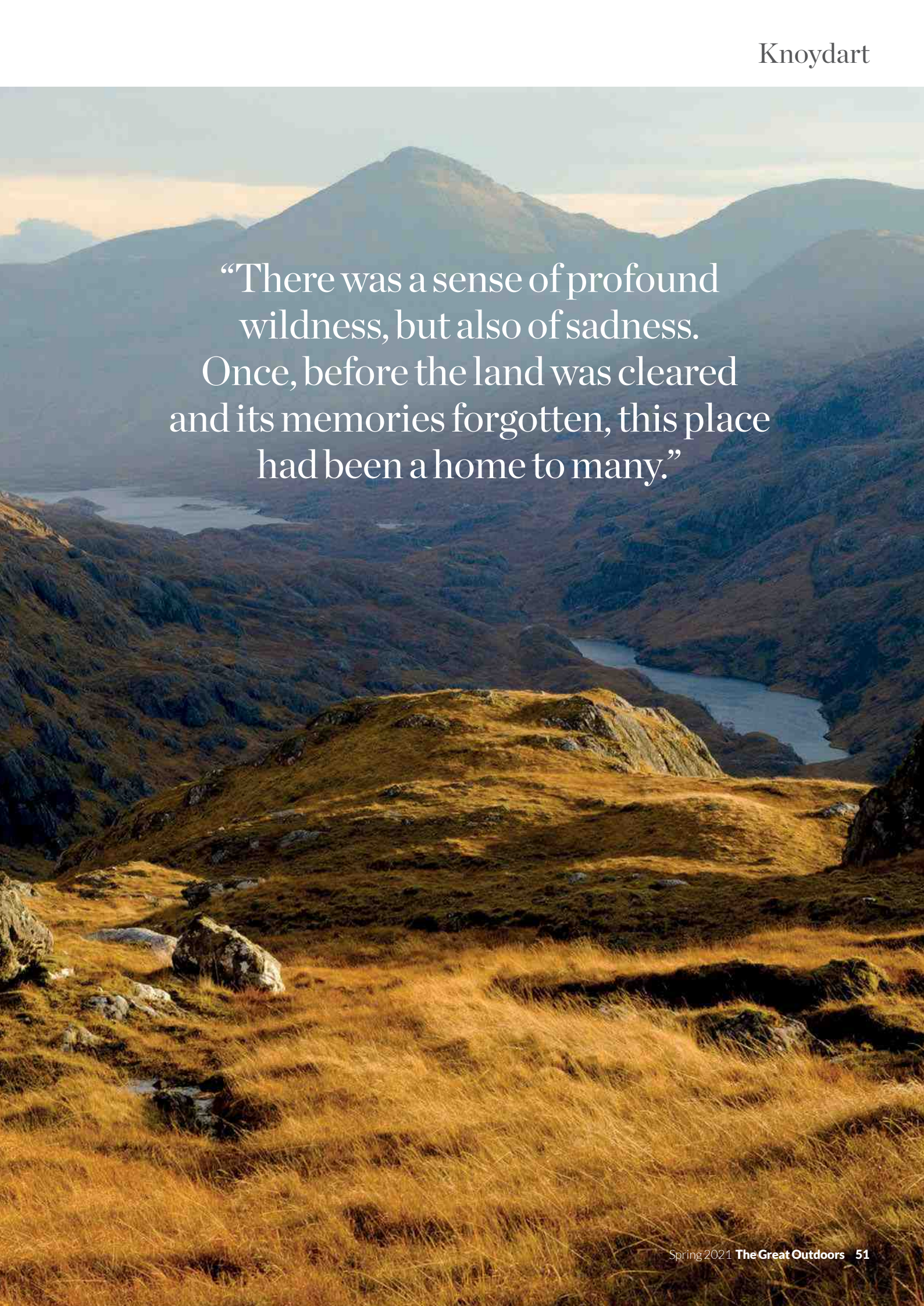
Despite my serene surroundings, and my gratitude at being back in Knoydart in the quieter, more beautiful time of year, I couldn't help feeling a little anxious. Much depended on the outcome of this trip. I'd planned a high route over Bealach Coire nan Gall – a steep, pathless col between Gharbh Chioch Mhor and Sgurr nan Coireachan. I'd never been along that ridge before and I didn't really know what to expect. The map showed some crags on the very steep northern side of the col, and my mission was to assess its suitability as a route for later in the winter when there may be snow on the ground. Perhaps even a cornice. With the bridge missing and the River Carnach crossing potentially dangerous, a viable alternative route between Glen Dessarry and Gleann Unndalain was critical.

A mile in Knoydart is a hard mile, but the first river crossings weren't as bad as I'd expected; I managed to find the easiest ford over the Allt a' Chaorainn, and splashed across without getting water beneath my gaiters. But the lucid quality of the landscape began to fade as the day wore on and more cloud blew across the mountain tops. Glen Pean greeted me with bog and churned-up forestry tracks, and the day grew dull, almost preternaturally dark, as I walked through moss-draped pine plantations where every sound was deadened and yet I could feel a close awareness on all sides. Soon my boots found the good track through the woods and I made better progress.

My plan had been to stay at A' Chuil, a bothy tucked away on the edge of the forest; but when I reached there in the early afternoon the bothy felt unwelcoming ➡

*[previous page]* Calm, clear and mild - perfect conditions for some reading by candlelight *[right]* Knoydart glow



A scenic landscape photograph showing a mountain valley. In the foreground, there is a grassy hillside with some rocks. In the middle ground, a lake is visible, surrounded by mountains. The background features more mountains under a clear sky. The overall tone is serene and natural.

“There was a sense of profound wildness, but also of sadness. Once, before the land was cleared and its memories forgotten, this place had been a home to many.”

# Knoydart

and damp, and I found myself craving a night in the open instead. My pitch was unglamorous but comfortable: a raised table of moss by the side of the forestry track about a mile further on. I slept like a child, lulled to sleep by the sigh of the trees all around me.

## The Knoydart squidge


The gloomy conditions persisted the next morning and I resumed my walk through dripping, silent forest, constantly brushing against pine boughs heavy with dew. Soon I'd broken out above the treeline and into the barren landscape of grass and rock outcrops above. Cloud swirled down from the heights in great plumes, now obscuring the crags, now revealing them once again. I looked up. Up there – way up there – Bealach Coire nan Gall waited, a steep 500m pathless climb above my position.

The climb was a tough haul, relentlessly steep, and squidgy underfoot too – that

special kind of Knoydart squidge that leads to mud-spattered gaiters and saturated boots. The first couple of hundred metres took forever as I zigzagged uphill with no particular landmarks to aim for other than the featureless murk-shrouded skyline, indistinct far above. Soon, however, I found the line of a lively burn bouncing from crag to crag, and this helped give my slog some interest and structure. As I climbed, I tried to think like a winter mountaineer: what would this look like in February, perhaps under snow? Where would the avalanche risk be greatest? Fortunately lots of small rock outcrops broke up the uniform slope, which I thought might help to keep risk down. The high angle concerned me, though.

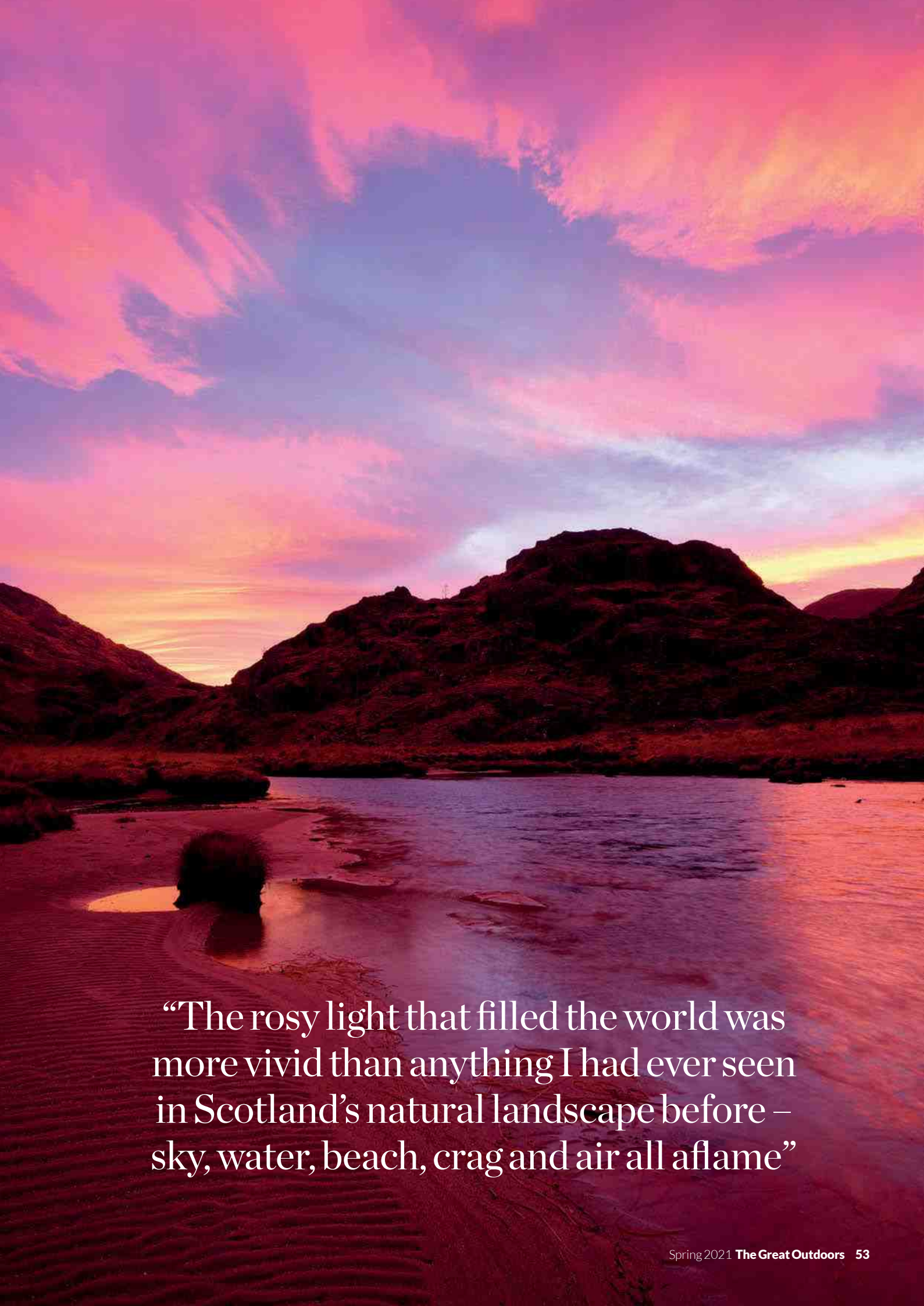
After an hour of flirting with the cloud base, it reached down and swirled around me in earnest, and I was back in the grey room again, navigating uphill by GPS and instinct. The shallow corrie

opened out into a surprisingly wide flat valley at the top with one final hummock to climb before reaching the bealach itself. When I stood at the highest point, marked by no cairn, all of a sudden the cloud lifted and I beheld the view north into Knoydart's innermost realm. The thread of the river led my eye along the length of Coire nan Gall towards the western end of Loch Quoich, veiled by receding planes of grey; but that Knoydart glow returned for just a moment as diffuse light picked out a spray of golden grasses at my feet. The mountain seemed to luminesce.

The descent on the other side of the bealach was steep and rocky. I knew I'd have a fun time of it here in the winter, but I filed that worry away for a later date. The short December day began to turn towards dusk. After another river crossing, I joined a stalker's path weaving a cunning route between rock outcrops in the bottom of a valley as I headed west towards Lochan 

[below] A sublime pitch beside Lochan nam Breac [right] The most colourful sunrise I've ever seen in Scotland





“The rosy light that filled the world was more vivid than anything I had ever seen in Scotland’s natural landscape before – sky, water, beach, crag and air all aflame”



[above] Before the snow

nam Breac. I thought of this exceptionally rugged and steep-sided glen as being on the edge of Knoydart's true inner sanctum – a special enclosed and shielded place that felt different to anywhere else nearby. There was a sense of profound wildness, but also of sadness. The moss-grown ruins of old Knoydart lay beside the path. Once, before the land was cleared and its memories forgotten, this place had been a home to many. Now there were more deer than people and the trees had retreated to secretive enclaves; the few places the grazing animals couldn't reach.

On the shoreline of Lochan nam Breac I made my camp, just above the pristine white sands where the footprints of an otter marked a wandering track between river and crag. A strong and gusty wind blew down from Mam Unndalain and ruffled the iron-grey waters of the loch. The mountains felt close and huddled all around me. There was no sunset. Overnight, I dreamt that the otter stood on its hind legs on the beach in the moonlight and watched my tent, a curiously human-like figure casting a long shadow on the pale sands.

## A perfect dawn

I woke the next morning to an intense red glow penetrating my tent's flysheet and painting the interior with hues too garish

to be real. After hurrying to get dressed and fumbling with boot laces and cold fingers, I grabbed my camera and headed outside. The sunrise was the best I had ever seen. Most of the cloud had gone overnight, and streamers of cirrostratus reflected the sun's fireball as it muscled up to the horizon. The rosy light that now filled the world was more vivid than any colours I'd seen in Scotland's natural landscape before – sky, water, beach, vegetation, crag and air all aflame, and the saturation kept increasing as I watched, each moment more colourful than the last. As I reviewed the photos on my camera's LCD, I wondered if people would think they were tastelessly photoshopped.

After the colours faded the landscape looked leached, monochrome. But I had the walk above the River Carnach up to Mam Unndalain to look forward to, and in better weather than yesterday. This path delighted me with its gushing waterfalls and scenic views down to the river. Again I felt that sense of a lost realm as I passed ruined summer shielings and crossed the mossed-over remnants of ancient bridges over burns, sometimes guarded by gnarled and stunted old birch trees sprouting from cracks in the rock, their leafless twigs quivering in the breeze.

More quickly than I had expected, I

rejoined the standard route of the Cape Wrath Trail, where a steep and pathless pull up from the gorge of the Carnach melded invisibly with the better trail I had followed from Lochan nam Breac. From here onwards I was back on familiar ground, and things felt subtly different. Although I remained very much alone, the knowledge that I stood on a popular trail that would be busy again in a few months coloured my perception of the place. As I descended towards Barrisdale Bay, I noticed lenticular clouds massing on the northern horizon.

## A different kind of isolation

For camp three I found a patch of sheep-nibbled grass just big enough on the shore of Loch Hourn. This huge sea loch bites deep into the landscape, and I followed a superb footpath along its south bank with exceptional views down to the water and across to the mountains on the far side. Bursts of sunlight broke through the thickening ranks of lenticular clouds, painting splashes of gold on the hillsides and deep chrome-blue on the water, but I was starting to worry that the weather was about to turn in a big way.

After another windy night and another clear dawn, I hurried the last few miles to Kinloch Hourn: a cluster of houses and estate buildings hidden amongst trees and



Map: Ordnance Survey

## Alex's route: essential info

**START/FINISH** Glenfinnan **GR: NM905808** to Cluanie Inn, Glen Shiel **GR: NH076117**  
**Distance** 72km/44.7 miles  
**Ascent** 2950m/9679ft  
**Time:** 4-6 days

**Maps:** OS Landranger 1:50,000 sheet 40 (Mallaig & Glenfinnan) and OS Landranger 1:50,000 sheet 33 (Loch Alsh, Glen Shiel & Loch Hourn). Harvey's British Mountain Map for Knoydart, Kintail & Glen Affric covers most of the route but lacks coverage for the first day.

**Time of year:** Any time of year possible. This route is arguably at its

best in spring or autumn at either end of the midge season.

**Summits:** None, although the route takes you within easy striking distance of Sgurr nan Coireachan (953m / 3127ft), and also potentially Garbh Chioch Mhor (1013m / 3323ft) and Sgurr na Ciche (1040m / 3412ft) via an alternative detour.

**Route notes:** This is mostly a low-level backpacking route on good (albeit boggy) paths, but there are some steep and exposed areas requiring navigational skill, especially Bealach Coire nan Gall (733m / 2405ft). There are several potentially serious river crossings.

### PLANNING ESCAPE ROUTES AND ALTERNATIVES

In places such as Knoydart with extremely rugged terrain, the loss of a key bridge – or just a spell of very wet weather resulting in high rivers – could lead to your planned route becoming impractical. There are a few tactics you can use to deal with this.

■ **Wade the river.** This requires careful planning and risk assessment. Don't underestimate the force of water pressure – it can knock you off your feet. Choose a wide, shallow area to cross, or look for a braid or island. Watch out for undercut banks, deep pools and rapids. Don't cross barefoot. River crossings are safer in groups – you can use each other for support. If safety is at all in doubt, don't cross.

■ **Find an alternative crossing point.** Often, all you need to do to find somewhere safe to

cross is hike upstream for a bit. However, in some areas, particularly Knoydart, this isn't always helpful due to rugged or steep terrain. Careful study of the map will usually reveal whether or not this likely to be feasible.

■ **Plan a different route.** It's likely that your original route was already the easiest route from A to B, but there are always other possibilities. Use the map to look for options that go over nearby bealachs or even summits. In most areas suitable routes will already have paths in place, but in wilder parts you may be on your own. Avoid very steep ground and any marked crags; this terrain could be dangerous, or at best slow and awkward. Don't forget to take into account the extra time the alternative route will add to your journey.

a maze of mudflats at the head of the loch. A few weeks before, a landslide had wiped out a section of the road, cutting off the village. It could now only be accessed on foot, by boat, or with an all-terrain vehicle. The public payphone at the stalker's cottage was dead when I tried it; "The landslide cut the line," the stalker told me "Highland Council say it won't be fixed till Easter. It's a pain in the neck." He was a busy man and didn't have long to spend chatting, but his words stayed with me for the rest of the day as I headed north towards Glen Shiel. Where I'd seen an oasis of solitude, he'd seen a place where he depended on a fine balance of isolation and connection in order for his livelihood to be viable. There was a lesson about perspective there; and a few months later, as I set out on my greater journey north towards Cape Wrath, I often thought about the stalker and the few minutes we'd spent talking about a faulty phone line.

A day later, walking uphill against savage gusts of wind and losing the path in driving snow, all I could think about was that I couldn't wait to get to the pub. I descended in the dark to the Cluanie Inn – only to find it an abandoned building site, and then had to wait by the roadside for almost an hour for the bus, gradually getting colder and wetter. By the time I made it to the Kintail Lodge Hotel I'd had enough of isolation for the time being. But I'll be back, I wrote in my journal that night. ▢

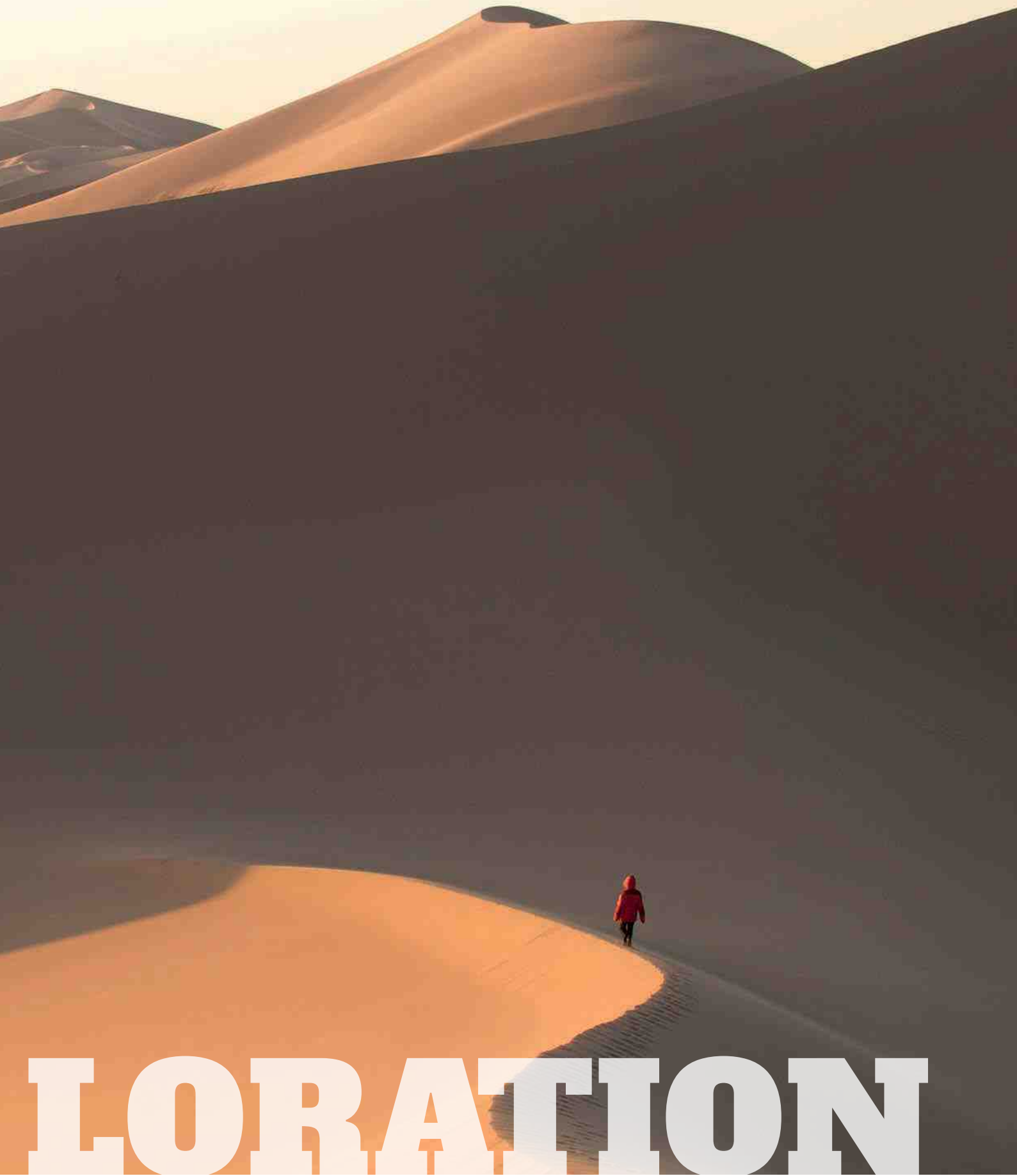


# SPACE EXP

On a 1000-mile camel-assisted trek across the Gobi Desert, Faraz Shibli experiences a world of vast horizons, rich culture and legendary hospitality



Gobi Desert



# LOCATION

PHOTOGRAPHY: EMMANUEL BERTHIER



I PEERED DOWN at my grubby, sun-peeled hands. Between my left thumb and index finger squirmed an engorged tick, freshly plucked from the genitals of one of my camels. In my right hand, I clutched a few crumbling lumps of dried camel faeces to burn on the campfire. This was comfortably my most bizarre summer holiday to date.

It began with a group of us who had met online, including a yoga instructor, a former soldier and me, a lawyer. We all wanted to walk across the Gobi Desert for our own reasons – in my case, brief respite from my first city job – and finally we found ourselves there, standing at its westernmost edge. Following a handshake and an exchange of money with some Mongolian herders, we had become the proud new owners of our very first Bactrian camels. Twelve of them, to be

precise. It felt a bit like buying a whole fleet of cars without first having learnt to drive.

Looking suspiciously at us through long, wiry eyelashes, their double humps flopping around like jelly towers, they shuffled their feet apprehensively. Little did they know that for two months they would help carry our belongings across the desert – all 1600 kilometres (1000 miles) of it. Once we had worked out how to load them, we would begin our journey east.

### **Endless space**

For miles in every direction stretched a yellow grass carpet: thirsty, threadbare and flat. Amongst the sparsely speckled saltwort, sagebrush and low grasses, not much could summon the strength to exist above knee height. The occasional saxaul tree stretched lethargically skywards but quickly slumped back down to earth. The

air was still, disturbed only by little lizards racing through the gravel, then pausing on diminutive rocks before darting off again.

As I lifted my gaze and looked out across the terrain, the features of this miniature world began to merge together, like a painting made up of tiny dots when viewed from afar, to form an endless watercolour wash of golds and lilacs and greens. Never before on land had I seen so much uninterrupted space. It was a great emptiness – a place without fences and of boundless steppe. The only signs of human habitation were the nomads' *gers*: round, wooden yurts, wrapped in felt and white canvas. From a distance, they blended seamlessly into the landscape, like daisies in a field.

On the horizon, a very different scene unfolded. At the fringes of these wide-open plains, we were encircled by the formidable



[previous spread] Sand dunes of the Gobi [left] Vast plains encircled by the Altai Mountains [above] The Flaming Cliffs, home to important dinosaur fossils [below] Sharing a joke back in camp



Altai Mountains, like the distant stands of a stadium of prehistoric proportions. I imagined their dark, jagged peaks to be the backplates of a huge sleeping Stegosaurus, half-submerged in the ground.

I wasn't far off. In the late Cretaceous period, around 70 million years ago, dinosaurs roamed the Gobi, which was then lush with forests and rivers. It's now a treasure trove for dinosaur fossil finds. In the 1920s, American palaeontologist Roy Chapman Andrews – believed to be the real-life inspiration for Indiana Jones – found the first fossilised dinosaur eggs in the Gobi. Since then, it has been the site of a whole host of fascinating discoveries, including a Tarbosaurus (similar to a T Rex) with its baby, as well as a Velociraptor locked in combat with a Protoceratops (a smaller, hornless relative of the Triceratops).

## Teeming with life


Heading east towards the mountains, people began to appear as if from nowhere: dainty women on tiny horses, wind-burnt men on rusty motorbikes and giggling children with gifts of hard cheese. We were often invited back to their cosy *gers*, where we were fortified by milky tea cooked on a central stove and served up in bowls. We glugged it eagerly while scanning the brightly hand-painted stools, carved knives and intricate saddles that adorned their homes.

A favourite horse was always tethered outside. Featuring heavily in Mongolian mythology, folklore and song, horses and horsemanship have formed a fundamental part of the national identity for hundreds of years. Indeed, it's traditionally said that a Mongol without a horse is like a bird without wings. They start them early: we saw kids in the saddle as young as

four or five years old.

There are wilder creatures to be found here too. Ibex, argali (the world's largest wild sheep) and the elusive snow leopard rove the mountains, while gazelles, wild ass and jerboas inhabit the steppe below. While we walked, a golden eagle performed acrobatics overhead, culminating in a nosedive to pluck an unidentified critter from the ground in front of us, before vanishing into a hillside nest. Close by, a pit viper sat coiled atop a collection of stones, its arrow-shaped head resting on a camouflaged body of brown and white stripes. And, as we lay tucked up at night, the hush was from time to time broken by the howls of wolves in the neighbouring hills. Despite its extreme remoteness, this place was teeming with life.

Our route brought us along the edges of a nature reserve, which, together with

A wide-angle photograph of a vast, flat, open landscape, likely a steppe or tundra. The ground is covered in low-lying, dry vegetation and small green plants. The horizon is flat and extends across the entire width of the image. The sky is a deep, dark blue, filled with heavy, dark clouds, suggesting an approaching storm or late evening light. The overall mood is one of immense scale and solitude.

*“Never before on land  
had I seen so much  
uninterrupted space.  
It was a great emptiness –  
a place without fences and  
of limitless steppe.”*



Crossing a nearly featureless part of the South Gobi

## Gobi Desert

another protected area to the southeast, is home to a number of endangered and critically endangered species, including the *takhi* (or Mongolian wild horse, once extinct in the wild but reintroduced in the 1990s), the Gobi bear (of which only a few dozen remain) and the wild Bactrian camel. The last is a genetically distinct species from the domesticated Bactrian camel – and even hardier. It has adapted to be able to drink saltwater – probably the only mammal on Earth that can do so – and survived atmospheric nuclear testing on the other side of the border in China.

### Mountain legend

When crossing mountain passes, we came across cairn-like piles of rocks, called *ovoos*. Draped in sky-blue ceremonial scarves, these are the scenes of sacred ceremonies. Travellers circle them three times clockwise for safety during a journey, while worshippers make offerings of animal skulls, sweets and money and libations of milk and vodka to the sky god, Tenger. ➤

### Faraz's tips for desert travel

**Cover up:** Use a high-factor sun cream, protect your lips and cover as much of your body in loose clothing as possible to avoid sunburn and sunstroke, including your head, arms and legs. Don't remove them to cool down – you'll speed up dehydration. Invest in good sunglasses with full UV protection. You can use thin gloves to protect your hands. Stay cool and hydrated: limit your time under the sun, finding shade wherever possible. Try to limit intense activities during the middle of the day, making use of mornings and evenings. Drink lots of water regularly. If you're running low, take small sips rather than big swigs, move slowly (try not to break into a sweat) and keep your mouth closed or covered to limit dehydration.

**Be prepared for sandstorms:** Pack goggles to protect your eyes and a thin neck gaiter to cover your nose and mouth. If you're caught short, use a damp cloth instead. Keep electronics in airtight bags and take a few brushes of different sizes with you to clean sand from your tent, zips and gadgets. Use the sun in an emergency: Bring a good signal mirror to be spotted from a distance on a sunny day.

**Stay warm too:** Be prepared for temperature fluctuations. Bring multiple layers to put on at night and find a spot to set up camp in good time before the mercury drops.

**Further reading:** Check out *The Ultimate Desert Handbook: A Manual for Desert Hikers, Campers and Travelers* by Mark Johnson.



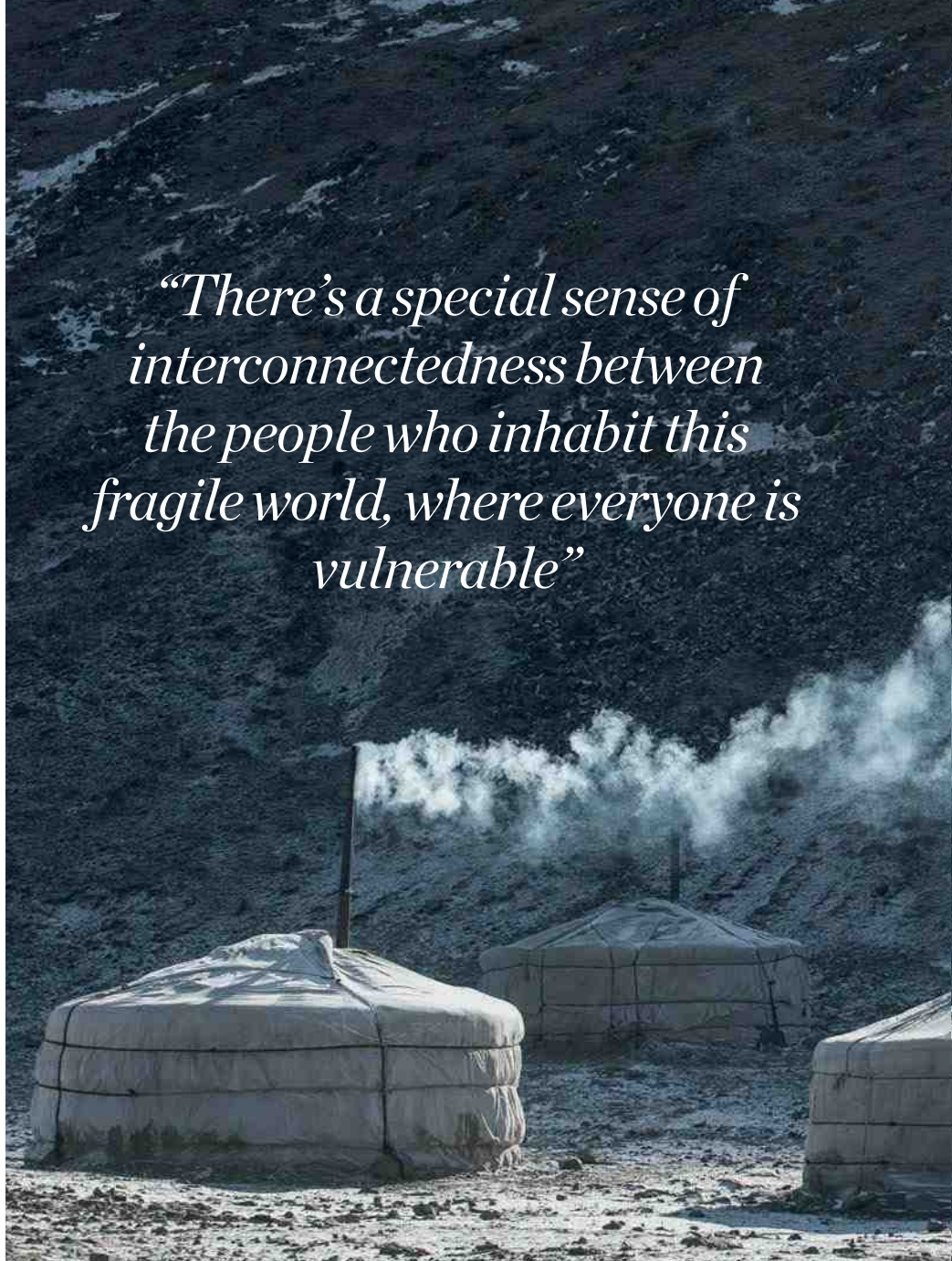
In Mongolian folk religion – a mélange of animism, shamanism and ancestor worship, with later Buddhist influences – the natural world is revered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the sky takes on a particular spiritual significance; unofficially known as the Land of the Eternal Blue Sky, Mongolia sees over 250 days of sunshine a year. Their belief system also speaks to the Mongols’ deep, historical connection to the land. Sometimes the mountains themselves are the subjects of worship through legends, folk songs and epics.

One such peak, and one of the most famous of the Mongolian Altai, stood before us in the middle of the next plain. Known as Eej Khairkhan Uul (Sacred Mother Mountain), it resembles the profile of a woman lying down. Legend has it she was married to another mountain to the south-west. He was old – his head was capped with snow all year round – and Eej Khairkhan grew tired of him. Her eyes wandered north-east to a younger, more dashing mountain, and over time she planned her escape to join him. One night, she ran away – but in her haste she put on her husband’s robe instead of her own. He awoke to the sight of her fleeing and, enraged, flung a handful of sand at her. It landed on the back of the robe, which was far too large for her, and dragged her tumbling to the dirt. She remains there to this day, pinned to the desert floor, with only the sand dunes for company.

### **Eye of the storm**

Dropping deeper into the South Gobi, the mountains petered out. Any remaining greenery faded into an increasingly ashen, almost lunar surface, leaving only thorny drought-adapted shrubs for our camels to graze on. It was an altogether lonelier space – one in which we felt like the sole inhabitants of a computer game in which the designer had forgotten to add any features. At times, it was tough to tell

*“There’s a special sense of interconnectedness between the people who inhabit this fragile world, where everyone is vulnerable”*



which way was which, so much so that walking in a straight line for any length of time without the help of navigational aids became impossible.

Other than pausing for meals, there was little to punctuate the days. Instead, time was measured in inhalations and exhalations; by the creaking of my knees and how many times I used the back of my glove to wipe the sweat from my eyelids. It was the antithesis of modern life, with its sensory overload, where events rush by like a train not stopping at the station. To fill the void, clusters of noisy, random and unconnected thoughts went off like synaptic fireworks in my head. I wonder what I’ll do when I get home. Perhaps I should put on some more sun cream. Watch out for that pothole. Often, I was unsure whether I had said them out loud.

Marching trancelike through this empty quarter, we didn’t see the sandstorm

coming. It had formed slowly at first – a mere smudge on the horizon. But soon, the advancing wall of billowing dust was nearly upon us. Reaching ourselves, we pulled down our ski goggles and covered our noses and mouths. We hadn’t yet set up camp, and with nowhere else to shelter, we brought our camels to kneel before lying down beside them, using their giant torsos as cover. While the feral winds shrieked and lashed the earth around us, the thickening swirls tumbled one over another, like a waterfall of gravel and grime, and everything turned to grey.

### **Fragile world**

As we entered July and daytime temperatures climbed to 45C, loading our camels became more of a chore, and some simply refused to carry. One even stampeded through our campsite, dropping precious food and drinking



[far left] Nomad girl [left] Gers nestled in the Altai Mountains [above] Resting by the campfire [below] Watching a desert storm



water. The latter had been especially hard-won: we had used Soviet-era maps – the most accurate representations of the Gobi available at the time – to navigate from well to well, many of which were dry. Such incidents can be deadly in this barren place, as we were regularly reminded by the sun-bleached skeletons of horses and camels that littered the ground beneath our feet. Although nomads still manage to survive here, it's becoming an ever more challenging proposition.

Mongolia suffers from a phenomenon called *dzud*: a natural disaster involving severe winters often preceded by summer droughts, which leads to huge numbers of livestock starving or freezing to death. These extreme events are becoming more common: at the turn of the last century, Mongolia was hit by *dzud* three years in a row, killing 11 million animals – more than the number of sheep in Wales.

The traditional nomadic way of life is becoming less viable still, following the recent discovery of trillions of dollars of minerals in the region and an influx of foreign mining companies. The sight of colossal lorries in the distance, which seemed utterly alien in the desert, hinted at mines not far off our route – some of the many operations (both legal and illegal) that have sprung up in the South Gobi. For herders, this means diminished access to water and pastures, as well as no-go zones caused by water and soil pollution from the use of mercury and cyanide. Some of the mines are subsequently abandoned, leaving pockmarks on the face of the earth.

Stripped of their livelihoods, some herders turn to dangerous illegal mining. Others up sticks and head to the city, more often than not living in slums without roads or proper sanitation and struggling to eke out a living. For those

who remain in the Gobi, their fate is tied to the fate of the land. But there's a special sense of interconnectedness between the people who inhabit this fragile world, where everyone is vulnerable. It's said that, during a journey, nomads can enter an empty *ger* and help themselves to food, water and a bed for the night. It's a hospitality borne of necessity in a land where roads are few, long-distance travel is tough and the traditional nomadic way of life constantly demands it.

Emerging from the east of the desert, we reached an unassuming *ovoo* on the brow of a gentle hill, taking the final steps of our journey. As I circled it, my eyes drifted up to the sky, which in that moment revealed none of the hardships of the Gobi. I thought back to open doors, milky tea and wrinkled eyes framed by smiles – glimpses of the kindness of strangers in a desperately harsh place. Long may it continue. ▢

# The better backpacking guide

In this four-part series with expert tentmaker Hilleberg, our equipment editor and long-distance walking legend **Chris Townsend** explains key aspects of backpacking. In this second instalment, he looks at top tips and techniques for pitching tents in challenging conditions, with added input from Hilleberg on how this advice relates to their models

## PART TWO: HOW TO PITCH TENTS IN COLD AND HOSTILE WEATHER

**TENTS**, as opposed to lighter options like tarps or bivvies, really come into their own – and justify the effort of carrying them – when the weather turns stormy.

The way you pitch a tent is often key to how secure it will feel. It can be very comforting to shelter in the wilds within a tent you know is sturdy while rain, wind or snow whirl outside. Conversely, being inside a poorly pitched tent that seems at risk of collapsing can be a very unnerving experience and guarantees a poor night's sleep.

To maximise a tent's storm-worthiness there are a number of things you can do. The first thing you should ensure is that you are familiar and well-practised at pitching the tent so you do it quickly and efficiently in poor conditions. Inside a howling storm is not the best time to be fumbling with your shelter!

### ■ PITCH SELECTION

In windy weather, always look for sheltered terrain; but sometimes an exposed pitch may be the only option there is. Often, though, there are options; even a gentle bank or a pile of rocks can help cut the wind. Passing by that lovely hillside pitch and continuing downhill to a less windy spot is often worthwhile. But in heavy rain, be wary of damp hollows; these could fill with water. In woods, look up. Camping under a dead branch is a bad idea.

### ■ PITCHING

To stop your tent blowing away in strong winds, peg down one end securely before inserting any poles or laying the tent out. In extremely strong winds kneel on the tent to hold it down while you peg out one end (it can also help to loosely peg down the other end)



Photo credit: Adam Burley

before inserting the poles, and then pull out the other end and properly peg it down. With tents that clip onto the poles, such as many dome tents, it's usually possible to peg out the tent and insert the pole ends before attaching the clips. Never pitch a tunnel tent side-on to the wind. With other designs, the door should be away from the wind.

**Hilleberg adds:** For Hilleberg tunnel tents, make sure to get a good stretch of the ridge line when you pull out and peg the tent. One school of thought says to pitch tunnel tents with the rear into the wind, but for our one-entrance tunnel tents, like the Nallo, Nammatj and Anjan, we recommend pitching the vestibule end into the wind; this keeps the rear wall from pushing down on your feet and increases ventilation and strength. On two-entrance tunnel models like our

Kaitum, Keron and Helags, with a vestibule at either end, position either end into the wind. On any tent, make sure doors are closed before pitching. A good habit: close the doors every time you take down the tent so it's ready for next time.

### ■ PEGS AND GUYLINES

Pegs should go in at about a 45-degree angle (leaning away from the tent) right up to their heads. Carry a selection of different pegs for different ground conditions – thin ones for stony and hard ground, wide ones for soft ground – so you can do this. If pegs really won't go fully into the ground, pegging loops and guylines should be looped round the peg at ground level – higher up and they could lever the peg out. Place guylines so they support the tent's structure. All guylines should be pegged out and tightened, set as



long as possible – but avoid overtightening the lines, as this could deform the tent structure. I do this even if it's calm – because the wind may pick up during the night.

**Hilleberg adds:** *On tunnel tents, we recommend the guylines at the ends of the tent should be set at a 45° angle to the tent, whilst middle guylines should be in line with the poles. Carry extra guyline cord. You can use it to lengthen lines on uneven terrain or add more guylines if needed. In conditions where you might need to put a stone on a guyline or peg point to add holding power, add an extra loop of cord to the line or peg point and put the stone on that so the stone won't damage the actual guyline, peg point or tent wall.*

### ■ PITCHING IN SNOW

In soft snow, a platform should be stamped out then levelled for the tent. Special extra-wide and extra-long pegs can be carried for snow. In soft snow these should be buried horizontally with guylines looped round them (a 'deadman anchor'). Extra cord may be needed for pegging points round the edge

of the flysheet for this. Ordinary pegs can be buried like this too. Stamp down on the snow above the peg to harden it – but be aware that they'll freeze in place and you may need an ice axe to dig them out the next day. Ice axes, trekking poles and skis can be used as pegs in snow too.

**Hilleberg adds:** *Very deep snow is rare in the UK, but in such conditions, on exposed terrain, we recommend digging your tent down to about half the height of the tent. Throw loose snow onto the side walls to help keep the wind from getting under them. Avoid building snow walls, as these can actually channel wind onto the tent or fall onto the tent. Hilleberg Snow and Sand pegs come with an attached line and hook so they are easy to attach to the guyline or peg points, and so they can be buried deep for optimal holding power.*

### ■ SECURING GEAR

Before pitching the tent, ensure all other gear is in your pack and the lid is shut so it stays dry and doesn't blow away. Tent stuffsacks should be pushed into garment or pack pockets to stop them being lost to the wind.

### ■ FINAL CHECKS

Before getting inside the tent, check all pegging points are secure and tighten the guylines. In rain it's worth getting out last thing before sleep to tighten everything again – some tent fabrics stretch when wet. If it's snowy, knock any snow off the tent. In very heavy snow you may need to do this during the night too.

### ■ KEEPING THE INNER DRY

Fill up water containers and do any other outside chores before entering the tent. If your outer clothing is wet, strip this off in the porch. A small sitmat is useful for kneeling on to do this. The idea is to keep any damp gear out of the inner tent so it stays as dry as possible.

**Hilleberg adds:** *On all Hilleberg tents, you can disconnect a corner (or more) of the inner tent from the outer tent to create extra 'vestibule' space. By disconnecting most of the inner tent attachment points and pushing the inner tent back, you create a great space for people to gather out of the storm without getting the inner tent wet. In addition, in truly wet conditions, when you take down your tent you can disconnect the inner tent completely and store it separately in your pack. When you reach the next camp spot, set up the outer tent as you would the complete tent, then climb into the protected space and reattach the still-dry inner tent.*



# HILL SKILLS

## 7 tips for beginner hillwalkers

Outdoor instructor Brad Reed of Plas y Brenin shares his top hillwalking tips – whether you're a total newbie or an enthusiast returning to the peaks after a forced hiatus



THE LAST 12 MONTHS have seen more and more people exploring the great outdoors from their doorsteps – and that's been amazing to see. But most people have been limited to their towns or cities. Once restrictions ease, getting out into the countryside will really increase your enjoyment of walking. Embracing expansive views from a hilltop will give you a sense of freedom and help you escape the complexities and stresses of modern life by resetting the mind.

Perhaps you've been away from the hills for so long, you've completely forgotten what to pack or wear? Or maybe – after discovering a love for local routes during the pandemic – you're eager to go hillwalking for the first time? Either way, this expert advice will help you stay safe and happy during your post-lockdown mountain adventures.

### 1. Get kitted out

You'll want clothing that keeps you warm and dry – but that can be tricky in the notoriously changeable British weather. One minute it can be glorious sunshine, the next it's hailing like there's no tomorrow. The best way to manage your personal thermometer is to have a selection of layers depending on the weather that day. A 'wicking' base layer is great for taking sweat away from the skin, but be sure to carry two to four additional layers with different thicknesses so you can adjust your clothing to suit your temperature on every section of the walk. A light fleece, down or synthetic jacket, and a waterproof jacket and trousers should suffice.

In terms of footwear, a sturdy pair of walking boots matched with some high-quality walking socks will give you the best comfort and safety for getting into the hills. See a pair of boots as an investment.



A Black Girls Hike walk in the Peak District. Joining a walking group is a great way to get started

Take your time trying on lots of pairs in an outdoors shop and select a pair based on how they feel, rather than the look or brand.

A sturdy, 30L rucksack with a hip-belt is a great place to store your high-energy food and water for the day. It will also be home to your waterproofs, any extra layers you need such as a softshell or down jacket, and a group shelter in case of any extended unplanned stoppages. Pack a hat and gloves in cold weather, or sunscreen and sunglasses when it's glorious, and a headtorch when the days are short during autumn and winter. Other things to remember include maps, compass and mobile phone.

### 2. Build up your hill experience slowly

Don't jump head-first into the deep end with full day hikes in remote countryside and big mountain areas. Instead build up progressively, starting with shorter, lower-level routes. If you reflect on all the walks you have done and draw learning points from each one, over time you will become more knowledgeable, comfortable and confident whilst out hillwalking.

### 3. Find some hiking buddies

If you don't have any walking buddies and don't feel comfortable going it alone, then maybe joining a club will help you to gain confidence and skills from experienced walkers. Walking clubs are extremely diverse, ranging from 'traditional' clubs with relatively formal membership arrangements to younger groups with an emphasis on inclusivity and diversity (see the 'Walking Groups' box). There are also a large range of commercially run walking groups, so do your research and find one you fancy. If you don't like the vibes try another one. The BMC has a list of affiliated clubs on its website, for example.

Alternatively, you might want to get some input from a course before you head out with friends. At Plas y Brenin we run week and weekend hillwalking and navigation courses in the heart of Snowdonia, which will give you a great confidence and skills boost.

### 4. Learn how to navigate safely

Having the skills to read a map, use a

Photo credit: Black Girls Hike

compass and interpret a GPS are essential for a safe hillwalking experience. But, like any skill, it takes time to improve your knowledge and confidence. Whilst it can seem quite daunting at first, there are lots of great resources out there to help you learn – from guidebooks to YouTube tutorials. Or why not consider attending a navigation course? With a professional instructor you will pick up new skills rapidly.

As a supplement to map and compass, GPS devices or mapping apps are fantastic for relocation and confirmation of your location. However, be cautious of over-reliance in case they run out of battery, lose signal or become difficult to use in bad weather. Even if your phone is waterproofed, using a touchscreen in the rain can be infuriating.

### 5. Be flexible with your plans

When planning a route in advance, a good approach is to give yourself a few options to choose from, say a high-, medium- and low-level walk. Then, once you have checked the weather forecast and taken into account all of the needs of your group, you can select the best option. Take this approach throughout the walk too. Think about factoring in decision points where it's possible to either take a more challenging route, if everyone feels it is appropriate, or to take an easier option if the weather, tiredness and enthusiasm aren't on your side.

### 6. Slow down and enjoy nature

There's a great thrill in reaching a summit or spotting a waterfall along your route, but if you slow down on your walks and adopt a curious mindset it will open up small wonders throughout the day. Take time to notice the flora and fauna, the geology and the landscape around you to give your walks that extra sense of wonder. Overhead, look out for a kestrel hovering above its prey or a peregrine falcon diving at full speed – both sights to behold. Underfoot, keep an eye out for interesting plants; butterwort and sundew are both insectivorous plants found in boggy areas. They have evolved to capture small insects (usually midges) to gain essential nutrients in the poor soils on the hills. *Hostile Habitats: Scotland's Mountain Environment* by Mark Wrightham and Nick Kempe, and *Nature of Snowdonia* by Mike Raine are great reference guides to help identify all those fascinating things

you discover along your wanderings.

### 7. Know what to do if something goes wrong

In the case of an emergency, contact the local mountain rescue team by calling 999 and asking for the police then mountain rescue. They will want to know your exact location (mobile apps such as OS Locate can help with this), what kit you have and details of the incident, and they will ask you to stay where you have a signal if you have moved from your party to call them. It is also always a good idea to leave your planned route

and expected return time with someone or somewhere reliable before you go, even if you are part of a group - and notify them if plans change.

But with appropriate planning and preparation, you can reduce your chances of ever needing help. Remember to pack an extra layer that you don't intend to wear and a group shelter or blizzard bag, in which you can stay put in relative comfort for a few hours if needs be - to wait out bad weather, get through a night or just think about your next steps - rather than resorting to calling mountain rescue at the first sign of strife.

## Hillwalking for beginners: FIND OUT MORE

### COURSES

Plas y Brenin ([pyb.co.uk](http://pyb.co.uk)), the National Outdoor Centre in Snowdonia, runs a series of residential courses to help beginners get mountain-confident, including 'Hill skills – 2 day' (£228) and 'Navigation skills for hill and mountains walkers – 2 day' (£327). Alternatively, simply Google for local instructors running navigation or hill skill courses in your area.

### ONLINE RESOURCES

Our website ([tgomagazine.co.uk/skills](http://tgomagazine.co.uk/skills)) has a wealth of information and advice from a range of experts. The British Mountaineering Council's (BMC) website has an excellent section dedicated to hillwalking beginners ([thebmc.co.uk/how-to-start-hill-walking](http://thebmc.co.uk/how-to-start-hill-walking)), including two free PDF booklets entitled *New Hill Walkers* and *Safety on the Mountains*.

### BOOKS/DVDS

Two useful resources include the BMC's *Hill Walking Essentials* DVD (available at [shop.thebmc.co.uk](http://shop.thebmc.co.uk)) and the book *Hillwalking: The Official Handbook of the Mountain Training Walking Schemes* by Steve Long (available at [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk))

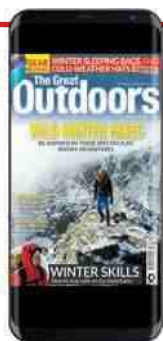
### WALKING GROUPS

The Ramblers ([ramblers.org.uk](http://ramblers.org.uk)) has over 500 volunteer-led walking groups across the UK, including groups specifically for people in their 20s, 30s and 40s, whilst the BMC also publishes a list of over 300 hillwalking and mountaineering clubs. On top of these 'traditional' groups, a new breed of outdoor social group has emerged over the past few years with an emphasis on diversity and inclusion, including Black Girls Hike ([bghuk.com](http://bghuk.com)), Steppers UK ([instagram.com/steppers\\_uk](http://instagram.com/steppers_uk)), Boots and Beards ([bootsandbeards.co.uk](http://bootsandbeards.co.uk)) and Iona's Adventures on Facebook.

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# GEAR

News from the world of outdoor kit, and product reviews from the UK's most experienced gear-testing team



## Two new jackets from Fjällräven

The High Coast Hydratic Jacket (right) is a new lightweight 2.5-layer waterproof top made of an eco-friendly recycled polyamide with a fluorocarbon-free polyurethane coating. The jacket has an adjustable hood and side vents, and comes in men's and women's sizes. It weighs 281g (size small) and costs £230.



Also unveiled is the shirt-style Vardag Jacket, made from durable G-1000 fabric: 65% recycled polyester/35% organic cotton. The Vardag has patch pockets and metal buttons. It weighs 745g (size M) and costs £185. Men's and women's sizes are available. [fjallraven.com](http://fjallraven.com)

## Gear News

### Mountain Equipment's most sustainable sleeping bags yet

The Earthrise sleeping bags use recycled down and have recycled shell and lining fabrics, making them ME's most environmentally friendly bags yet. They are high-performance products with 700+ fill power down, slant wall baffles, shaped hoods and foot-boxes, and full-length zips with baffles. There are four models in the range: two for men, two for women. The men's Earthrise 600 has a sleep rating of -9°C and weighs 1070g; the women's Earthrise 600 has a rating of -7°C and weighs 1030g. Both cost £320. The women's Earthrise 400 has a rating of -2°C and weighs 850g; the men's has a rating of -4°C and a weight of 890g. Both cost £270. [mountain-equipment.co.uk](http://mountain-equipment.co.uk)



### Founder Wayne Edy back in charge of Inov-8

Wayne Edy, who founded Inov-8 in 2003, has bought the company back after it was sold to Descente in 2015. Since taking back charge he has been spearheading the design of a "revolutionary new running shoe" that will be the first in the world to feature a graphene-enhanced foam called G-Fly. This follows Inov-8's use of graphene-enhanced rubber for the outsole. Graphene is the world's thinnest material and is 200 times stronger than steel. [inov-8.com](http://inov-8.com)



### Merrell unveils extra-grippy trail running shoes

The Merrell Agility Peak 4 is a trail running shoe "designed for those who want a lot of protection on even the most rugged of trails". To that end the shoes have a Vibram MegaGrip sole for maximum traction and durability on wet or dry surfaces, plus a rock plate for protection against stones and a thick lightweight cushioning foam midsole. The uppers are mesh for breathability. The Agility Peak 4 costs £120 and comes in men's and women's sizes. It will be available in May. [merrell.com](http://merrell.com)



## Outdoor Research expands lightweight Helium range

Outdoor Research has launched four products to complement its Helium Rain Jacket, all made from bluesign-approved Pertex Diamond Fuse fabric. The Helium Wind Hoodie weighs just 150 g (size medium) and has an adjustable hood. It costs £100 and comes in men's and women's sizes. The Helium Wind Convertible gloves (above) have a shell mitt that tucks away on the back of the hand. The gloves weigh 48g (size large) and cost £37. The Helium Rain Mitts have taped seams and are made from waterproof Pertex Shield Diamond Fuse. They weigh 20g (size L/XL) and cost £40. Pertex Shield Diamond Fuse is also used for the Helium Gaiters (right), which weigh 139g (size large) and cost £55. [outdoorresearch.com](http://outdoorresearch.com)



## Klättermusen launches new kit collection

CEO Gonz Ferrero says Klättermusen's 2021 collection presents "innovative, made-to-last products with a strong focus on lightweight, waterproof protection by advancing the development of the best sustainable fabrics". Key products include the Asynja waterproof jacket (left) and pants made of bluesign-approved fluorocarbon-free fabric. Weights are just over 300 grams for the jacket and 293 grams for the pants. Prices start from £200. There are also the Grimner pants and shorts in men's and women's fit. These use organic cotton blended with bio-based polyamide and elastane with Cordura reinforcements on the seat and knees. Prices are from £150. Finally, there's the Brimer pack, which comes in 24 and 32 litre sizes, uses 100% recycled and waterproof fabric, and has a flexible frame and big pockets. Prices start from £210. [klattermusen.com](http://klattermusen.com)



## NEWS



## ViewRanger: what's happening?

ViewRanger is set to disappear – but not quite completely. Chris Townsend looks into the future of this favourite navigation app.

VIEWRANGER, the GPS navigation app, has been the subject of chatter on social media amongst outdoor people recently regarding its takeover by Outdooractive, which occurred in late 2019. It's clear there are changes going on but not so clear as to exactly what they are. To find out, I asked ViewRanger founder Craig Wareham for more information.

The headline news is that the ViewRanger name and app will disappear, though not for at least a year. The features and functionality will continue, as part of Outdooractive, and the same UK team will continue development. Outdooractive is based in the Alpine town of Immenstadt in Bavaria and now has offices in several European countries.

Features like Skyline AR and Buddy Beacon have already been added to Outdooractive and, says Craig Wareham, "improved upon whilst we did it". OS maps will continue to be available.

So what happens to current ViewRanger subscriptions, you may ask? Subscriptions to ViewRanger are no longer available, and current ones can't be renewed. Whilst their subscription lasts current ViewRanger subscribers get a matched subscription to Outdooractive and when it expires they will be offered a significant discount on renewing with Outdooractive. If you've purchased individual map tiles or regions these will still be available. Currently the Outdooractive Pro subscription is £26.99 (£2 more than the ViewRanger Premium + OS maps subscription) and that includes access to all Outdooractive topo maps including OS, IGN France, SwissTopo and more.

Craig Wareham says that becoming part of Outdooractive gave "a path forward that was exciting and should deliver an even better solution and set of tools". I hope he's right. I'll be reviewing Outdooractive after I've used it for a while.

I've been using ViewRanger for over a decade and it has become one of my favourites and most-used outdoor apps. I am sorry to see the name go, and I really hope Outdooractive will prove as good.

Following comments from TGO readers after this story went online, ViewRanger has been asked what will happen to UK-wide map purchases in the switch to Outdooractive. It had not yet responded as we went to press.

# NEW PRODUCT REVIEWS

Equipment editor Chris Townsend reviews the most exciting and interesting new gear releases



£175 1.12kg (L/XL)

✓ light, stable, water-resistant zips, plenty of pockets

✗ quite expensive

**Capacity:** 30 litres  
**Materials:** 100D Robic  
**Back system:** adjustable, internal frame, injection moulded panel  
**Back length:** 54cm (size L/XL)  
**Hipbelt:** padded  
**Pockets:** stretch mesh front, 2 stretch mesh side, 2 hipbelt, zipped lid, zipped inner, 2 mesh shoulder strap  
**Features:** side compression straps, ice axe & walking pole loops, helmet attachment  
**Sizes:** 2 men, 2 women (Tempest Pro)

Osprey has updated its Talon and Tempest day packs, adding some more technical versions, which have the prefix Pro. Since last autumn I've been trying the Talon Pro 30. It has a ziparound top and plenty of pockets. The fabric is a light but tough Robic nylon with heavy-duty reinforcements on the base and on the front. The zips are water-resistant, which is good to see in a pack like this as it means a pack cover isn't needed the moment there's any rain, as it is with similar packs with unprotected top zips. There's a helmet holder on the front.

The Talon Pro has an internal frame and a perforated framesheet covered with mesh – a system called Airscape that's designed to reduce sweat on the back whilst maintaining a close

fit. The back is adjustable and comes in two lengths. The frame is curved and slightly flexible so it adjusts to your shape. The wide hipbelt and shoulder straps are lined with soft non-slip material.

The Talon Pro is comfortable to carry and very stable. I've used it ski touring and it really clings to my back. The Airscape back system has worked quite well at keeping my back dry too. The ziparound top gives quick access to the contents and so far hasn't leaked in rain. The pack isn't fully waterproof – the seams aren't sealed – but I've not had more than drips inside. Waterproof clothing can be stuffed into the front pocket for access without having to open the pack. The shoulder strap pockets are quite narrow. The hipbelt pockets are roomy – my fairly big smartphone fits in okay. The watertight zips are a little stiff on these pockets and I needed two hands to open and close them, though this did improve with use.

I think the Talon Pro is an excellent daypack. It should prove tough and the design is practical. The weight is quite low. The price is on the high side, but you do get materials and features not found on similar packs – and the quality is excellent.

★★★★★  
**The North Face**  
 Summit Series  
 L3 50/50



£470 500g (men's L)

✓ breathability, warmth, lightweight

✗ not fully windproof

**Fill:** 800 fill power ProDown with water repellency  
**Shell:** nylon with DWR finish  
**Hood:** shaped, rear drawcord  
**Cuffs:** elasticated  
**Hem:** drawcord  
**Pockets:** 2 zipped handwarmer, 2 open topped inner  
**Sizes:** men S-XL, women XS-XL

The North Face has come up with a new construction method for down jackets. To keep down in place it's normally contained in baffles between two layers of tightly woven fabric. This design is windproof and fairly breathable, though condensation can occur when working hard. With the L3 50/50, the company set out to make a down jacket with maximum breathability so mountaineers could move faster and more efficiently, with less need to remove layers. To achieve this, the down is contained in a series of baffles hung inside the outer shell. This means the latter doesn't need to be tightly woven and is instead highly air-permeable.

To find out how this new construction performed, I took the jacket on several ski tours in sub-zero temperatures and quickly found I didn't overheat

as I would expect to in a down jacket of this weight. In fact, in windy weather I felt a little cool. This construction really is more breathable than a standard down jacket. After a particularly strenuous ski through soft, deep snow, except for my lower arms (where the jacket has standard baffle construction) there was no condensation, and I was dry.

The L3 50/50 is filled with high-quality 800 fill power down with a water repellency treatment. The down is Responsible Down Standard certified. There are zipped handwarmer pockets and two large inner pockets. The helmet-compatible hood is roomy and has a rear drawcord.

The L3 50/50 is a warm and comfy jacket. The performance is impressive with regard to breathability. However, if out in a very cold wind for many hours I would need a shell over the jacket to keep warm. If you want to wear your down jacket when walking or skiing in cold weather then the L3 50/50 is more breathable than other down jackets, meaning you're less likely to overheat or get sweaty.

It's an interesting approach, and it's good to see The North Face being innovative.





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# 3 SEASON BOOTS

The most important tool in the box is probably the one on your feet. *Judy Armstrong* and *David Lintern* take a look at the latest general-purpose three season footwear.



**THREE SEASON BOOTS** ARE the walking footwear most of wear for most of the year. So they are worth careful consideration, especially in relation to fit and expected terrain. Get the fit wrong and you'll feel uncomfortable or insecure. In footwear that is under- or over-specified for the ground you'll cover, the simple act of walking will not be straightforward as it should be.

## Fit

It's critical you get fit right, and until you know which brands work with your foot shape, it's best to try in-store. Our feet are unique. We all have feet of different sizes and/or shapes, and walk with a gait that favours pressure on a specific part of the foot.

What else to look for? Wiggle room for the toes on descent, no heel slip or lift on uneven ground and no constriction across the top of the foot from the laces are the bare

essentials. If in doubt about fit, or if you've had sore feet or back pain, when lockdowns allow get measured up by a professional.

## Terrain

Three season boots are the mainstays of hiking footwear, and as such are very wide-ranging. Some products are designed with groomed paths in mind and have less lateral stiffness and more flex in the toe; others may have bigger lugs, stiffer soles or more complex lacing systems to deal with rougher ground underfoot.

Judy prioritises comfort and support in three season footwear, preferring a boot offering low weight, midsole cushioning, good sole grip, and forward flex combined with lateral stability. They're used for mountain trails, for scrambling, lightweight backpacking and via ferrata, so structural integrity for the rough stuff whilst remaining

dextrous is key. For women, mids can offer better heel security than shoes, particularly if the boots have a degree of sole rigidity.

On a day trip, photographer David likes a lined boot with a chunkier sole unit that offers comfort and waterproofing. On a backpack, dry feet over many days off-trail are unrealistic, so he prefers more minimalist footwear (often unlined) with a slightly stiffer sole that give some tendon support but can drain and dry out if conditions allow.

For this review, we've mostly opted for lined footwear. We've shied away from the more technical 'approach shoes', which tend to have less durable soles and stiffer lasts (making them good for scrambling and rocky terrain) in favour of generalist mid-cut boots that offer varying degrees of flexibility and support. These should provide a solid platform for most hill adventures bar snowy or icy conditions.

**Q Features**

**1. Fit**

This is the most important factor in any boot, regardless of weight or height. The critical points are to have an anchored heel (women's boots have a slimmer heel box), secure forefoot that does not compress your toes, and support (not compression) along the sides. Socks make a difference, as do footbeds. It's always best to try for size in a shop, preferably with a trained boot fitter to hand.

**2. Flex**

Lightweight boots are flexible front to back and laterally, so are less tiring on soles and tendons than stiff boots. Uppers with suede/leather lacing platforms can flex where the fabrics join or around a toe rand/bumper, which is not necessarily where you want it. Check the flex point by trying to bend the boot in half (toe towards cuff): see if it bends with a rounded flex or sharply to a specific point. If that specific point does not match where your foot flexes (just back from your toes) then go with a rounded flex.

**3. Support**

The soft cuffs on lightweight boots usually skim the ankle and dip at the rear to avoid pressure on your Achilles tendon. Height is for comfort and security, not support. Underfoot support is more important and the flat footbeds supplied in virtually all boots should be replaced with shaped, supportive, removable insoles. Sidewall support / torsional stability is especially important on rock and steeper, technical terrain.

**4. Lacing**

Laces should run smoothly for accurate adjustment, comfort and fit. Metal eyelets and hooks offer fluid lace movement. Wide suede loops can also work well. Fabric loops and holes punched into the upper are cheaper but make laces harder to adjust as they can stick rather than slide. Angled and/or recessed ankle hooks or loops are an important aid to anchoring the heel (especially important for women).

**5. Sole unit**

A narrow tread pattern is more likely to get choked with mud and debris; a wider pattern will self-clean more readily. A sole with a squared-off heel front edge will offer better purchase on descents. Very hard rubber will grip less on wet rock but last longer on rugged terrain.



**WOMEN'S**

by Judy Armstrong

**NOTES** WEIGHTS: for a pair, size as specified, from my digital scales  
FIT: my feet are size 37/4, slightly wide at the front, average heel.  
FOOTBEDS: replaced after the first outing with Orthosoles (except Scarpa Mescalito).



**Hanwag**

Tatra Light Lady GTX

£210 950g (size 4)

comfort, security, grip, stability

nothing

**Uppers:** suede, fabric  
**Lining:** Gore-Tex  
**Mid/outsole:** PU, TPU shank / Vibram Integral Light  
**Sizes:** 3.5-9 (men 6-13)  
[hanwag.com](http://hanwag.com)



These boots have been around since 2018 and I'm glad to see Hanwag hasn't messed with a product that works. They tick literally every box, supplying comfort and support on all types of terrain. Tipping the scales as the heaviest boots in this test, they still feel dextrous and light on my feet. Security is excellent, with a smooth lacing run through fabric and metal eyelets, a properly recessed heel hook and two well-placed ankle hooks. Heel fit is secure, the midfoot is snug (wide feet/ high arches may feel compressed?) with a generous forefoot; I had masses of toe wriggle room. The tongue - fabric with suede patch against lace pressure - is sewn in to the base of the top hook, with thinner cushioning and a soft edge where it folds under the laces. This cushioned fabric continues in a diamond to the heel hook, and combined with a

soft fabric segment between heel cradle and lower ankle hook allows sweet ankle articulation. Forefoot flex is perfect for hiking comfort and there's sufficient lateral stiffness to stand on a rock edge or via ferrata rung. The sole has chunky, wide-spaced lugs that bite equally into dry, muddy and wet ground, whilst the heel is the most aggressive in the test, giving me confidence on steep stuff. Toes are protected with a rubber bumper, there's no rand (but I don't expect one on this genre of boot) and the suede upper bonded to the TPU shank works a treat against rocks. Midsole cushioning is spot on - I was protected without being remote from the ground - and my feet felt supported when I was load-carrying (better with my footbed than theirs). My only complaint is the laces could be longer. Still, the Tatra Light Lady is a belter of a boot and my clear Best Buy.



### Salewa

Women's Alpenviolet Mid GTX

£180 824g (size 4)

sole unit – grip, rocker, weight, materials

toe flex point, cuff height/tongue combo

**Uppers:** 1.6-1.8mm suede, 2mm PU-coated leather, high tenacity nylon fabric

**Lining:** Gore-Tex

**Mid/outsole:** dual-density EVA / Pomoca Alpen, butilic rubber compound

**Sizes:** 3-9

[salewa.co.uk](http://salewa.co.uk)

On paper, Alpenviolet looks the business – low weight, high specification – but I struggled with them, on two counts. The combination of a high cuff with minimal rear dip, a high, padded tongue with a sharp-edged, inward-folding bellow, plus a forward-set top ankle hook meant I couldn't avoid pressure on my ankle bones. I fared better with the Orthosole footbed, which raised my foot higher in the boot – although the downside was lower volume in the toe area. Ankle comfort was finally solved by loose lacing and pulling the tongue bellow to the outside. This worked because heel security, courtesy of recessed hooks and reinforced heel cradle, is excellent. The lacing run starts at the toes with a fairly smooth pull through suede loops to the heel hook and up to two ankle hooks. Nylon heel reinforcing continues forward along side walls, offering good midfoot support and contributing to torsional stability, to a toe rand. This curves around the front and over the big toe. But it also creates a forced flex point: the boot can only bend where the rand lets it. Unfortunately, that didn't match my foot's natural flex. The Pomoca outsole has a pronounced front rocker, which saved the day: the rubber compound felt great on rocky terrain and widely spaced lugs gave great purchase on steep, slippery going as well as in the dry. This boot didn't work for me, but if it suits your feet it could be a contender.



### Meindl

Respond Lady Mid GTX

£163 735g (size 4)

weight, flex, heel security

minimal support and cushioning

**Uppers:** synthetic velour, mesh

**Lining:** Gore-Tex

**Mid/outsole:** PU / Meindl Contragrip Trail dual density

**Sizes:** 3.5-8 (men 6-12) inc half sizes

[meindl.co.uk](http://meindl.co.uk)

The lightest boot here, Respond joined the extensive Meindl line-up two years ago. Cuff profile is classic 'mid', on my ankle bone, with a moderate heel dip. Featherweight in action, they have a very soft forefoot flex, almost like a trainer. Weight and suppleness are due to the mesh upper, reinforced with ribs plus a rubberised strut through the heel box. The base of the ribs protects the mesh as it joins the sole unit, as well as forming a toe bumper. Lacing starts on the rounded flex point, with a relatively short run through fabric loops to a heel hook, through another loop mid-tongue, and up to two ankle hooks. The laces can't pull smoothly in one shot, so for me it's a three-part adjustment process. Volume is moderate; I find most Meindl boots slightly narrow in the forefoot but in these I have toe wriggle-room. Underfoot, cushioning is minimal so the ground feels close, flex is very soft laterally as well as forward, and instep support is entirely absent. As with most boots, the footbed should be replaced with an orthotic. Meindl's Contragrip sole unit has low lugs and a minimal heel ledge; it works well on dry terrain but was less effective on mud, especially descents. This isn't a boot I'd use in difficult conditions, despite the Gore-Tex lining, so the sole unit is fine for its likely destinations. It's a good fair-weather, dry to moderate condition boot with a soft flex for low-level walking.



## Scarpa

Mescalito Mid GTX Women

£200

874g (size 37)

✓ security, stability, construction, support, grip

✗ no heel hook lessens heel security

**Uppers:** suede 1.8mm water-resistant

**Lining:** Gore-Tex

**Mid/outsole:** dual-density EVA, TPU shank / Vibram Dynamis LBT

**Sizes:** 37-42 (men 41-48)

[scarpa.co.uk](http://scarpa.co.uk)

I have a soft spot for the Mescalito: 20 years ago I wore the original version to climb a series of 4000m peaks in Switzerland. There had been a late dump of snow and I did the entire route with a plastic bag stuffed inside each boot in the absence of a waterproof liner. The new version is a little lower, and has a Gore-Tex lining and a softer flex. Volume is relatively low but – and this is rare – the original footbed actually works. A fabric ankle insert allows flex, with good support from the suede upper. A full rubber rand incorporates a small toe cap for protection. In a nod to climbing shoes, laces run to the toe cap, then through holes in the suede to two ankle hooks. Because of this they must be adjusted individually as there are no metal or plastic eyelets to allow a smooth pull. My only criticism is the lack of heel hook, and I had to lace very deliberately to avoid heel lift without creating a pressure point across the front of my ankle. The stretch tongue is sewn in to just below cuff level, and once the boot is on the foot it feels snug (and warm). The Vibram sole is an asymmetric 8 with no heel ledge; despite this, the grip was excellent and I had to hunt out really steep, muddy terrain to feel any slippage. Whilst the flex is perfect for walking, the torsional support gives confidence on more technical terrain. On trails and technical going they're a pleasure to wear. Let's see if there's a third incarnation in another 20 years.



## Jack Wolfskin

Force Striker Texapore Mid

£140

853g (size 4)

✓ sole/grip, heel security, torsional support

✗ forefoot insecurity, short lace run

**Uppers:** synthetic / textile

**Lining:** Texapore O2+ (polyester)

**Mid/outsole:** rubber / EVA / Vibram

**Sizes:** 3-9 (men 6-13) inch half sizes

[jack-wolfskin.co.uk](http://jack-wolfskin.co.uk)

This was a difficult boot to test, because it wore so differently with the footbed supplied, compared with my Orthosole. With Jack Wolfskin's flat, thin footbed the boots felt high-volume and unsupportive, verging on floppy. With my footbeds, my foot was higher in the boot and had instep support, making them much more wearable. The boot is high for a mid (as high as Salewa's, but slightly lower at the back), with a rounded forward flex and reasonable torsional support. But the lacing run is very short, starting well behind the toes, with four eyelets leading to a deeply recessed heel anchor, and up to two ankle hooks. The heel and midfoot are secure, thanks to a cupped, reinforced box, a relatively narrow 'waist' and well-placed anchor. But with nothing securing the boot from instep to toes, plus a very roomy forefoot, the front felt adrift. Part of the package is Jack Wolfskin's Force Plate – a stabilising forefoot plate for a dynamic and responsive ride' – but although the forefoot does have a firm base and structure, any benefit is overridden by the high volume and lack of lacing. The boot also has 'Wire Support', which forms a triangle from rubber rand to last lace loop and down to the forward flex point, but it didn't help. Cushioning is good, a low rubber rand and small toe cap protect against rocks (necessary on a textile boot), and the sole unit is excellent with good lug depth and pattern and an aggressive heel. Better lacing would make all the difference.

## Testing conditions

Courtesy of a national lockdown, Judy tested her boots – in ridiculously varied conditions – within the North York Moors national park. Woodland, river valleys, open moorland, coastal footpaths, heather upland, rocky ridges and outcrops were dry, then muddy, then drowning in snow so the demands on 'lightweight trail footwear' were more extreme than anticipated. On the plus side, her feet stayed dry and she mostly stayed upright, so everyone's a winner.



**MEN'S**

by David Lintern

NOTES

WEIGHTS: are for size 10.5 per pair on the reviewer's kitchen scales  
FIT: wide forefoot, narrow heel  
FOOTBEDS: used as supplied



**Scarpa**

Maverick GTX

£160 1160g

fit, profile

synthetic upper

The Great  
**Outdoors**  
RECOMMENDED

**Upper:** vegan-friendly fabric and microfibre

**Lining:** Gore-Tex

**Last:** SHT

**Sole:** Crossover with Supergum rubber

**Sizes:** 7-12 (women's 4-8)

[scarpa.co.uk](http://scarpa.co.uk)

The Maverick is a comfortable and versatile all-rounder that offers a good amount of support without being overly bulky. There's a comfortable amount of flex in the toe and no heel lift or wiggle, which translates into all-day comfort and a feeling of security underfoot. The boot is slimline externally and sightlines are good, but there's still (just) enough volume inside for a second pair of liner socks. I can find the Scarpa last a little narrow for my wedge-shaped feet, but not so with the Mavericks – there was plenty of room to wiggle my toes on descent. The heel and mid sole unit provides enough cushioning without removing all feedback underfoot and there's an encouraging amount of lateral support too – useful for carrying larger loads on uneven ground. Grip from a relatively soft rubber sole unit is excellent. Lacing is simple with cleats to finish and the boot is mid cut with a minimal rubber toe bumper. The outer fabric does wet out but my feet stayed dry, if a little cool, under the Gore-Tex membrane. All in all, this is something of a 'Goldilocks' boot. As with most synthetic fabric boots, I'd be wary about durability, but would have no reservation in choosing this for shoulder season weekend trips.



**Meindl**

Journey Mid GTX

£190 1000g

grip, breathability

extra-wide fit

The Great  
**Outdoors**  
RECOMMENDED

**Upper:** nubuck leather and mesh

**Lining:** Gore-Tex

**Sole:** Meindl Comfort

**Sizes:** 6-12 (women's 3.5-9)

[meindl.co.uk](http://meindl.co.uk)

The Journey is a lightweight, grippy trekking boot designed for wider feet on tracks and trails. The boot is exceptionally spacious and comfortable in the 'flex zone' (what brands call the hinge between your foot and your toes!) but I found the boot very wide at the heel. As a result, I felt much less secure in the boot when off-trail. Otherwise, the Journey ticks all the boxes. There's a very reassuring amount of lateral support in a robust sole unit, which protects the middle and heel of the foot well, a robust toe bumper and a simple but effective lacing system. The boot is cut to just above the ankle, and this, alongside a leather and mesh upper, translates into a very comfortable and breathable boot, without it feeling overly cool. Grip is exceptional, with a grid system of fairly deep lugs right across the sole that provide plenty of traction on everything from icy rocks to muddy paths. I loved the comfort in the forefoot and security of the grippy sole, but my narrower heel just wasn't quite secure enough in these boots. However, if you have a very wide foot overall and need a durable, lightweight 3-season boot for anything from canal towpaths to pathed hillwalking, I think these will be a perfect workhorse.



## Keen

Tempo Flex Mid

£135 1020g

fit, profile

nothing

**Upper:** ripstop mesh  
**Lining:** Keen.Dry  
**Sole:** Keen.All-Terrain  
**Sizes:** 6-14 (women's 2.5 - 9)  
[keenfootwear.com](http://keenfootwear.com)

Keen's Tempo Flex boasts new technology from the brand in the form of something called Flex.Bellows. The upper has a series of four rubberised ridges or bellows where the toe meets the foot, which are designed to improve flexibility, and perhaps help 'pop out' or unflex the boot when straightening the foot. The effect is not something I can measure scientifically, and without everything else working well, new tech would not matter, but thankfully elsewhere there's a seamless blend of comfort and function. The boots are low mid cut and feel very trainer-like on the foot – unobtrusive, light and comfortable with plenty of room in the toes, but still holding the heel snugly in place without slipping. The lacing is simple and very quick to tie, whilst the sole unit is wide but with a clean profile and is soft and grippy... with the possible exception of ice, where the more widely spaced, star-shaped lugs can't quite keep up. For a wide, trainer-style boot there's lots of cushioning and lateral support too – the Tempo mid may look like a casual shoe but clearly a good deal of thought has gone into them. They are comfortable, supportive, easy to wear and made from recycled PET. I usually find that Keen's proprietary 'waterproof' liner eventually gives up the ghost, but in that sense it's no different to most others in flexible boots. In the meantime, they remained waterproof and breathable in a wide range of weather. Overall, this is an excellent new product that I found myself wanting to reach for again and again during the test period – one more natural way of demonstrating over time which might come out on top as a Best Buy.



## Berghaus

Expeditor Trek 2.0

£100 1160g

breathability

fit

**Upper:** suede and mesh  
**Midsole:** EVA  
**Lining:** AQ  
**Sole:** Opti-Stud  
**Sizes:** 7-12  
[berghaus.com](http://berghaus.com)

The Expeditor is an uncomplicated and wallet-friendly 'entry-level' 3-season boot that's comfortable straight out of the box. There's lots of flex in the toe box and plenty of room for the toes on descent. The heel is held firmly in place with a higher ankle cuff and sensible, unobtrusive lacing. Overall it's built on a longer, narrower last and as such I found the toe overhung a little. This wasn't a problem at all on easier ground but it started to matter more when off-trail – I snagged the toe a few times on roots and rocks. The sole unit is reasonably grippy and offers a fair amount of cushioning, plus there's some lateral support in the midsole, too. The mesh and suede upper provides what synthetic boots cannot – a near-perfect balance between warmth and breathability – which was incredibly comfortable across a range of conditions from warm rain to deep snow. The AQ liner remained intact and my feet stayed dry throughout, no doubt assisted by that natural material in the upper. There is no rand at the front of the boot, which suggests that these are designed mainly with tracks and trails in mind. Overall, there's nothing that surprises or excels here; but that needn't be a criticism if the fit works for you. The price is also excellent.



## Inov-8

Roclite G 286 GTX

£165 580g

grip, breathability

fiddly lacing system

**Upper:** Cordura  
**Lining:** Gore-Tex  
**Sole:** Graphene Grip  
**Midsole:** EVA  
**Shank:** Meta plate  
**Sizes:** 6-13 (women's 4-8.5)  
[inov-8.com](http://inov-8.com)

Time was when Inov-8 had a reputation for well-designed but not always hugely durable running shoes; but times change and the brand has set about toughening up. The 'fastpacking' sister to the recent TGO award-winning, hiking-friendly 400, the G 286 also features a graphene laced outsole and a ruggedised Cordura upper. It purports to be the lightest Gore-Tex-lined hiking boot in the world, and it is certainly the lightest in this test. For such a lightweight boot, the sole unit is surprisingly rigid, with deep-set lugs that grip well on trail or off, and provide oodles of lateral support. The Inov-8 last is too wide at the heel and too narrow at the toes for me in a shoe, but their mid boots have always been more forgiving and these are no exception. The boot is close-fitting and has a narrow profile externally, which engenders nimble footing; but there's still enough room for two thin pairs of socks and the heel is locked securely into place with a very extensive lacing system. I found the lack of cleats overly fussy when taking the boot on and off, but the overall effect once the boot is on is of total security. The boot is lightweight, minimalist, features a low drop (6mm, as compared to the 400's 8mm) and does run cool, and as such I look forward to giving these a longer-term test into the warmer months. For early spring and late autumn off-trail backpacking I think they will prove their worth.

## Accessorise!



## Boot Bananas

Moisture Absorbers

£22

Speaking to the distributors of the Dexshell skullcap reviewed in the March issue of the magazine, I discovered that Troll UK – the company originally set up by Tony Howard, designer of the modern climbing harness amongst many other things – is still in business; pretty exciting stuff for a gear nerd! They also distribute these incredibly useful banana-shaped moisture absorbers. The idea is simple: slip a banana into each boot after a long day out in the weather, and let the silica filling soak up the damp inside without exposing your footwear to direct heat sources that can damage laminates, glues and fabrics. A subsequently engorged boot banana can be refreshed with a few hours on top of a radiator, and mine have been pressed into heavy service on everything from kids' snowboots to B2 mountaineering boots, to great effect. They are particularly effective on furry or fleece-lined inners and have resulted in completely dry footwear day after day, even in the depths of winter. They can also be hung inside wet jackets or sleeves using the fabric straps at the top of each banana. They have made a huge difference to family comfort levels in recent months, as well as a much less damp and dingy shoe cupboard! They also make an odour-neutralising version...

[bootbananas.com](http://bootbananas.com)

## Testing conditions

David wore his boots on the hills, glens and moors of the Cairngorms National Park, on both single and multiday missions. Whilst these are '3-season boots', timescales meant they were tested in the depths of the snowiest winter in several years, giving further insight into their versatility.



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# TAKE THREE

# TARPS

Little more than a sheet of fabric, a tarp is the ultimate form of lightweight, minimalist shelter. **Chris Townsend** looks at three options



You truly are closer to nature under a tarp!

A TARP is a very simple shelter: just a sheet of fabric with no zips or doors or fixed shape. Tarps can be pitched in many ways, and part of the fun of using one is experimenting with this. Battened down, a tarp can cope with big storms. Raised high above the ground, a tarp can be more spacious and give better views and contact with nature than any tent. Tarps are also generally lighter than tents for the space provided and have fewer problems with condensation.

So why ever use a tent then? Well, tarps do have some disadvantages. They can be harder to erect in stormy weather, and they need careful pitching to keep out wind-driven rain. And there's no protection against biting insects without using a mesh

inner. You need to practise pitching a tarp in different configurations too.

Tarps come in a wide range of sizes. In my view for comfort a tarp should be large enough for three of the sides to be pitched down to the ground with enough room inside to sit up, cook and store gear. The tarp should also be long enough that you can keep far enough away from the open end not to get wet from any rain that blows in. Small examples with only enough room to lie under in rain or strong winds take away the freedom a tarp can give.

A tarp needs accessories to be used. Unless the ground is dry you need something under you. I like a groundsheet so I can spread gear out on it, but a bivvy bag can

be used and does give protection against any rain that gets in. With a small tarp I'd definitely use a bivvy bag. Unless you're camping in woodland and hanging the tarp from trees, poles are essential. If you use trekking poles you already have these. Otherwise, some rigid tent poles are needed. Pegs are required too, plus guylines – and some tarps come with both of these. If you're going to use a tarp in midge season a mesh inner will keep you sane. Various models are available with sewn-in groundsheets.

One accessory well worth having is a set of Gram-Counter Gear Grip Clips. You can attach these two-part fastenings anywhere on a tarp you want to attach a guyline or a peg.



1



**Likes** attachment points, cost

**Dislikes** heavy

**Weight** 730g

**Material** 68D

polyester, taped seams

**Size** 295x295cm, floor area 8.6m<sup>2</sup>

**Guylines** 6

**Attachment points**

13 loops

**Pegs** 6 x 18cm

hexagonal

*kelty.com*

## KELTY NOAH'S TARP 9

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£55



The Noah's Tarp 9 is a substantial tarp made from tough fabric and durable components. Whilst this means it should last it also means it's quite heavy. The fabric feels strong, is reinforced round the edges and has taped seams. Six fairly thick long guylines with line loks are provided. These pack away into Velcro-closed pockets if not needed. Two corners of the tarp have two guylines each, which is good for stability with poles. The other corners just have one guyline each. The guylines can be removed. They attach through metal rings which can also be used for the tips of trekking poles. There are eight loops along the perimeter of the tarp for pegs or guylines plus another five on the fabric. All the attachment points along the edges are reinforced. The ones on the fabric aren't. These are sewn into the seams and seem strongly attached. I'd be wary of putting too much

strain on them though.

The tarp comes with pegs for each guyline, weighing a total of 96 grams. More will be needed if the other attachment points are used along with extra guylines – I'd add another dozen pegs and two or three long guylines. Short guylines could be attached permanently to the perimeter loops and just ignored if not needed. Long guylines for the loops on the body of the tarp are most easily attached with mini carabiners and removed when not in use.

The five loops on the fabric provide many options for pitching the tarp and for increasing stability in strong winds. I found a tapered ridge effective. There's enough room underneath for two people and their gear.

The Noah's Tarp 9 is a good tarp at a low price. The only drawback is its weight.

# 2



**Likes** attachment points, cost  
**Dislikes** could be lighter  
**Material** 30D siliconised Cordura ripstop nylon  
**Weight** 530g  
**Size** 240x280cm  
**Guylines** none  
**Attachment points** 24 reinforced Hypalon rig points  
**Pegs** no  
[alpkit.com](http://alpkit.com)

## ALPKIT RIG 7

The Rig 7 is a very versatile tarp whose design makes pitching it in different configurations easier than with some other tarps. This is because it comes with 24 rubber reinforced attachment points, 16 along the perimeter and eight on the fabric itself. The perimeter points all have holes in them for pegs or the tips of trekking poles. It's the eight on the fabric that make the real difference though. Attach guylines to these and you can come up with all sorts of shapes. Guylines can be attached by tying a loop on one end, threading the other end through the tarp loop and then through the guyline loop. Even easier is to use small clips like mini carabiners. Alpkit sells these along with cord for guylines and a variety of pegs, neither of which is supplied with the Rig 7. Needing to use all the attachment points is very unlikely. Indeed, using all eight on the fabric probably wouldn't result in a practical shape. However having double guylines on poles is useful for stability so I'd go for at least 20 options. Six of the perimeter points have pegging loops so no guylines for these are needed unless you want to pitch the tarp well above the ground. The other ten don't



have guylines so ones are needed for these. For plenty of options I think eight long guylines and ten short ones should be ample. Once you've settled in a number of configurations you might find you need fewer.

Alpkit says the Rig 7 is big enough for two to three people. I think it's just right for one and should be okay for two if pitched carefully in stormy weather. I've pitched it as a simple ridge open at both ends, a sloping ridge with one end down to the ground, a pyramid, and a lean-to. The last is my favourite if the weather permits. In wind or rain the sloping ridge is much more protective.

The Rig 7 is quite light and the price reasonable. It's made from nylon with silicone on the outside to keep rain out. The seams are taped inside. The quality is good and it should last well. It comes with a small stuffsack weighing 16 grams. There is room for guylines and pegs in the stuffsack.

# 3



**Likes** light weight  
**Dislikes** cost  
**Material** Kerlon 1000 silicone nylon  
**Weight** 305g  
**Size** 315x215cm at widest point  
**Guylines/pegging loops** 8 attached guylines  
**Attachment points** no  
**Pegs** no  
[hilleberg.com](http://hilleberg.com)

## HILLEBERG TARP 5

The Tarp 5 has an unusual shape and is designed for solo use. It's five-sided but the sides are not of equal length. At one end, which would be the front in many configurations, there are two equal length sides coming to a point. The other end is straight with the two longer sides angling away from it. There are eight long guylines attached to metal rings. Each guyline point is reinforced. The tarp is made from Kerlon 1000: Hilleberg's lightest silicone nylon and the same fabric as used in its Yellow Label tents.

The shape means the obvious way to pitch it is with the pointed end at the front and the flat end at the rear. Like this, the front gives protection from the sides while being open for views, ventilation and easy access. This is the case even if the tarp is pitched down to the ground except at the front to keep out storms. The latter can be done by inserting pegs through the rings. Fairly narrow pegs are needed for this. Wide V-shapes won't fit. No pegs are provided with the tarp. A minimum of eight are needed. There



are no attachment points on the fabric, which I don't think is a drawback in a tarp of this size. Grip-Clips could be used if you wanted to experiment.

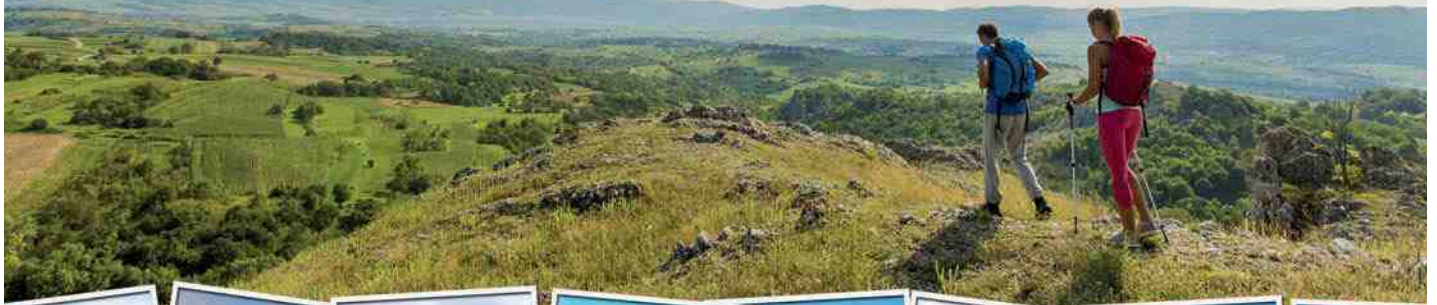
The Tarp 5 can be pitched in other ways. One side can be pegged to the ground to keep the wind out with one or two poles on the other side, creating a semi-pyramid or a lean-to. In any configuration altering the height if the weather changes is quick and easy with a little practice.

The Tarp 5 is very light and compact, compressing to the size of a grapefruit. A little stuffsack sewn into a seam is provided. This forms a pocket when the tarp is pitched.

The Tarp 5 is quite expensive but it is very well-made and very light. For solo use it's ideal.

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5 varied routes in Scotland, England and Wales



## Our walks this month

**1 Central Highlands** Ben Vuirich

**2 Southern Highlands** Beinn Mhor & Beinn Bheag

**3 Lake District** Boredale Horseshoe

**4 Snowdonia** Aran Benllyn & Aran Fawddwy

**5 Devon** Jurassic Coast

### CONTRIBUTORS



Stefan Durkacz



Alan Rowan



Ronald Turnbull



Roger Butler



Fiona Barltrop

1 →

Heading west on the hill track between Strathardle and Blair Atholl  
Photo: Stefan Durkacz



3 →

Beda Head and Boredale  
Photo: Ronald Turnbull

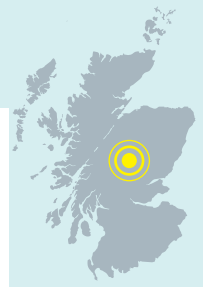


5 →

Looking over Sidmouth on the descent from Salcombe Hill  
Photo: Fiona Barltrop

# Ben Vuirich

## Central Highlands SCOTLAND



### Stefan Durkacz seeks out a hill for the discerning

**MOST PEOPLE** who park by Loch Moraig above Glen Tilt are heading for the massif of Beinn a' Ghlo. It's the perfect mountain day out in many ways: a beautiful complex of sweeping ridges and tops, three Munros, and all in easy reach of the most populous bits of Scotland. Paths have been much improved in recent years too.

So why eschew all that for the self-effacing heathery lump of Ben Vuirich? Well, once you're off the paths serving Beinn a' Ghlo you'll most likely be on your own. It's a fine long moorland tramp, a tick on the Corbett list, and a lovely return walk on an old hill track linking ➔



**1 Start/Finish**  
**Public road end**

by Loch Moraig  
**GR: NN905671**

A short distance beyond the parking area, leave the road that turns N to Monzie Farm and take the track through a gate, then climb E onto the moors below Beinn a' Ghlo.

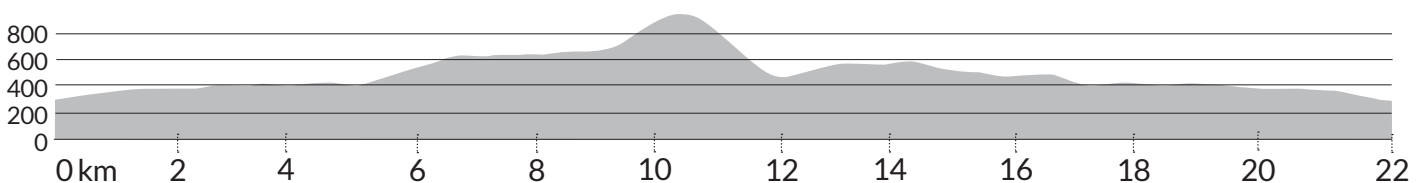
**2** Ignore the track that branches off to the R, and continue E on a well-made path, easily navigable by mountain bike.

**3** Bear R on a rougher path down to the Allt Girnaig. Ford the burn and climb the hillside opposite, bearing NE to reach the high ground above Allt Loch Valigan. Continue broadly E, keeping to the higher ground N of Loch Valigan towards the obvious heathery bulk of Ben Vuirich, where a steeper but straight-forward climb leads to the flat summit crowned by a trig point (903m).

**4** From the summit bear N and descend steeply to cross the Allt Nead an Eoin (a faint spur avoids the steepest slopes) and meet a Land Rover track from Strathardle.

**5** Follow the track then path SW over a fine pass to pick up the outward route above the Allt Girnaig. Retrace the outward route across the burn and back to Loch Moraig.

### Gradient profile Metres above sea level





Strath Ardle and Blair Atholl. Hamish Brown wrote that “Ben Vuirich may be unobtrusive but it has the common magic of all mountains”. Keep your eyes and ears open, and you’ll share in that magic too. Still not convinced? Well, this walk is kind of all about Beinn a’ Ghlo anyway. It provides a superb vantage point to admire the southern aspects of the range, which looms large to the north.

Summer was wearing on when I made this particular visit. On a fine, warm day I cycled for few kilometres before stowing the bike in deep heather, leaving the well-made path that leads into the toe of one of Beinn a’ Ghlo’s ridges, and crossing the Allt Girnaig. Ben Vuirich lurks at the far end of a rising moor, making an easy target in good visibility. I stuck

to the northern rim of the wide bowl holding Loch Valigan. The slowly changing, scree-flecked rampart of Beinn a’ Ghlo was my constant companion to the north. Clouds of heather pollen coated my shoes and the air was alive with insects. A hoverfly disguised as a bumblebee buzzed around me as I ate lunch by a tiny, breeze-ruffled pool, watching cinematic cloud shadow play across Beinn a’ Ghlo’s huge canvas.


The steep upper slopes of Ben Vuirich are dotted with big, lichen-covered boulders and liberal amounts of crowberry and cloudberry, though it was still too early in the season for fruit. The summit was breezy and wide; Hamish Brown had it right again when he advised walking around the perimeter of the

little plateau to get the best views. My eyes were drawn north to Loch Loch (yes, you read that right!) cradled in vast moorlands like a gem in the bedrock.


I dropped steeply north and crossed a small burn to pick up the old right of way between Strath Ardle and Blair Atholl. Heading west across the pass, the track soon dwindled to a path. Haze and cloud began to build, heralding thunderstorms due to arrive later that evening. I was glad of the early start and the bike left near the Allt Girnaig. Beyond, the way became busy with walkers making the long trek back from Beinn a’ Ghlo’s most distant summits. I hadn’t met a soul on Ben Vuirich, but we had all shared in that common magic. 📍

[Captions clockwise from top] Airgiod-bheinn of Beinn a’ Ghlo from Allt Girnaig; Looking north to Loch Loch from Ben Vuirich; Beinn a’ Ghlo from the moors west of Ben Vuirich

### Further information

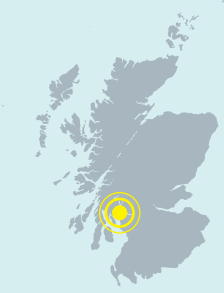
 **Maps:** OS 1:50,000 Landranger sheet 43 (Braemar & Blair Atholl)

 **Transport:** Station at Blair Atholl (approx. 4.5km from start) for rail services to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth and Inverness ([scotrail.co.uk](http://scotrail.co.uk)). Citylink service M91 between Edinburgh and Inverness stops in Blair Atholl ([citylink.co.uk](http://citylink.co.uk))

 **Information:** Pitlochry TIC (01796 472215), [highlandperthshire.com](http://highlandperthshire.com)



# Beinn Mhor & Beinn Bheag Southern Highlands SCOTLAND



## Alan Rowan tackles a long, tough ridge

**THE RUGGED HILLS** of Cowal have a degree of roughness that elevates the seriousness of the ascent to a greater level than height alone would suggest. The area is characterised by sheets of impenetrable forestry, slopes abounding with crags, outcrops and steep gullies, long stretches of tussocks and strength-sapping bog. Easy strolls are hard to find.

All the way down the length of Loch Eck the eyes are drawn to the 13km-long ridge west of the loch, which runs from Glenbranter to Benmore Botanic Garden. There are several ways to tackle the two main peaks, Beinn Bheag and Beinn

### 1 Start/Finish Benmore Botanic

Garden car park

GR: NS140857

Cross bridge at W of car park and turn N onto track, which follows shoreline for 7km to Bernice.

2 After passing entrance to house, branch off W on track heading up Bernice Glen.

3 Leave track at high point as it starts to swing L, and follow faint path up by stream and fence to bealach.

4 Head N, skirting round rocky top by grassy ramp and then to E of Meall Breac and continue N to Beinn Bheag summit (618m).

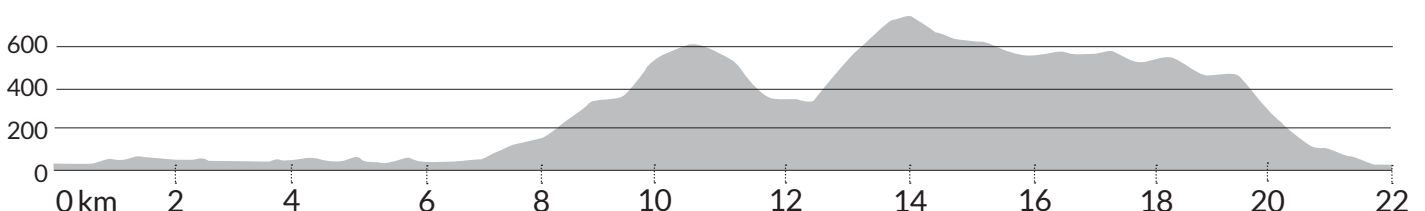
5 Retrace your steps to bealach and climb S and SW to Beinn Mhor, 741m.

6 Drop S to Capull Clioche and go SE over series of tops to A'

Chruach, then S to treeline.

7 Pick up path through trees then track, which weaves its way down to Benmore Botanic Garden and the road.

### Gradient profile Metres above sea level





Mhor, each with its own set of challenges.

I chose the lochside route on a clear day in early spring, albeit with a fierce, chilly easterly wind. Still, the early part of the day was along an easy track; and for the initial ascent I had the wind behind me.

The trees nearer the water were mostly skeletal, a breeding ground for moss and lichens, a creeping subjugation that included scattered boulders. I rose above the forestry and headed up a mixed gully by a tumbling stream, all deep grasses, thorny branches, hidden boulders and rusted fencing, to reach a boggy bealach.

The climb to Beinn Bheag was steep at first, then it was all about dodging round rocky lumps. The visibility meant it

was straightforward; it would be a different prospect in mist. The summit cairn was a few rocks in danger of being engulfed by the surrounding vegetation, but the view down Loch Eck invites superlatives. It would have been a spot to linger if the wind hadn't been so busy trying to send me into the grey waters far below.

Beinn Mhor is the bigger sibling, but the ascent is simple from the shared col and I was soon trying to stand up at the trig point, which marks the highest spot for miles. Now it was simply a case of following the long ridge south-west.

This proved harder work than I had imagined. There's a lot of up and down, and a few necessary detours. First there's a long pull over boggy ground to Capull Cloiche. Then the roller coaster picks up, over

Creachans Mor and Beag.

Craggy Clach Bheinn to the east was a tempting prospect; but the wind had gone into reverse from the forecast, now strengthening rather than weakening. It was tiring work. Instead, I carried on to an unnamed summit ringed by vertical drops, which demanded a careful reversal of route to get back on the right track to the final grassy hump of A' Chreach.

The gusts were at their strongest as I followed the rusted fence posts to the treeline and the relief of a gentle track, which meandered around the boundary of the Botanic Gardens to reach the road. My feet were tender, my legs weary, but my mind was satisfied. The wind had certainly added an extra factor to the exertions of the day. 📍

[Captions clockwise from top] View back from the gully leading up to the bealach; View down Loch Eck from Beinn Bheag; The summit trig of Beinn Mhor

### Further information

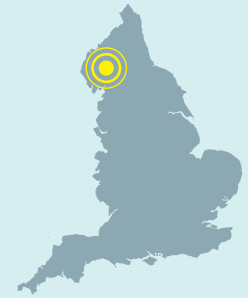
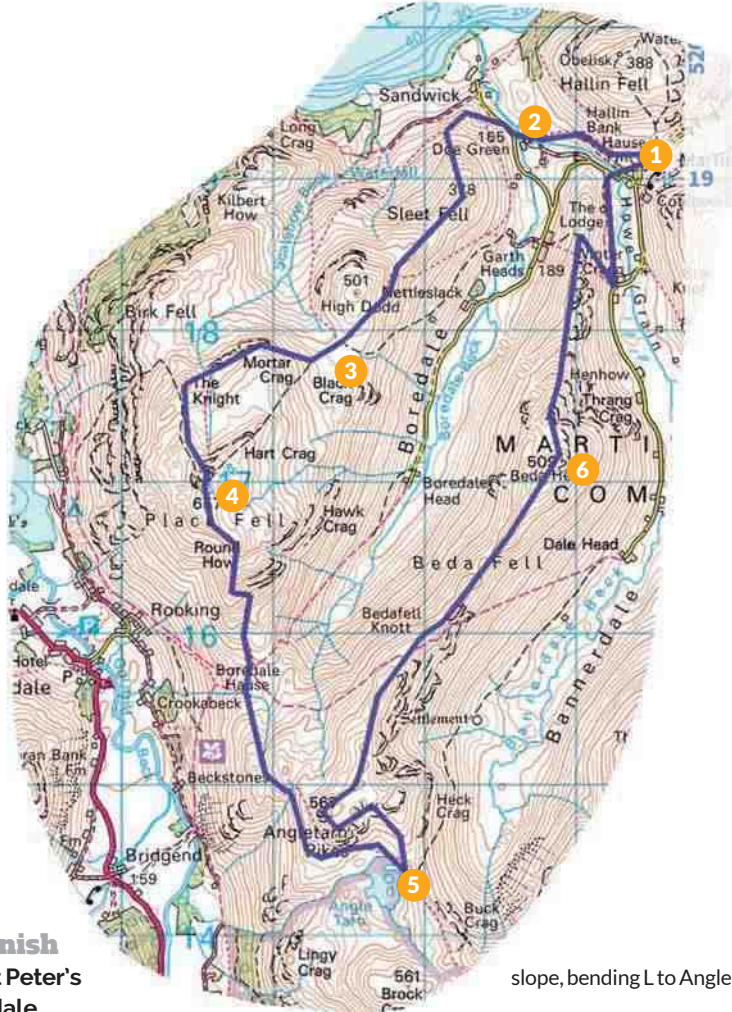
**Maps:** OS 1:50,000 Landranger sheet 56 (Loch Lomond & Inveraray) or 1:25,000 Outdoor Leisure sheet OL37 (Dunoon & Inveraray)

**Transport:** West Coast Motors service 486 (Dunoon-Inveraray) passes the Botanic Gardens. Details from 01586 522319 or [westcoastmotors.co.uk](http://westcoastmotors.co.uk)

**Information:** Dunoon TIC (01369 703785), [lochlomond-trossachs.org](http://lochlomond-trossachs.org), [wildaboutargyll.co.uk](http://wildaboutargyll.co.uk)

# Boredale Horseshoe

## Lake District ENGLAND



### Ronald Turnbull turns at Angle Tarn

WHEN IT COMES to horseshoe walks in the Lakes, we think of Fairfield, Newlands and Kentmere. But every small valley defines its own one. In the hills east of Ullswater, the valley of Boredale provides a shorter horseshoe walk as nice as any I know.

It helps that you climb the big hill right at the beginning. After strolling down the lane from St Peter's Church, straight away I'm into the 600m of ascent onto Place Fell. I choose the steepest line, straight up the end, as this will give a level section at half height. Sleet Fell is a place to ramble restfully, enjoying the views of Ullswater underneath. ➔

**1 Start/Finish**  
Layby at St Peter's Church, Martindale

GR: NY435192

Opposite the church, take a pathless 'public footpath' line contouring W to pass Hallin Bank, then slant down field to cross Sandwich Beck to a lane.

**2** Head NW 100m, fork L on faint path, then turn uphill SE on steep path. It follows level ridge, then bypasses L of High Dodd to col with sheepfold.

**3** In 100m, faint path contours R to rocky knoll The Knight. Head S then SE to trig point on Place Fell.

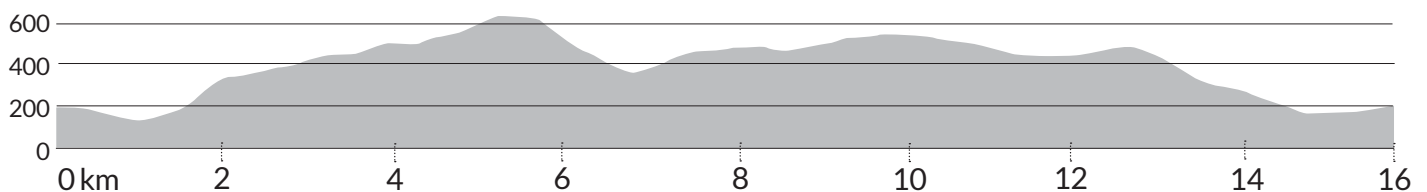
**4** Large path down S to Boredale Hause. Ahead across stream to path up in little hollow, and through col. At junction top of Dubhow Beck, fork R for small path along top of steep

slope, bending L to Angle Tarn.

**5** Return on higher path to Angletarn Pikes plateau. Head W to main summit (rock fin), then NE to northern corner of plateau. Path N then NE along ridge, finally rising to Beda Head.

**6** Down ridge N to final slight rise Winter Crag. In col beyond, path back R to road. Sharp L in green track above farm. At road, R to St Peter's Church.

### Gradient profile Metres above sea level





Then a very quiet side peak of Side Pike, The Knight, gives an even more vertical view down onto the lake.

And that's the day's climbing more or less climbed. From Boredale Hause I could slide out sideways and short-cut onto the return ridgeline of Beda Fell. But it's much better to keep ahead, on the edgy path along the slope top high above Patterdale. When I can spare attention from my feet, the view across Patterdale is a fifty-fifty mix of cloud and mountain.

With the main summit already behind me, the horseshoe walk turns, not at a top, but at a Tarn – wittily using Angle as its corner. With its outlook westwards to Fairfield and St Sunday, Angle Tarn has

roughly half as much view as a summit would have. But by the same token it has twice as much shelter, plus the sparkle of the water, and a couple of geese splashing about amongst the choppy waves. The tarn also has a set of rocky islands, and small crags placed decoratively around the shoreline.

When it comes to Angletarn Pikes, it's important to notice the S on the end. There are at least four of it. Harvey thinks the western one is the true top, a long fin of rock that makes an elegant perch. But there's also the Angletarn Pike that looks down over the tarn itself, and the one looking east across Martindale. Being the stern-minded summit bagger that I am, I dodge around the peaty plateau to visit them all. The

path, on the other hand, drives straight through the middle, eager to get its feet onto the delicious ridgeline of Beda Fell.

Beda is pronounced beader rather than bedder. It's a grassy edge between the depths of Boredale and Martindale on either side, and downhill almost all the way – only very tired walkers will notice the 60m of ascent to the main summit, Beda Head. But Beda saves the very best bit for last. Poking up at the foot of the ridgeline, a tiny rocky moment just above the valley floor. It's the final nail in the small horseshoe.

And now I can 'Bore' my friends with talk of the horseshoe walk that's even 'Beda' than the classic Fairfield one. *[Ronald, this is punacceptable –Ed.]* 📍

**[Captions clockwise from top]**  
Place Fell across Boredale from Beda Fell; Path from Boredale Hause to Place Fell, with Brothers Water and Red Screens; Path to Angle Tarn

### Further information

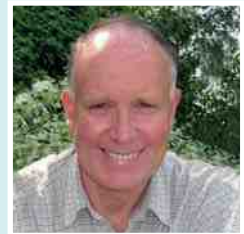
**Maps:** OS 1:25,000 Outdoor Leisure sheet OL5 (English Lakes, North Eastern Area); Harvey 1:25,000 Superwalker, Lake District East

**Transport:** Ullswater Steamers Pooley Bridge to Howtown [ullswater-steamers.co.uk](http://ullswater-steamers.co.uk)

**Information:** Pooley Bridge Visitor Info Point (01768 486135), [pbtic@lakedistrictstates.co.uk](mailto:pbtic@lakedistrictstates.co.uk), [visiteden.co.uk](http://visiteden.co.uk)

# Aran Benllyn & Aran Fawddwy

## Snowdonia NORTH WALES



### Roger Butler finds it hot work on the Arans

I STILL CALL IT LAKE BALA though I know you're supposed to say Bala Lake these days, or, better still, Llyn Tegid. But who's going to worry about that when its ripple-free surface is sapphire blue and the overhead sky offers the promise of another long Mediterranean day? A couple of early morning dinghies were searching for a suitable breeze but they would soon need to get out their oars.

Paths and tracks skipped out of Llanuwchllyn and swung south over Garth Fawr. Away to the north, wedge-shaped Arenig Fawr rose from a sprawling blotch of forestry that had

#### 1 Start/Finish

Car park at Pont y Pandy in Llanuwchllyn, GR: SH879297

Cross road from car park and take gate marked Crib yr Aran. Walk up lane to cattle grid and go R at bridleway (signed Aran ridge path). Follow grass track up field to R-hand gate, ignore ladder stile and proceed to next gate. Continue on grass track to gate in wall and Open Access land; with fence on R continue to next wall and take stile on L.

2 Keep ahead up ridge, over three ladder stiles, and climb to another ladder stile, with crags and boulders ahead and occasional marker posts. Climb steep slope after large cairn and carry on to another cairn just before a wall crosses the ridge by summit of Aran Benllyn.

3 Drop down slightly over two more ladder stiles, with fence on L and cross ladder stile onto broad, stony plateau. Pass tall cairn and cross old wall with two more ladder stiles to reach summit of Aran Fawddwy.

4 Continue S from top but don't cross next ladder stile - trend L along the fence and leave the ridge by the last gully on L (or continue to Drysgol and descend NNW from there) to drop down to Creiglyn Dyfi.

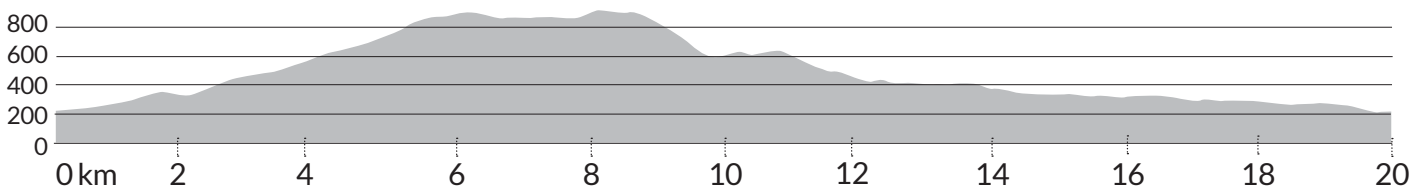
5 Head NNE to pick up path and rough track into Cwm Llwydd. Go L at gate, with fence on R, and descend to ford. Keep on track for 2km to join lane at Nant-y-barcut. Continue ahead for 1.7km and fork L after farm at Ty-mawr.

6 Follow signed field path after Tyn-y-cae, with three ladder stiles, and pass house at Cae-poeth. Veer L over next field to small gate, cross footbridge and stile to rough pasture. Cross another small bridge, pass through wood, and cross two more footbridges.

7 Join track at Plas-Morgan and continue for 2km back to start.



### Gradient profile Metres above sea level





inherited the unforgettable title of Y Lordship.

Looking west, Snowdon resembled a long, lumbering anteater: head down with back arched upwards and a long tail trailing west towards Porthmadog. Other hills had their own character too. From this angle, Cadair Idris was Ben Loyal, Moel Famau and its cousins were a mirror image of the Malverns, and the bumpy northern end of the Rhinogs could have been a battered wall of crumbling masonry.

A hazy wilderness stretched east and wriggly ravines spilled from the high tablelands of peat above Dinas Mawddwy. Streaks of quartz turned one hillside into a geological zebra and great striations fell from the shadows on Erw y Ddafad-ddu.

The sun-baked summit of Aran Fawddwy, a couple

of miles further on, was dry and dusty and most of the small pools that normally leak across the rocky hollows had completely disappeared. A Duke of Edinburgh's Award expedition cursed their empty water bottles as I veered off-piste and followed down a fern-filled gully to the steely waters of Creiglyn Dyfi.

A grassy shelf made a comfortable sofa above the lake shore where the silence was broken only by the hum of midges and the deep croak of a distant raven. I once camped here and remember firing up the stove as shimmering layers of silver clouds were backlit beyond Cadair Idris. Next morning, torrential rain put paid to any further exploration and the waterfalls below Ogof Ddu foamed like badly brewed Guinness.

There were no such problems today, and a steep and grassy descent through Cwm Llwydd soon merged into a track down arrow-straight Cwm Croes. A gate creaked like polystyrene and I expected the sheep-shearing farmer to jump in surprise. Three or four minutes must have passed before he realised I had quietly waited for him to finish his latest trim.

You might work up a sweat climbing one of your favourite mountains but, believe me, it wouldn't match the sweltering streams that trickled down his neck and tumbled across his bare torso. The hot weather was the first topic of conversation, followed by the price of wool and, inevitably, Brexit: "Put me in No 10 for two weeks and I'll sort it all out!" That's the sort of person we need in charge. 🇬🇧

[Captions clockwise from top] View north to Bala Lake from Garth Fawr, with Foel Goch in the far distance; Summit cairn on Aran Benllyn looking north to Snowdon in the far distance; Enjoying the view to Cadair Idris from Aran Fawddwy

### Further information

**Maps:** OS 1:25,000 Explorer Sheet OL23, Cadair Idris & Bala Lake

**Transport:** Lloyds Coaches service T3 (Barmouth-Wrexham) passes through Llanuwchllyn. Details from 01654 702100 or [lloydscoaches.com](http://lloydscoaches.com)

**Information:** Bala TIC (01678 521021), [visitbala.org](http://visitbala.org); [gobala.org](http://gobala.org)

# Jurassic Coast Devon ENGLAND



**1 Start**  
**Beer Cross**  
**bus stop, Beer**

**GR: SY228894**

From bus stop bear L past Beer Village Stores down Fore Street to coast. Lane goes right down to beach, but bear R just before it, passing Anchor Inn on R. Follow this road, Common Lane, uphill. Fork L at Coast Path fingerpost along paved path, passing below caravan site. Route is now very straightforward, following well waymarked Coast Path, which leads to Beer Head, then descends to continue along undercliff path. Route goes through a caravan park at other end, then descends grassy slope to Branscombe Mouth.

**2** Continue uphill, passing inland of former coastguard cottages to enter woodland. Once out of trees, fine walking along fairly level grassy cliff top, but with a couple of quite deep/steep valleys on the way, the first (Weston Mouth, after 5km) taking you right down to the beach. After descent from Salcombe Hill final leg down into Sidmouth has been diverted inland along residential roads due to cliff falls. At bottom, path crosses bridge at mouth of River Sid.

**3** Continue along Sidmouth sea front and at far end carry on along Clifton Walkway below cliffs to beach beyond. Official path goes up zigzag path but alternatively white Jacob's Ladder (wooden steps), which leads to Connaught Gardens, provides good views from the top. Coast

Path continues up grass alongside road, briefly joined, then carries on via Peak Hill and High Peak (worth a brief detour to summit itself) and down to Ladram Bay. The view of sea stacks and coastline is very impressive.

**4** Easy clifftop walking takes you past WW2 Brandy Head Observation Hut to Otterton Point. After rounding point continue to join lane, bearing L across River Otter.

**5** On W side of bridge leave Coast Path and turn R along riverside path to road bridge, R to Otterton for bus back to Sidmouth.

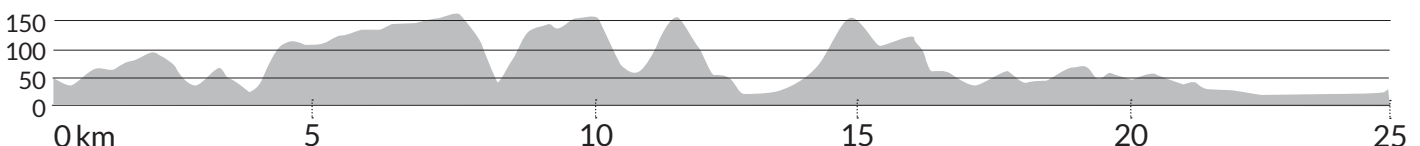
**6 Finish**  
**Otterton village**  
**GR: SY080852**



## Fiona Barltrop enjoys a spectacular clifftop walk

**SITUATED AT THE EASTERN END** of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site and surrounded by AONB designated countryside, the attractive Regency town of Sidmouth makes a fine base for walkers. Especially as the local area has more public rights of way than any other parish in the county – so with lots of scope to explore life here for residents during lockdown can't be too

### Gradient profile Metres above sea level





much of a hardship.

East Devon has the oldest rocks along the 'Jurassic' coast, with the striking red cliffs (Otter Sandstone and Mercia Mudstone) which flank the town dating back 230 million years to the Triassic period. Head east along the coastline and you'll find Cretaceous chalk at Branscombe and Beer Head, the most westerly chalk cliffs in England. In the other direction Triassic red cliffs lead to Ladram Bay, famous for its sandstone stacks.

While it's easy enough to devise circuits, the local bus services are useful for linear walks. That was my plan for today: bus out to Beer and another back from Otterton at the end. The section from Beer to Sidmouth is graded 'severe' in the South West Coast Path

Association's guidebook –but in my book all the sections of the SWCP graded 'severe' or 'strenuous' are the best there are.

And this one is no exception. The first climb of the day takes you up to Beer Head, where it's tempting to keep on along the cliff top, which provides superb views. But the official route (which I opted for this time) descends to follow the undercliff path, which also affords impressive views, looking up at the imposing cliffs alongside. (The undercliff was formed in 1790 by a great landslide – the chalk pinnacles are a notable feature.)

From Branscombe Mouth the path turns uphill into woodland; the charming old village of Branscombe, which lies just inland, is well worth a visit some time. Once out

of the woods, it's easy cliff-top walking, albeit with a couple of fairly steep descents and corresponding ascents along the way, one taking you right down to the beach. On this lovely spring day I met no one until the final stretch down to Salcombe, where I joined the strollers along the sea front.

The next leg to Ladram Bay involves a couple more climbs (Peak Hill and High Peak) but it's very gentle thereafter. Once round the end of the Otterton peninsula I left the Coast Path to continue north along the river bank path to Otterton, a delightful final stretch on a beautiful evening. A bus back had been the plan, but since the last one departed early evening and I'd not wanted to rush, a taxi later was a small price to pay for a superb day's walk. 📍

**[Captions clockwise from top]**  
Hooken Cliffs near Beer Head;  
Ladram Bay sea stacks; The view  
west from Higher Dunscombe  
Cliff above Salcombe Mouth

### Further information

**Maps:** OS 1:50,000 Landranger sheet 192 (Exeter & Sidmouth) or 1:25,000 Explorer sheet 115 (Exmouth & Sidmouth)

**Transport:** AVMT bus service 899 Sidmouth to Beer (01202 600012) [avmt.bustimes.wixsite.com/mysite](http://avmt.bustimes.wixsite.com/mysite) Stagecoach South West service 157 runs from Otterton to Sidmouth (01392 427711) [stagecoachbus.com](http://stagecoachbus.com)

**Information:** Sidmouth TIC (01395 516441) [visitdevon.co.uk](http://visitdevon.co.uk)





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\* COROS APEX Pro White shown with optional silicone band

# READERS' PHOTOS *'off the beaten track'*



Heading into the Ak Tubek gorge in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan Photo: Michael Henley



Around the Back o' Skidda – always a good bet if you want some quiet!  
Photo: Georgina Collins



The long descent from the Shey La (5100m), looking over the mountains of the Tibetan Plateau Photo: Michael Henley



Craig y Pistyll, Ceredigion, Wales Photo: Ian Medcalf

In our readers' photography series, we invite you to send in your best pictures on a specific theme. Next is 'the perfect camp' by 05.04.21.

Next month: *'the perfect camp'*

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