

JANUARY 2025
VOL XLVIII NO. 1

"I have loved the stars
too fondly to be fearful
of the night."
SARAH WILLIAMS

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

THE ORIGINAL MOUNTAIN MAGAZINE

THE STARS ARE FOR EVERYONE

Kumano Kodo:
Hike Japan's
Pilgrim Trail

Make the Most
of Winter Nights

- Wild Camping Skills
- Night Sky Photography
- Plan Your Hill Bagging Adventures

Essential Winter
Gear – Crampons
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Reviewed

Lewes and the
South Downs



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WELCOME

Ben Lawers in Winter



Photo credit: Alex Roddie

Written under the stars

IT'S DEEP WINTER. The days are short, and there's a bracing chill in the air – not that this ever deters *The Great Outdoors* readers. You're a hardy bunch, and more than a few of you might prefer felltops to fireworks on New Year's Eve.

Maybe your 2025 begins by the warm glow of a bothy's fireplace, or peering up at a (hopefully) starry sky through a frosty tent flap. Wherever your adventures take you, we hope you'll find plenty of inspiration in these pages as we look ahead to an exciting new year.

It's an especially exciting time for the magazine, as we have a new team in place. As outgoing editor Francesca Donovan wrote last month, *TGO* contributor Andy Wasley and former deputy editor David Lintern are now joint editors, and long-time contributor Hanna Lindon steps up as our new deputy editor. Francesca remains fully on board too, looking after our Almanac, website and social media – and finding plenty of inspiration in your letters and photographs.

We've often turned to *TGO* for advice and ideas for our own adventures. And this month, there are rich pickings for Winter lovers keen to brave cold nights in search of excitement.

Through much of 2024, an immense solar storm led to spectacular aurorae in Britain's skies. The Northern Lights' celestial dance inspired many people to head outdoors to photograph the night sky. In our lead feature this month, astrophotographer Stuart McIntyre explains what drives him to shoot nocturnal mountain

scenes – and offers practical advice for anyone keen to turn their camera towards the cosmos (page 22).

Also seeking happiness in the hills, Alex Roddie beats a trail to the summit of Ben Lawers (page 32), where he finds a night out under the stars offers plenty of earthly excitement for anyone hardy enough to brave the Scottish Winter. And Right to Roam campaigner Lewis Winks makes a passionate case for wild camping, as Dartmoor's access rights hang in the balance following a Supreme Court hearing in October – turn to page 16 to read why this case should concern everyone who loves the outdoors.

For those keen on trails further from our shores, on page 52 Chris Townsend revisits his epic 1988 hike along the full length of the Canadian Rockies, as a new edition of his classic book *High Summer* is published. And Phoebe Smith writes about the “bittersweet joy” of completing a pilgrimage along the Kumano Kodo, Japan's superb sister route to the Camino de Santiago. Read her story on page 42.

Many of us who love the outdoors have looked up in awe at the night sky. In its way, a starry sky unites all who brave the darkness in search of freedom or adventure: Wherever we hike or camp, we do so under the same stars – and when dawn breaks, it never feels warmer or more promising than it does in the great outdoors.

Wherever you begin the new year, we're glad to be by your side.

Your team at *The Great Outdoors*

Get in touch: @ tgo.ed@kelsey.co.uk X @TGOmagazine f /TGOmagazine thegreatoutdoorsmag.com

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“... it feels fitting to have arrived in the Far East, where the sun rises and new beginnings await.”

Phoebe Smith, p42



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The coire of a thousand thank yous – Tour des Ecrins



Photo credit: David Lintern



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Stuart McIntyre finds freedom and light in the darkest of Scotland's night skies



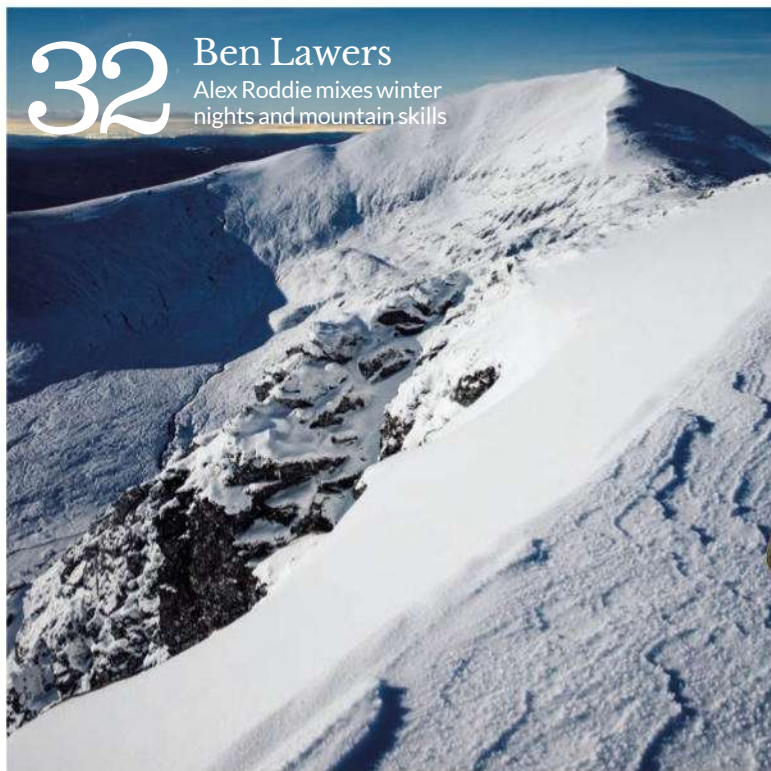
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Phoebe Smith recounts a 'bittersweet' hike along the Kumano Kodo



“On a winter mountain at night, I feel more vulnerable, but if I’m lucky I might be rewarded by rare beauty.”

Alex Roddie, p32



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Ben Lawers

Alex Roddie mixes winter nights and mountain skills



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Canadian Rockies

Chris Townsend recalls his 1988 hike, and his classic account of that epic: *High Summer*



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MEET THE TEAM

Your new TGO editors...



Andy Wasley is *The Great Outdoors'* editor, a role he shares with David Lintern. Andy is a journalist, photographer and long-distance hiker, whose boots have carried him along big trails across Britain and in Europe, Asia and the Americas. He found his way into the hills during his childhood in the

Cotswolds, where he now lives with his husband and son. He leads a Cubs pack and will be teaching them celestial navigation – and camp fire songs! – during the coming long winter nights.



Francesca Donovan is a journalist and hillwalker based in a Peak District barn. When her Wi-Fi plays ball, she works as content producer at TGO. Otherwise, she loves walking, swimming and camping in the mountains of Eryri, Lakeland and – whenever the cost of train fares allow

– Scotland. After choosing to step away from the editorship of TGO, Francesca is looking forward to a year of Type 2 fun, furthering her outdoor skills by day and stargazing by night.



David Lintern now shares the editor role with Andy. David has worked across the creative industries for 30 years as a writer, photographer, land rights and access campaigner, founder of a refugee arts charity, teacher and journalist. He has contributed to *The Great Outdoors*

magazine in almost as many guises for over a decade.

The common thread is the celebration of, and advocacy for, the connections between people, nature and place.



Hanna Lindon is a freelance outdoors journalist and TGO's new deputy editor. She lives in the South Downs and spends far too much time commuting back and forth to the hills. At this time of year, she tries to make those snatched mountain moments count by staying out past sunset.

Favourite dusky winter memories include snowholing in the Cairngorms, ghostly wild camps under Dartmoor tors and big, snowy days in the Lakes with late-night descents.

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ALMANAC

JANUARY

in the mountains

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EVENT

Girls on Hills: Winter Skills 101

Skills courses

18 / 25 January • Fort William, Glen Coe

Girls on Hills Ltd is the UK's only guided trail, fell and skyrunning company designed specifically for women. Delivered by MCI- and WML-qualified female guides with a maximum ratio of 1:6 for safety, this two-day course is for women seeking adventure in Winter. The mountains of Scotland are breathtaking in snow but can be dangerous. The course covers movement skills, crampons, self-arrest using an ice axe, avalanche awareness and winter navigation. Summer hillwalking experience is necessary for this course, and a good level of hill fitness is also required. For those who have already been on a winter skills course, a two-day guided winter hillwalking weekend in Glen Coe will also be hosted by Girls on Hills from Saturday 11 January. It promises the chance to climb iconic mountains (weather permitting) with like-minded women. All events will run from Roam West, the accommodation partner offering discounted stays should you wish to spend evenings relaxing together by the fire, sharing a well-earned drink and tales from the day!

Cost: £250

■ girlsonhills.com



Photo: Girls on Hills

New project encourages us to 'go forth and menstruate in the mountains'

Outdoor initiative

Running throughout 2025 • Cairngorms National Park

Over the past year, Cairngorms Connect – the UK's largest ecological restoration partnership – has been working with a group of local volunteers aged 18-25 on a project to facilitate a deeper understanding of landscape-scale ecological restoration. Through a collaborative process, the group decided to contribute to Cairngorms Connect's 200-year vision by engaging in conversations locally around safe and equitable access to nature – and so the Menstruating in the Mountains initiative was born. The group designed an information leaflet and poster to be put up on the back of toilet doors across the

national park. The resources cover safe use and disposal of sanitary products as well as advice for those on multi-day treks in natural spaces. They hope to get this resource out into the community across Badenoch and Strathspey. The poster can also be downloaded, and shared far and wide. The team – which includes rangers, foresters, primary school teachers and students – hopes it will inspire others to 'go forth and menstruate in the mountains!'

■ cairngormsconnect.org.uk



Photo: Cairngorms Connect

Trash Free Trails launches new fund to help communities access outdoor education

Adventure fund

Running indefinitely • UK-wide

Over one third of us live more than a 15-minute walk from nature, with people who live in ethnically diverse areas having to travel 73% further than others to explore, according to Wildlife and Countryside Link. So, not-for-profit Trash Free Trails is addressing this issue through the Purposeful Adventure Fund (supported by The North Face, the European Outdoor Conservation Association and the Hydroflask Parks For All Fund). Small organisations and community groups struggling to facilitate outdoor and adventure education can apply for

financial help, further enabling leaders to encourage litter removal as a route to nature connection and wider environmental awareness. The fund will be available for groups across the UK who work with Hardly Reached communities, including members of the Global Majority, D/deaf and disabled people, and vulnerable young adults, to deliver outdoor adventure experiences as well as enable ongoing vocational and training opportunities. The fund is now open for applications and donations.

■ trashfreetrails.org/purposeful-adventure-fund

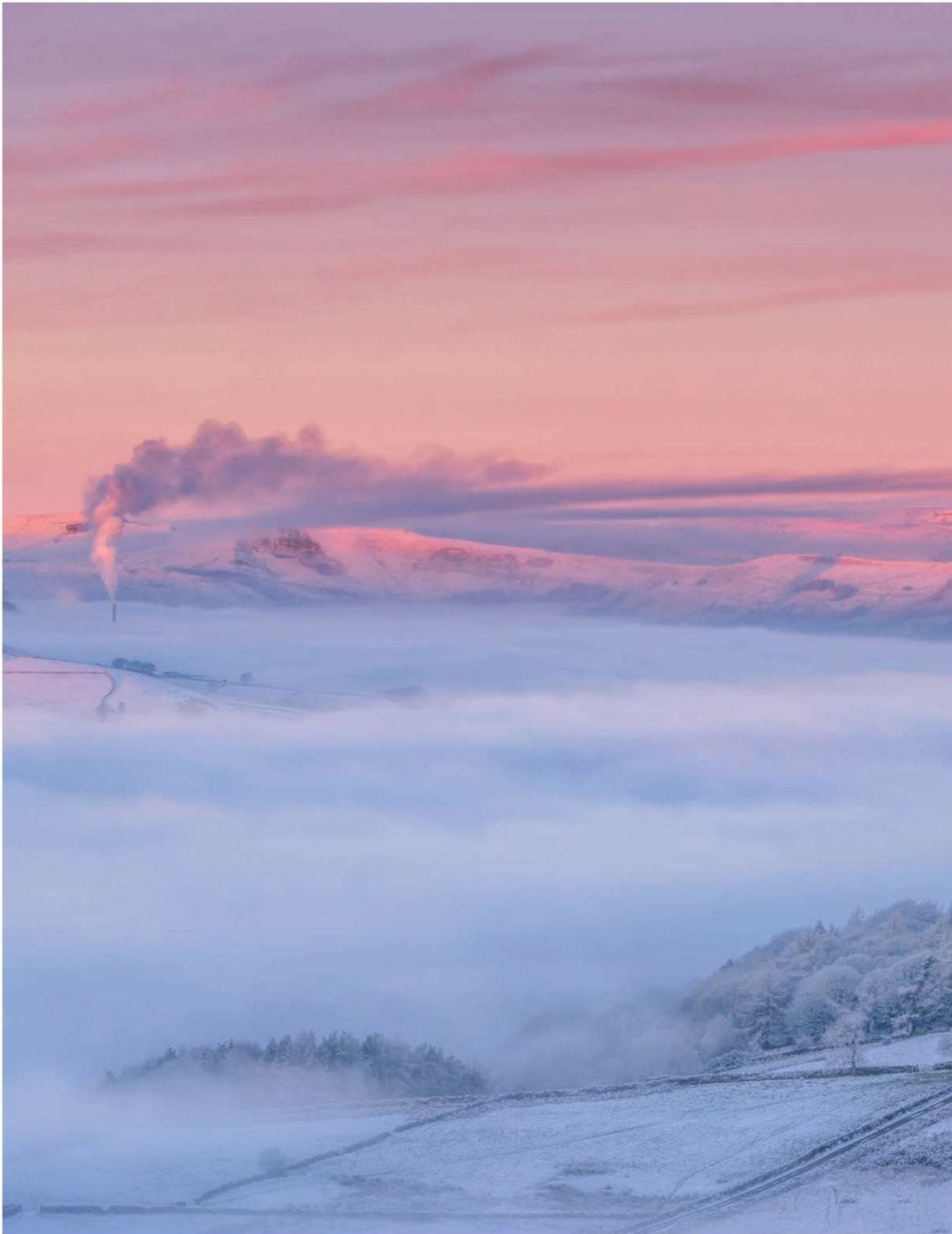


Photo: Pete Scullion



Photo: Ronald Turbull







Hope Valley, Peak District

A cold snap, early December, and I drove to the Peaks on a whim. Surprise View was covered in snow and hoar frost in a way I'd never witnessed before. At dawn, the far silhouette of the Great Ridge turned pink, half of the landscape still shrouded in shadow, the other catching the first rays of the sun. Steam billowed from the chimney of the iconic cement factory to merge with the fog. Winter is filled with both solitude and beauty.

Photo by Verity Milligan
veritymilliganphotography.com

Readers' page

Share your views, your experiences and your favourite photos 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.

Paper treasures
(Part 2)

A long-standing reader recently got in touch after a bout of at-home decluttering to see if we could help find his complete collection of TGO magazines a good home.

I read with interest the letter from Ryan Codling in the November issue of *The Great Outdoors* entitled 'Paper treasures'. Coincidentally, I have recently had to clear my loft, where I had stored every single issue of TGO magazine since Issue 1 was published in March 1978. I would now like to pass on this collection to any interested individual buyer or to an establishment such as a library. I would prefer not to split the collection and, ideally, I should like it to go to a place where it will be accessible to many people.

If you would like to give this archival collection of *The Great Outdoors* a good home, please get in touch at tgo.ed@kelsey.co.uk



I will consider any offers, preferably for the whole collection or for part thereof. The magazines (currently stored safely in 13 boxes!) will need to be collected from my home in South London.

Phil Tarr

Better together

Upon reading a collaborative piece in TGO's September issue about the renaissance of group adventure, the Chairperson of Gwent Mountaineering Club wrote to us with some further advice on finding a club that's right for you.

Arising from the great age of mountain and rock exploration in the late 19th/early 20th Century and expanded greatly through post-war post-industrial development of outdoor mountain recreation, there are now more than 450 clubs across the United Kingdom. Some are local, some are regional or national. Most clubs are broad spectrum, having members with interests across all kinds of different mountain sports. A few clubs lean more towards one mountain discipline than another. There are clubs specifically for women, and clubs catering to diverse individual



and collective identities.

Joining a club is a great way to make friends, to team up and find walking or climbing partners to safely share outdoor adventures together, and to develop personal mountain skills of all disciplines. Many clubs have their own accommodation huts in popular mountain areas that can be used year-round quite cheaply by members; and there are often reciprocal rights for members to use the huts of other clubs.

Social media



In the photo essay entitled 'Nature's witness', which was published in the November issue of *The Great Outdoors*, photographer and Mountain Leader Alex Nail recalled the four years and false starts it took to get to know and capture the Fisherfield Forest through his camera lens. Our readers were blown away by the photographs. Here's what just a few had to say...



Conor Finnegan (@cfinneganphoto/X)

"The book Alex produced [titled *The Great Wilderness* and published by Alex Nail Publishing] is amazing!"

Stavros Lambrakis (@stavros.lambrakis.222/Instagram)

"Sublime images, Alex. Just great work!"

Daniel Tuchowski (@munrodrifter/Instagram)

"Lovely stuff, Alex, as always."

Terry Adby (@terryadbyoutdoors/Instagram)

"Stunning shots, but that first one in particular is a sensational capture of the moment (and sure it wouldn't have looked like that if I'd taken it)!"

And then there's the social rewards.

Clubs are generally welcoming. They want new members, and often offer free trial memberships for a few months so that people can discover what it's like and whether a particular club meets their needs. It's not uncommon to find folk belonging to multiple clubs. Quite simply, being a member of a club is very good fun. The websites of both the British Mountaineering Council and Mountaineering Scotland have 'find a club' pages that can help anyone looking for a group to join.

Alex Hardisty

Chairperson, Gwent Mountaineering Club



Your adventures this month

Some may find the dark oppressive and menacing. But the sky comes alive at night in ways we can't imagine during daylight hours, unifying all the adventurous night owls under the same spectacle of stars – weather permitting! Perhaps this universally grounding experience was no more keenly felt this October when Lady Aurora danced bright across Britain for the second time in 2024. Despite being taken miles and miles apart, the similarities in these four reader photos serve to show how small but connected we all are in the grand scheme of the majesty of our natural world.



[left] Lauren Harwood and Alex Bowden (@thatwelshcouple/Instagram)

"This was a magical moment in South Wales we won't ever forget. Spending it with each other really was a moment we will carry in our relationship for many years to come. Capturing a range of colours so unique and special every time we took a shot was also pretty rewarding!"

[below] Nicole Shepherd (@travelwithnicoleshep/Instagram)

"This moment captured me experiencing my first ever sight of the Northern Lights, illuminating the sky above Coniston in the Lake District. It was a feeling I still can't explain but it felt very magical."



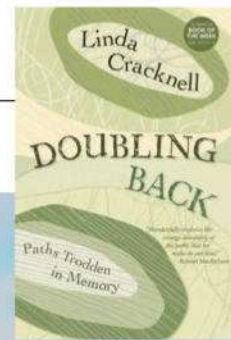
[below] Martin Hornsey (@martin_hornsey/Instagram)
"Standing in awe beneath a vibrant display of the aurora borealis, I realised I'd certainly made the right decision to camp on the Yorkshire coast on 10 October!"



[above] Paul Skea (@skeapaul/Instagram) "After a promising aurora forecast, I decided to camp somewhere with the least light pollution and darkest skies I know of within a couple of hours' drive. I pitched in the middle of the Cheviot Hills, on Shillhope Law summit. Not much sleep was had and the cold was quickly forgotten as I sat out mesmerised by the light show with the aurora corona directly overhead at one point. A night to remember!"

Doubling Back: Paths Trodden in Memory

by Linda Cracknell
(£9.99, paperback, Saraband)



Winter descending from the hills overlooking Loch Ness



‘BY WALKING an hour each morning,’ Cracknell writes, in the opening chapter of *Doubling Back*, ‘I plant myself here.’ The line captures an essence of this versatile author’s work, which spans fiction, drama and – in this book – personal essays. From her earliest memories, Cracknell has been on the move, whether tunnelling through the undergrowth of her childhood back garden, walking barefoot through a village in Kenya, or struggling, injured, across Norway.

But far from superficial tourism, her explorations are always about rooting down into the people, stories and natural worlds where she passes. And her spade is her pen. Cracknell writes to discover, and her walks are a multi-dimensional excavation of places – and herself – across time.

The premise of *Doubling Back* is ‘Paths Trodden in Memory’ as Cracknell retraces the steps of previous walkers and entwines their experiences with her own. Some of the walks are intimately connected with her, such as following a climb by her late father in Switzerland. Others follow previous authors: Thomas Hardy in Cornwall, Jessie Kesson in the hills above Loch Ness, and Rabbie Burns in ‘the Birks o’ Aberfeldy’. Others explore ancient routes, like the Highland drove road to Skye or the ‘Mozarabic Trails’ of southern Spain.

Some are solo while others are in varied and colourful company. Threading the collection together are a series of memories from Cracknell’s three weeks at the writers’ retreat Château de Lavigny in Switzerland. She reflects there on the push-pull of movement and stillness that her writing demands and ‘the contradictory impulses of familiarity and “otherness”; self-sufficiency and company’.

That tension reaps rewards as Cracknell has a rare gift for conjuring experience. Her observations of nature are keen: a red-throated diver is ‘floodlit in a sudden splash of sunlight’. People are equally summoned: a guide ‘had a soft way of laying words’. A walk along the pilgrimage route of St Cuthbert’s Way captures a spiritual luminosity: ‘Our own reflections had us walking on water.’ And the final chapter, saturated with water in the peat bog of the Flow Country, takes us to the earthy depths as she got on her knees and ‘plunged hands into slow waters and raised dripping samples of sphagnum moss’.

That chapter is a new addition to the original book, which first appeared in 2014 but promptly disappeared with the publisher’s demise. This 10th anniversary edition brought out by Saraband is a welcome ‘doubling back’ over Cracknell’s walks and words, which hold ever more resonance and richness with the passage of time.
Merryn Glover

NEW
Book
REVIEWS

Scottish Hill Tracks

by ScotWays

(£25, softback, Scottish Mountaineering Press)



Lochan Fada
and Beinn Làir

BACK IN 1977 I bought two little booklets by DG Moir called *Scottish Hill Tracks Southern Scotland* and *Scottish Hill Tracks Northern Scotland* as part of my planning for a Land's End to John O'Groats walk the next year. I'd done little walking north of the border at the time, and these booklets proved invaluable. I carried them all the way through Scotland. In future years they were useful for planning TGO Challenge walks.

The booklets were first published in 1947 and then revised for a second edition in 1975. There have been four subsequent editions, with the latest just published as a handsome 396-page book by the Scottish Mountaineering Press on behalf of ScotWays (the Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society).

Every one of the 350 routes has been resurveyed for this sixth edition, with around 130 ScotWays volunteers spending two years checking every one, which involved 7600km of distance and 194,000 metres of ascent. The result is a book that I think is just as invaluable as the original booklets for anyone interested in walking in Scotland, especially long-distance routes. The wealth of information it contains is astonishing.



Scottish Hill Tracks is beautifully produced, as has come to be expected of Scottish Mountaineering Press, with attractive maps and many colour photographs. The layout is clear and it's easy to find the information you want. The routes are divided into 25 geographical sections, from the Cheviot Hills to Caithness, each with a brief introduction including landscape, cultural and historical information plus an overview map of all the routes. Each route then starts with the OS Landranger map numbers, grid reference for the start and finish, distance, amount of ascent and descent, high point and any alternative options.

This a lovely book that, in addition to its practical use, is wonderful for browsing and daydreaming. I've planned several long walks already. I just have one complaint – the weight! At 680g I wouldn't carry this on a long route. My original booklets weigh 100g each. (The new edition is far more comprehensive, of course.) Congratulations to all involved in its production.

The book costs £25 and is available from the Scottish Mountaineering Press. Highly recommended.

Chris Townsend

Wildlife and Nature

BOOMING BITTERNS

Editor **Andy Wasley** introduces an expanded 'On the Lookout' nature feature with a search for the elusive bittern

BARELY ABOVE A WHISPER, an RSPB officer at Leighton Moss near Morecambe Bay, told me what I should listen for: "It's like someone blowing across a bottle neck."

I'd gone to this Lancashire nature reserve on a bright Winter morning, on my way home from a weekend in the Western Fells. Marsh harriers were patrolling the reserve's immense reed beds – the largest in north-west England – snipe were skulking by the hide, and an assortment of waterfowl drifted out on an otherwise still lake.

But of the bittern – not a sign. And no surprise: this stolid heron is a master of disguise, and notoriously shy. Its scientific name, *Botaurus stellaris*, means 'starry bittern', a reference to its streaked and speckled plumage. This conceals the bird almost to the point of invisibility in reed beds, keeping it safe from prying eyes as it hunts fish, amphibians and insects.

You might not see a bittern, then – but visit one of its wetland haunts and you might hear it. The male's call is a peculiar, bassy sound, rather like... well, rather like someone blowing across a bottle neck. This 'booming' call can carry for miles. It's one of the most astonishing sounds in nature.

In recent decades, wetland restoration projects have extended the bittern's winter range to habitats across England and Wales. January is a good time to take your chances for a sighting, as the reeds' foliage has died



"You're more likely to hear it than see it"

back. I was lucky enough to see one during my short visit to Leighton Moss: a low, lolling profile, glimpsed just for a moment above the reeds.

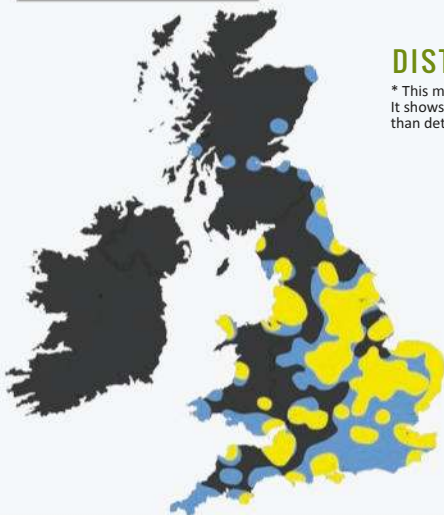
Any sighting of this elusive bird is a treat, because it remains scarce in Britain despite a recovery from local extinction in the 1870s. It returned to our shores in 1900, but by 1997 only 11 males were heard. Its population has



grown steadily since, and although it remains on the UK's Amber List of birds of conservation concern, the RSPB has reported a 25% increase in calling males in recent years. You could almost say it's booming.

Photo credit: (top) Les Cater (RSPB-images.com); (bottom) Ben Andrew (RSPB-images.com)

ON THE LOOKOUT: BITTERN: *Botaurus stellaris*



DISTRIBUTION MAP

* This map is intended as a guide. It shows general distribution rather than detailed, localised populations.

KEY

- BREEDING
- WINTERING

Based on map at rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/bittern

Conservation status:

Amber

Abundance:

234

MALES IN ENGLAND AND WALES (2023)



WHERE TO SEE:

Wetlands in England and Wales

WHEN TO SEE:

Year-round, but especially in Winter

More information: rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/bittern

Map credit: Based on RSPB data

BOOST YOUR ENERGY THIS Christmas

Stay energised, focused, and healthy this Christmas with just one capsule a day of **Doctor Seaweed's** natural supplements.

The holiday season is a time of celebration, indulgence, and joy, but it can also bring added stress and fatigue. Between hosting family gatherings, shopping for gifts, and indulging in rich foods, it's easy to neglect your health. The result? Low energy, brain fog, and even weight gain. These are all symptoms often linked to not getting enough iodine, and why you can often feel this way.

Iodine is essential for maintaining a healthy metabolism, energy levels, and mental clarity. Without enough iodine, especially during the busy holiday season, you might feel more sluggish, bloated, or tired out than usual. That's where seaweed comes in. As nature's richest source of iodine, seaweed provides a safe and natural remedy to boost your well-being during this hectic time of year.

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Speak to a health care professional if pregnant, breastfeeding, on medication or have existing medical conditions. Food supplements should not be used as a substitute for a varied diet and health lifestyle. Iodine can be harmful if taken in excess dosages. Store in a cool, dry place - out of the reach of children.



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Katy Wakefield

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HOT TOPIC

By Lewis Winks

Our fight for wild camping rights isn't just about Dartmoor



People protest against efforts to curtail wild camping rights on Dartmoor

In October 2024, the Supreme Court heard a case that could protect or extinguish the right to wild camp on Dartmoor. Right to Roam campaigner **Lewis Winks** explains why this is an issue that should concern everyone who loves the great outdoors

WE SET UP CAMP on the edge of a small mixed woodland in the Scottish Borders, having walked out from my friend Sam's house in the afternoon. By 6pm we were rigging our tarp and laying out sleeping mats, in time to watch the sun set over the Pentland Hills. The last of the day's warmth offered welcome comfort before the chill of the night.

I'd asked Sam if we could camp together close to his home because I was intrigued: what's it like to have a foundation of access rights that extend to land and water, and

which include the freedom to sleep under the stars a short walk from your front door?

This has always been customary in the Highlands, but in the Central Belt of Scotland it is relatively new, resulting from the Land Reform Act, passed in 2003 and supported by the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. To Sam it has become much more than a right – it's something that is ingrained into his sense of self.

"I need these moments," he said. "It's part of who I am. It's a reset, but it's also

a way to connect with what matters."

Meanwhile, in England, the right to sleep under the stars is confined to just 0.2% of the country – about 70,000 acres in Dartmoor National Park – and even this is under threat of extinction. A legal challenge brought by Dartmoor landowners Alexander and Diana Darwall reached the Supreme Court in October. The court's ruling will determine whether wild camping is to remain a legal right within the national park.

We've heard from hundreds of people

Photocredit: Emma Stoner



Right to Roam supporters attend a demonstration on Hound Tor

for whom wild camping on Dartmoor has been life-shaping and transformative. But until the Darwalls launched their legal challenge, this experience remained almost unheard of by much of the wider public.

It's a tragic reality that we can't miss what we haven't noticed, and we often won't notice what we haven't experienced. It was probably a safe bet then, on the Darwalls' part, that wild camping was going to go quietly into the night. How they underestimated the public reaction: the original High Court ruling saw 3500 people take to Stall Moor on the Darwalls' estate in protest.

The struggle to defend wild camping has transmuted into an important illustration of both the value and the fragility of our access to nature in England, where just 8% of the countryside is publicly accessible. We're living at a time of crisis, not only across the natural world but also of our experience of nature. In a recent study of nature connectedness, Britain was ranked lowest out of all countries surveyed. Our biodiversity didn't fare much better.

If we are to solve these interrelated crises, we must find ways to enable a closer relationship with the natural world.

“We can't miss what we haven't noticed, and we often won't notice what we haven't experienced.”

Sleeping under the night sky and having the right to belong in a landscape after the sun has set is one of those ways; yet it is confined – as a right – to Dartmoor.

Whether or not wild camping remains a right on Dartmoor, the real test is how resolute we as the public are in defending and extending access to nature. Right to Roam is campaigning for new legislation to unlock the countryside. We will continue to call for extensions to public access in England (with BMC leading efforts in Wales) – including a right to sleep under the stars – so that more people can experience rights like those enjoyed in Scotland.

As Sam and I lay in our bivy bags and looked up at the stars through a lattice of branches, he told me about favourite wild camping spots near home. Places where dog walkers seldom venture, but which are close enough to nip out after a day's work and be back home in time for breakfast: a practice that

the writer and adventurer Alastair Humphreys calls a 'microadventure'. We finally fell asleep listening to the rustles of deer and badger, and the other-worldly calls of tawny owls.

Sam has gained a deep sense of his locale, enriched by sleeping out in woods, by streams and on hilltops close to home, enlivened by the rhythms of the landscape through day and night. He's passing this passion and knowledge on to his daughter. Isn't it time those of us living in England and Wales had the right to do the same?

Right to Roam is encouraging people to write to their MP to call for better, fairer access to the countryside. Visit righttoroam.org.uk/write-to-your-mp to get involved, and please consider donating to the campaign. At Lewis's request, we have donated his contributor's fee to Right to Roam to support their campaign.

Y S G Y R Y D F A W R

Centre of early Christianity, the Black Mountains echo with ancient spirituality. Jim Perrin makes a pilgrimage to 'Holy Mountain'

SACRED SUMMITS are ten a penny in the legend-wreathed Black Mountains – but even in a landscape steeped in Celtic spirituality, Ysgyryd ('Skirrid') Fawr stands out. Topped by an ancient, ruined chapel and famed for centuries as a place of pilgrimage, it's known locally as Holy Mountain.

You'll find its north-south ridge a mile or so south of Llanfihangel Crucorney. From the east, I've found Tintern makes a good rest stop, and I sought out chewy tea cakes the size of dinner plates (toasted of course) that needed washing down with gallons of tea. Duly refreshed, I headed westwards, with my objective of Ysgyryd Fawr, at 1594 feet, slowly rising on the horizon ahead. Clearly visible on its weather slope is a great distinguishing landslip cleft, Gothically accentuated and strange.

For a hill that barely makes Marilyn status, it certainly has presence. I ambled towards it on delightful paths from the valley of the little Afon Troddi, along the

Three Castles Walk, the route enlivened now and again by statuesque bulls sporting great brass rings through their nostrils. Soon I arrived in Cagle Street and Llanvetherine, neither sporting a pub, and so I shuffled on.

Contours crowded together as I made my way from Tump and on to The Arwallt in this gorgeous border country of the Southern March. The way ahead lay steeply up a twisting ridge. Perched on its gable, two squat pillars of the local sandstone stood within the confines of the site of Llanfihangel – St Michael's

Chapel – of which only the ground plan remains.

In 1676, Pope Clement X decreed that plenary indulgences would be granted to pilgrims visiting the chapel on Ysgyryd Fawr at Michaelmas. As recently as 1980 a large wooden cross stood on the ridge, but it's now gone. I wonder where? Firewood, perhaps?

So too has most of the earth from the mountain top, which was once believed to be holy and unusually fertile. It's said that several of the churches of Gwent were built on mounds of earth scraped from the grounds of St Michael's Chapel. This earth was also scattered on coffins before Catholic burial, and on farmland to increase yield. According to some writers, neither worm nor slug could live in it.

The only worm I saw certainly looked in poor shape. The sorry little creature had no earth to disappear into, so I picked it up and dug it into rich, deep loam lower down the hill.

Tradition has it that the massive landslip to the west of Ysgyryd Fawr occurred when the veil of the temple in Jerusalem was rent at Christ's crucifixion. Heathens and cynics might dispute that explanation by pointing to other huge landslips in the local sandstone – there's a very prominent one,

for example, at Cwmyoy in the Vale of Ewyas.

Religions crave miracles, and one thing for certain is that this little Marilyn hovering close to the southernmost reach of the Black Mountain ridges is a miraculous viewpoint, from which the eye takes in the whale back of Deri, the humped outline of the Sugar Loaf above Abergavenny, and the closing channel of the Severn Sea, which has Somerset and the Mendips beyond it. To the north-east, hill upon hill through the length of the Southern March are visible: Herefordshire Beacon in the Malverns, Brown Clee, the Shropshire Hills, Caer Caradoc... even the Lickey Hills, demarcating the urban fringe of Birmingham. Gyrn Wigau, distinctive outlier of Y Berwyn, peeps down from far away to the north in fair weather, whilst to the west lurk the desolate expanses of Llangynidr and Llangatwg, beneath which stretch some of the longest and most

arduous cave systems in Britain: Agen Allwedd, Eglwys Faen and Porth yr Ogof, spied en route via the Cambrian Way.

On the subject of caving, I thoroughly recommend the through trip from Cwm Dwr Quarry Cave above the South Wales Caving Club's headquarters at Penwyllt. It holds some of the most entrancing sights I've ever encountered underground, including the three-mile stream passage, Column Hall, with its straw stalactites that tinkle together as you walk past. On the sedgy moor above, Aneurin Bevan and

his friend Archie Lush promenaded and debated in heated discussions that led ultimately to the formation of the National Health Service.

I raced down from the summit of Ysgyryd Fawr and along the road to Crug Hywel, a pretty town with good pub and cafés, in one of which I recently attended an excellent reading by the first National Poet of Wales, the fabulously accomplished Gwyneth Lewis. If ever you get the chance to hear her, take it. She's gifted, witty, vastly talented – in my view a national treasure. But that's Wales for you. Its hills breed poets!

“Religions crave miracles, and one thing for certain is that this little Marilyn hovering close to the southernmost reach of the Black Mountain ridges is a miraculous viewpoint”

FURTHER INFORMATION

Map: OS Explorer 13 (1:25k)

Transport: Buses (no. 23) run from Cardiff to Abergavenny and Crug Hywel (Crickhowell)

Food & accommodation: Crug Hywel has places to stay. The Pandy Inn near the northern end of Ysgyryd Fawr is an excellent pub.

Further reading: The major Socialist critic Raymond Williams

came from the village of Pandy, just north of Ysgyryd Fawr, where his father was station master. His *Border Country* trilogy is one of the major achievements of the 20th-Century novel in English. It's imbued with the history and atmosphere of this region, as too is his later two-part novel, *People of the Black Mountain*.

Ysgyrd Fawr as seen from Bryn Arw



Photo credit: Shutterstock

YOUR
WEEKEND
IN...

LEWES

With hills in all directions and a pub over almost every brow, the downland town of Lewes is the ultimate base for cosy country walking. **Hanna Lindon** introduces her home town



The view from Mount Caburn, Lewes's local mini-mountain

IF YOU FANCY a winter walking adventure that's frosty and forgiving as opposed to wild and cornice-capped, get yourself to the eastern edge of the South Downs. Here you'll find the mediievally marvellous town of Lewes, with its hilltop castle and uneven cobbled streets, strategically positioned at the confluence of three downland ridges.

Walk one way and you'll find yourself on the slopes of Mount Caburn, a Neolithic hillfort, National Nature Reserve and panoramic lookout point all rolled into one. In the other direction, a great, green wave of a ridge rolls away towards hawthorn-topped Blackcap and the 248m heights of Ditchling Beacon. Walk south to join the South Downs Way (SDW) as it marches to its coastal conclusion. And if the weather gets too wild and woolly even for these gently contoured hills, there's the 42-mile (67km) Sussex Ouse Valley Way cutting straight through the town centre.

Still not enough to tempt you south for a winter weekender? We haven't got to the

pubs yet. You'll find one around almost every corner in Lewes, fighting for street space with coffee shops, bakeries and flea markets. Most rural walks end at a pub as well – but if you prefer to spend your evenings in more sophisticated fashion, there's always the cultural pull of Glyndebourne (opera), Charleston (literary largesse) and the bright lights of nearby Brighton. Adventure, culture and endless beer-quaffing opportunities all rolled into one.


YOUR WEEKEND, SORTED SATURDAY

There's not much in this rolling corner of the country to challenge your winter skills, so why not set yourself an endurance test instead? From Lewes you can walk the final stage of the South Downs Way and then a bit, meandering over the Seven Sisters from Eastbourne before cutting inland through Friston Forest and returning to Lewes via Firle Beacon (217m) and Mount Caburn.



West of Lewes, the SDW rolls on to Steyning

This 17-mile / 27km banger of a linear route has everything you need for a gold-standard winter adventure. Scenic variation (when you're not tramping over sweeping sea cliffs, you'll be wandering through woodland, birdwatching from a river bank or enjoying the huge skies from the bare back of the South Downs). Villages so olde-worldy they belong in a museum. A plethora of pubs at Alfriston and Litlington (some of them rated amongst the very best in the country) conveniently placed around the lunchtime mark. Wildlife, from the over-wintering water birds at Cuckmere Haven to peregrine falcons on the Seven Sisters and hares on the Downs above Firle. Even ease of access – there's a direct train line from Lewes to the start point at



Eastbourne, which takes the hassle out of route planning.

The other upside of this walk is flexibility. Fancy something marginally shorter? Skip the coastal cliffs of the Seven Sisters and start with an easier (but equally alluring) inland hill walk over Lullington Heath and past the famous Long Man of Wilmington. Getting tired towards the end? Hop on a train at Glynde to bypass the final climb up Mount Caburn. High winds driven you down from the tops? No problem – there’s a valley diversion that follows the base of the Downs from Alfriston to Firle. Whichever way you walk it, though, this has to be one of the very best linear routes in the South Downs.

SUNDAY

Another day, another train-based adventure. Easy linear walks are a bonus feature of basing yourself at Lewes – not only is the town an hour’s direct train ride from London, it also has multi-directional rail links to plenty of rural stations in and around the Downs.

This time, you’ll be hopping on board a train to Newhaven (yes, they do run on Sundays), and following the western bank of the Ouse towards Piddinghoe. Take the random triangular diversion here that leads away from the river and back again, finally meeting the South Downs Way where it crosses the bridge at Southease. It’s well worth ducking into the 12th-Century church (famous for its restored medieval wall paintings). After this, there’s a choice ahead of you:

continue along the South Downs Way as it marches westwards onto the ridge above Southease, or duck into Rodmell’s Abergavenny Arms for a quick refresher before walking up through the village to rejoin the SDW again at the top of Mill Lane. Don’t agonise too much, though. You’ll have another chance for a pub break in 4 miles / 6km, when the route finally leaves the Downs and descends to The Juggs at Kingston. It’s short work after this to cross the road near Kingston windmill and take a high, view-filled bridlepath back into Lewes.

The full route is around 10 miles / 16km. That might be enough to satisfy your feet after yesterday’s endurance fest, but if not then there’s a nice digression near the end down into Castle Hill National Nature Reserve. Finish up with a haunting wander through the remains of Lewes’s medieval priory for a last shot of wintery atmosphere.

OTHER WALKS NEARBY

Ditchling Beacon (14 miles/22.5km; 1550ft/472m; 6.5 hours)

To the west of Lewes, the Downs climb above Plumpton Plain until they reach the 248m top of Ditchling Beacon. Descend from here to Westmeston and take a bucolic bridleway north to Streat. At Plumpton Racecourse, you can either turn north again to regain the ridge you left earlier, or call it quits at Plumpton station and jump on a train back to Lewes.

Devil’s Dyke and Truleigh Hill (6

miles/10km; 1520ft/464m; 3.5 hours)

North of Brighton, a grand dyke splits the Downs – the story goes that it was carved by the Devil, who wanted the sea to wash through and flood the villages on the other side. See this landscape of legend in a figure-of-eight walk that lassos Devil’s Dyke and neighbouring Edburton Hill from Fulking (which, incidentally, has an excellent country pub).

ACCOMMODATION

Lewes is packed with guest houses, inns and hotels. They range from the high-end (Pelham House) to the budget (Premier Inn), with plenty of options in between. Most campsites are closed at this time of year, but Southease YHA offers well-priced dorms and rooms a short train ride away from Lewes.

FOOD AND DRINK

Almost every other building in Lewes town centre is a café or a pub. Try the original Bill’s for a posh fry-up, Flint Owl Bakery for an even posher packed lunch, Chaula’s for excellent curry, or the Pelham Arms for decent pub fare. Top country pubs include the Half Moon (Plumpton) and the Jolly Sportsman (East Chilmington).

GUIDES AND ACTIVITY PROVIDERS


Friends of the South Downs (friendsofthesouthdowns.org.uk) organises regular guided walks that anybody can join. Other adventure activity options include exploring the area’s waterways with The Kayak Coach (thekayakcoach.com) and mountain biking with South East Mountain Biking (southeastmountainbiking.co.uk).

GUIDEBOOKS

Ordnance Survey publishes a Pathfinder guide – *Walks in South Downs National Park & East Sussex* (£12.99) – which covers this area. There’s also Kev Reynolds’ *Walks in the South Downs National Park* (Cicerone, £12.95).

GETTING THERE

It couldn’t be easier to reach Lewes via public transport – the direct train from London Victoria takes just an hour. Local bus networks connect the town with Brighton, Eastbourne, Tunbridge Wells and other downland destinations.



A snowy South Downs Way above Pyecombe, near Lewes

PHOTO ESSAY

STARS

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: STUART MCINTYRE



Whilst some shy away from dark corners, Scottish astrophotographer *Stuart McIntyre* wades right into them, tripod at the ready. In this photo essay he describes how a longing to escape and explore led to some miraculous moments under the stars, often alone but sometimes shared

TRUCK

ORION OVERETIVE

I've always loved photographing in the snow. The available light bounces off the landscape and generates a magical luminescence. Here in Glen Etive I was drawn to how the constellation of Orion was sitting directly above the hills. Orion's sword is one of the best-known deep sky objects. If you find yourself asking, 'why is one star out of focus whilst all the others are in focus?', it's because it's a nebula – a forming star. It is incredibly bright at its centre but surrounded by soft gaseous hydrogen that glows faint red.



COSMIC FIRE

[RIGHT]

In Winter, the clear, crisp sky in the northern hemisphere offers a good chance to see deep space objects. You may well have seen the constellation known as Orion the Hunter as well as his famous three-starred belt. The jewel in this icon of the night sky is the star-forming region Messier 42 (M42), otherwise known as the Orion Nebula. It sits just below the first star in Orion's Belt, Alnitak, and can easily be spotted with the naked eye under moderately dark skies despite being 1500 light years away from us. In this photo, the Orion Nebula is perfectly perched behind Buachaille Etive Mor in Glen Coe.





PRESENCE IN THE LANDSCAPE

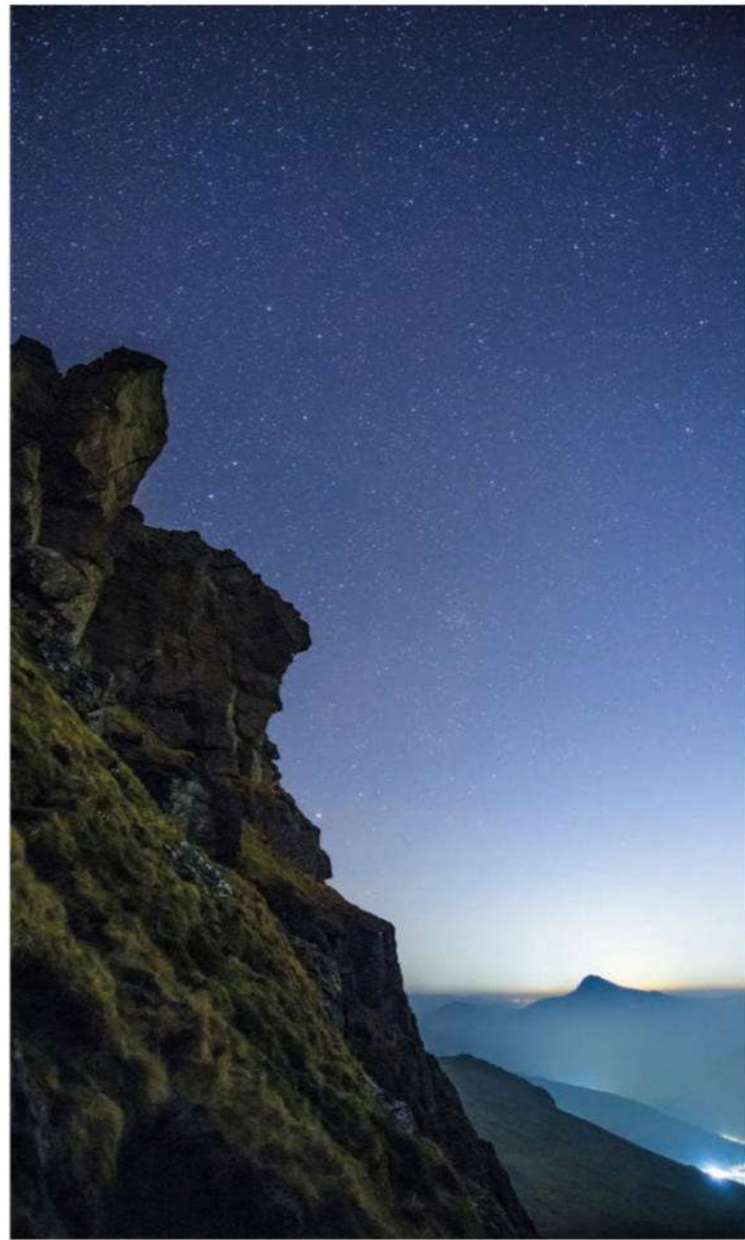
[LEFT]

Cairn Holy Chambered Cairn (that's not a misprint) is the remains of two Neolithic burial chambers side by side, near the coast in Dumfries. The tombs would originally have been covered and not looked as they do today – many of the stones have been removed for building materials over the centuries. Beaker pottery and jadeite originating from the Alps have been found on site, indicating the wealth, power and status of whoever was buried here and the significance of this place to different people over many centuries. This image was taken in the summer when the Milky Way is more vibrant.

STAYING LOCAL

[RIGHT]

This image was taken halfway up Ben Arthur (also known as The Cobbler), with Ben Lomond in the distance and the village of Arrochar in the mist below. Inversion conditions are prized in astrophotography because they mute terrestrial light pollution and let the night sky shine through in its true glory.



MY HOBBY-TURNED-OBSESSION started in 2014, which now feels like a lifetime away. I wish it I could say my journey into astrophotography began with grand artistic vision or great insight. In truth, I suspect like many of us who break out of the city and discover the outdoors, it began because I was in an unbelievably stressful job that was making me very unhappy. So much so, one night I just wanted to escape. I had little knowledge of astronomy, and absolutely no experience in the rural world outside Glasgow. I simply zoomed out on the satnav of my car until it showed me as a tiny red dot in Scotland, and headed out into the unknown.

My first night drive took me up the A83 to the Rest and Be Thankful viewpoint, and then onto Lochgoilhead. I was trying to escape the harsh visual noise of the city. Darkness was my only directional pull. A penny dropped during that first night. At its margin, I became acutely aware of the sheer volume of light that emanates from Scotland's largest city, and how widely scattered it is. A long way from home, my stresses quietened and I embraced the dark.

MOONRISE KINGDOM

But then it happened... moonrise. Until that moment, it had not occurred to me that the moon rose and set at different times just like the sun. My unthinkingness made me feel foolish. But standing there in the dark, I also realised there was nobody else around to judge me. It didn't matter. I could happily be an idiot in the dark, totally anonymous, stumbling around and staring at the beauty of the stars and the Highlands around me.

I moved closer to the water and turned on my torch to capture the reflections. Of course, the tide was coming in. This natural ebb and flow resulted in a dance, of sorts. I'd take a photo, standing still for 20 seconds, before running back from the creeping cold water to avoid getting wet. The ridiculousness of the situation was utterly liberating. I felt like I had all of Scotland to myself.

Ever since then, I have been hooked. I had this sneaking suspicion that an entire world of drastically different images were waiting there to be captured. My background was in microscopes and imaging where the control of light (photons) was very tightly calibrated. I was captivated by the idea that the photons in my

CAPTURING THE NIGHT SKY

Stuart shares some tricks and tips he's picked up over the years...

■ The key thing is to go out and explore, and try to make photos your own way. Have a think about how one of your favourite spots might look in the dark.

■ With astrophotography it's impossible to dictate 'magic' camera settings that will always work, but I would begin with as wide a focal length as you have available to you. 16mm or lower simply allows you to capture more sky!

■ The camera does need to rest on something stable. A rock or a beanbag will do, but a tripod is more versatile and gets the camera off the ground, meaning it's easier to operate and your photo will be less troubled by out-of-focus elements in the foreground.

■ Turn your auto-focus off, and slowly turn your lens to the infinity focus position. Some modern mirrorless cameras will allow you to fine-tune manual focus by 'magnifying' via the electronic viewfinder (EVF).

■ Now, try a 20-second exposure. Above 25 seconds and you will actually start to see the movement of the Earth, as shown by 'trails' of the stars. If you don't want that streaking effect but need more light in the shot, keep the exposure under 25 seconds and increase your ISO, or lower your aperture to compensate.

■ ISO can increase the noise in the dark areas of your photo, but modern cameras are quite remarkable in their ability to keep noise to a minimum. An aperture of 2.8 or lower still can work at night, because the dark flattens depth anyway.

■ When you feel you have nailed the photograph, de-focus the camera and then refocus it, in order to take the photo again! I have learned the hard way to get back-up shots and duplicates. I cannot count the number of times I've returned home from a night shoot to find an otherwise great photo slightly out of focus.

■ Good luck, and I wish you clear skies!





Comet Lovejoy

Orion

SURVIVING THE SUN

Comet C/2011 W3 Lovejoy – named for the man who discovered it back in 2011 – is a comet on its way to the outer solar system, having survived a close brush with the sun in December 2011.

I was able to photograph the comet over Loch Restil on the Cowal Peninsula in Argyll and Bute. It is always exciting to see something new visiting our night sky. For me it gives a real feeling of depth and wonder as to all that is happening above us.

THE MAN UNDER THE STARS

[RIGHT]

Orion is one of the most prominent winter constellations due to its distinctive shape. As it's dark a lot in Winter we have plenty of time to become familiar with the night sky! On this particular night in Glen Coe, the stars seemed to wrap The Buachaille in their embrace, their light reflecting off the snow-covered tops. As it turns out, I wasn't the only one enjoying it!

ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER

[BELOW]

The North America nebula really does resemble North America. This shot was the first of my hyper-planned photos. Whilst this bright nebula can be found relatively easily, the framing of the shot still took some foresight. I was pleased to be able to photograph it 'rising' above Dun Na Cuaiche Watchtower as I stood in watch myself from a vantage point at Inveraray castle.



SOMETHING LIKE MAGIC

[RIGHT]

The Glenfinnan Viaduct will be instantly recognisable to many, popularised after it was featured in the Harry Potter

films. It gets incredibly busy by day, but far less so when the light fails. I prefer to avoid the standard locations, but sometimes the moment is too good to resist. I couldn't pass up the chance to get this shot.





photographs had travelled vast distances from stars and nebulae across space, coming to land on my lens, and then finally at the back of my camera to be absorbed by the electronic sensor.

SHARING THE DANCE

After researching a little about the moon and the best times to head out, I ended up on a run-down pier on Loch Fyne. Despite my planning, I found that there was still some light pollution creeping out from behind the hill I was photographing. Barely visible by eye, purple beams of light were somehow picked up by my camera lens. I then realised I was photographing the aurora borealis – or Northern Lights – very close to the infra-red end of the spectrum. At this point a very nice if slightly concerned policeman arrived, wondering what I was doing on a pier at 2am. I showed him how the camera had captured the dance of the aurora and the two of us, strangers together, stood watching them for some time.

That moment was another epiphany of sorts. From that moment of joint wonder, I strove to capture the majesty and scale of the night sky in order to share with others how it feels to be enveloped in the dark. I also wanted to try to stick to what's sometimes called 'witness' or naked eye photography. When people talk about astronomy, they usually think of high-powered telescopes staring at tiny distant objects. While the most impressive sights of the night sky are incredibly big, they are also incredibly faint. This has determined my drive to escape light

Astrophotography

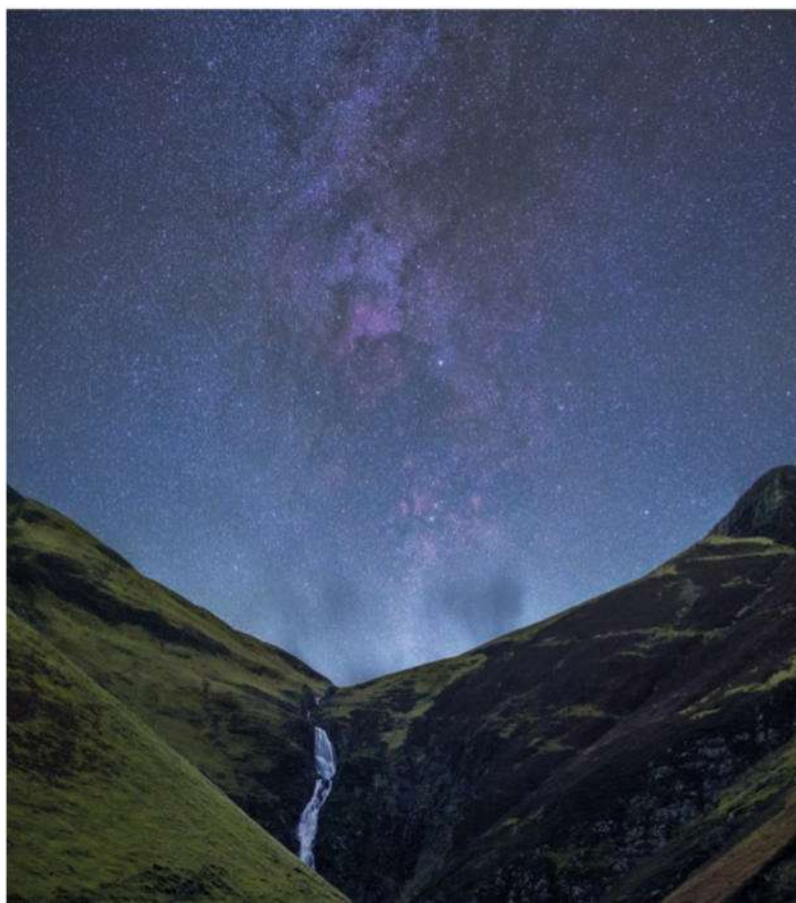
“I think my ‘passion’ for astrophotography would be better described as moronic dedication!”

pollution in my approach to astrophotography. I started climbing hills at night. On the summits during an inversion, low-level clouds would encase the lights of towns and villages, while above my head all was clear.

I also learnt how to stitch photos together to make panoramic skylines, in order to convey scale. It was imperative to me that I merge these photos accurately. Most of the automated software registers stars as random dots, so I then mapped out the constellations to further my own knowledge of astronomy – and to serve as a final check of my work.

WADING IN

Looking back over my long learning process, another moment comes to mind. My ambition was to take a photo of the Milky Way arching over Kilchurn Castle, the stars reflecting in the waters of Loch Awe. I had to wade right out into the water to achieve the right framing. There had been a lot of recent rainfall and the loch had burst its banks. I waded using a red-light torch so as to preserve my night vision. It was interesting to note a surprising amount of wildlife in the loch.



AN AMERICAN DREAM

[LEFT]

This shows a wider image of the sky around the North America nebula (NGC 7000) – an emission nebula found in the Cygnus constellation, which gets its name as it’s shaped somewhat like the continent of North America. One of the brightest nebulae in the night sky, it is relatively easy to find thanks to its proximity to the star Deneb. Here the sky around the nebula looms bright over the Grey Mare’s Tail waterfall, an impressive 60m cascade in the Moffat Hills.

THE MILK ROUND

[ABOVE]

The Milky Way is a 13.6-billion-year-old spiral galaxy holding several hundred billion stars, one of which is our sun. Photographing the Milky Way requires late nights – or incredibly early rises, depending on your perspective. I’d been imagining this photograph of the Milky Way arching over Kilchurn Castle and Loch Awe for some time before clear sky conditions and my schedule aligned in order to make the trip. It’s more vibrant in the summer, when sadly the eels are more active too!



By 2am I had settled the tripod into the loch bed and tried to keep as still as possible while the camera was taking its long exposures, to retain the reflections in the water. After a while I felt the rather disconcerting sensation of eels (perhaps!?) brushing up against my waders. The familiar ‘ding’ of an email coming through to my phone added to growing sense of disturbance. Who could be emailing me at 2am?! Very awkwardly I retrieved my phone from my pocket through my waders to read the message. It was a marketing prompt from Nikon advising I should “learn to get the most out of your camera”. If I had to do any more than I was currently doing, I didn’t want to know!

One of my most recognised photographs is one I’ve named ‘The Man Under the Stars.’ I wanted to convey the feeling of scale and of isolation when out capturing the night sky. The Milky Way dwarfs Buachaille Etive Mor but, look closely, and you’ll see another photographer standing sentry as they captured their own composition. I would love to say I planned it, but I only noticed the figure after 15 minutes of standing there myself.

The word ‘passion’ tends to get used a lot in photographic

circles. Perhaps my passion would be better described as moronic dedication! Out of a simple wish to escape and explore, I have developed a parallel love of trying new photographic techniques in the quietest and darkest corners of Scotland. My camera has enabled me to gaze into deep space, and I’ve been lucky enough to freeze these moments in time as they rose and set with the horizon. Perhaps my astrophotography is as much about my own journey exploring the limits of darkness and light as it is about the images that have resulted. ▲

STUART’S SET-UP

- Most images were shot on a Nikon D810a with a 14-24mm lens, mounted on a Gearhead tripod.
- The deep sky images were shot on a Nikon D810a with a 200-400mm lens plus

- IDAS Halpha filter.
- Stuart also uses a Skywatcher AZ mount.

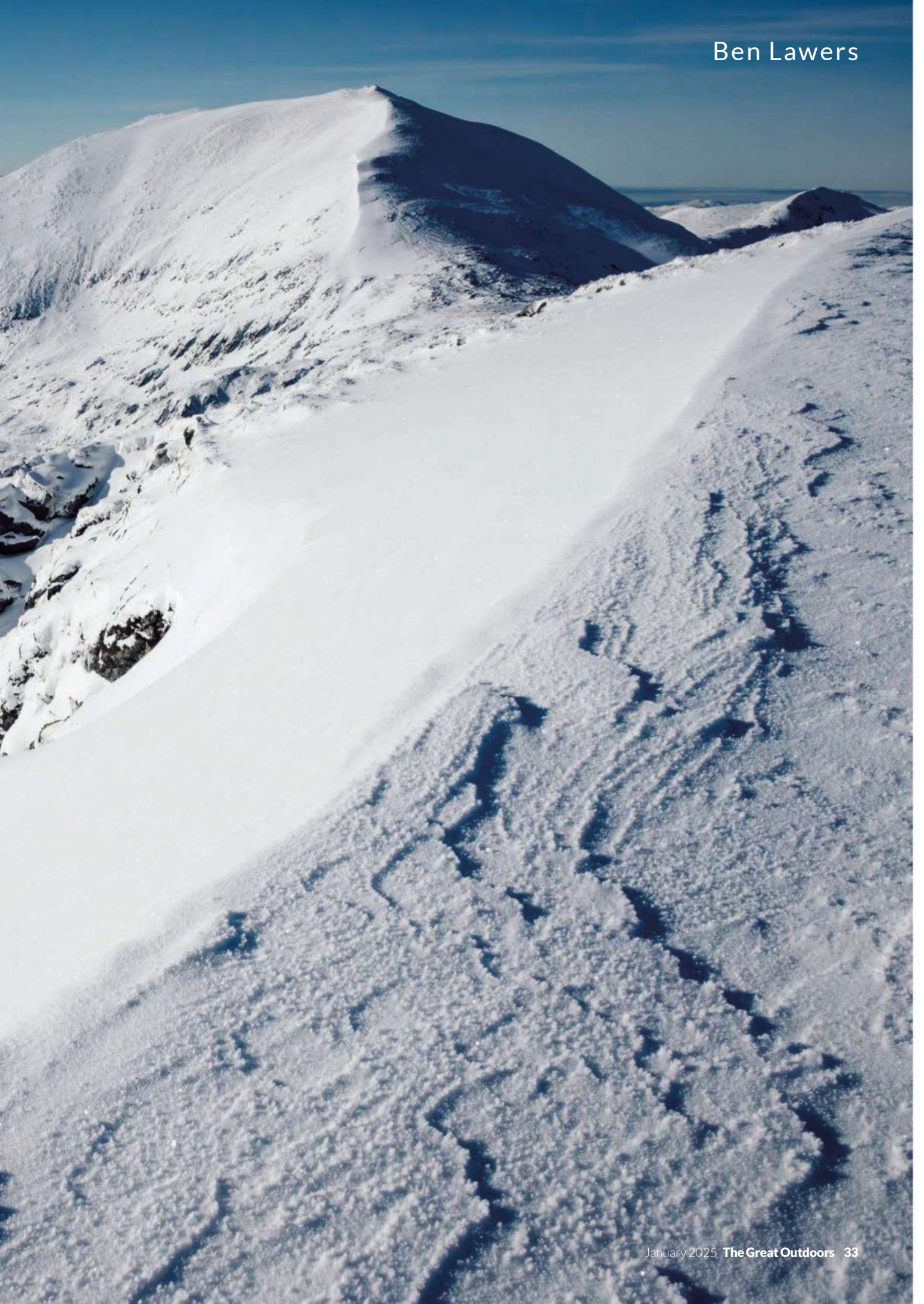
Find more of Stuart’s photography at boundbystarlight.com



UNLOCKING THE WINTER MOUNTAINS

To experience the mountains at their very best, go in Winter – and stay out overnight. Alex Roddie shows how to step up to winter backpacking

WORDS &
PHOTOGRAPHS:
ALEX RODDIE



Ben Lawers

I THINK THE BRITISH MOUNTAINS are at their best in Winter. Summer offers a lot, and I love Spring and Autumn too of course; but for me Winter's mix of risk, reward, uncertainty, aesthetics and personal challenge yields the most intoxicating answers.

I didn't take the next, logical step for several years after my first day out in the winter mountains. To wild camp or even bivvy in Winter seemed extraordinarily risky and uncomfortable, in exchange for long hours of darkness and probably not a lot else. But it's just another part of the learning curve if you want it to be, and it can really sweeten the reward.

My favourite thing is to head out for two or three days to take in several summits. The wild camps can be every bit as rewarding as the tops. On a winter mountain at night, I feel more vulnerable, but if I'm lucky (and have planned well) I might be rewarded by rare beauty. Aurora, a blazing sunrise over a temperature inversion, fogbows. Things the day tripper might never experience. These rewards are a validation of one's own journey in the mountains, the evolution of skills and experience over time.

So I'm going to revise my earlier statement. I believe that the British mountains are at their best in Winter.. if you stay out overnight.

After returning from a winter weekend in the Ben Lawers range, I got thinking about how easy it is to take all this for granted when you've been kicking around for a while.



[previous spread] Ben Lawers, majestic in full moonlight [left] Investigating the steep ascent of An Stuc [right] An overview of the An Stuc summit camp [below] Glorious golden haze as soon as the sun is up

To forget what it was like to weigh up decisions about where to camp, anxious about pitching a tent on

snow for the very first time. It's worth remembering – and sharing – how to take that first step into the cold and dark.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Plans remained in flux up to the start line, but two days before my weekend, I began to check the weather (mwis.org.uk) and avalanche forecasts (sais.gov.uk). Both were ambiguous, with cloudy conditions projected as well as question marks about snow. On Friday night, MWIS said that the Central Highlands would have the best chance of clear summits. No precipitation was expected, and the freezing level hovered at 900-1000m. This meant that conditions underfoot might not be fully frozen, but sticking to ridges should help to keep avalanche risk very low.

On this basis, I planned a linear 17km route over five



“Camping out in the winter mountains, we’re rewarded with treats the day tripper might never see.”



WATER IN WINTER

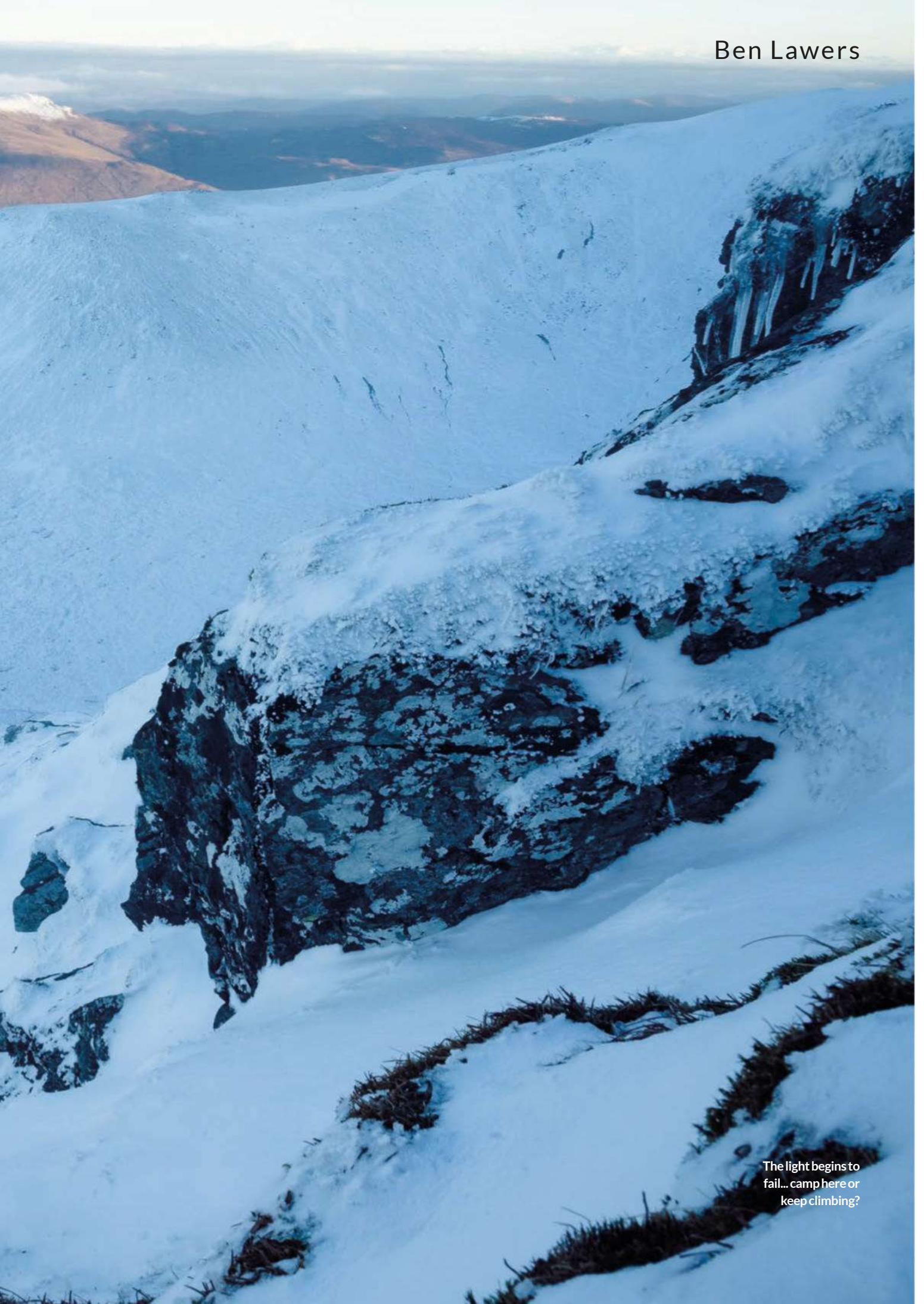
Running water can be scarce in Winter. Top up from liquid sources when you can. To prevent bottles from freezing during the day, wrapping them up deep in your pack is usually enough, especially if the bottles are insulated. I recommend insulated Hydro Flasks or 1-litre Nalgens with insulated covers.

When you stop to camp, set up your stove and begin melting snow. Dense, well-frozen snow or ice yields more water. Add a little liquid water to the pot to aid melting. Aim to completely fill all your bottles with hot water before melting enough for cooking and hot drinks.

Overnight, when temperatures are much lower, your bottles may freeze if left in your porch, or even inside the tent inner. Put them inside your sleeping bag.

At breakfast time, use last night's water for cooking or drinking, then melt more snow to top up your bottles with hot water for the day ahead. This will keep them liquid for longer.





The light begins to
fail... camp here or
keep climbing?



Munros, including Ben Lawers itself. Although this might be feasible in a single day, when planning a high camp I like to give myself extra time to scout out potential tent pitches, especially in Winter. Looking at the map, I hoped I'd be able to camp on the summit of An Stuc, but there should be plenty of other options if necessary.

Putting myself in the boots of a first-timer to winter backpacking, the Ben Lawers range is ideal: it's quite accessible and has straightforward navigation, there are plenty of good camping spots, but it's also a lovely, long ridge spectacularly situated in the Central Highlands, and exciting enough in Winter to offer real reward. Depending on the precise conditions on the ground, An Stuc's northern side might even offer up a short but sharp climb (at about winter Grade 1).

BEING HONEST

We all have different reasons for going into the mountains. Mine are, in many respects, probably similar to yours – I'm gradually working through the Munros, I like pointy peaks with nice ridges – but being a gear reviewer adds complexity. Which gear do I need to test, and what does that testing require? Where can I go for the best photos? These may sound like luxurious problems to have, but I mention them because it's worth being hyper-aware of our individual motivations and how they might affect our decision-making process. Being over-committed to a particular route for whatever reason can compromise safety, so we need to keep having these honest chats with ourselves. Being honest and flexible is key, particularly in Winter.

This time, I needed to head somewhere with steeper ground that would let me test ice axes, but also enough flat areas for pitching (and photographing) a tent. A summit camp would be fantastic. Equally, I tempered those gear testing ambitions with a choice of area based on the weather forecast for clearer skies and lower winds.

A GRACEFUL EYRIE

The day started with thick, fast-moving cloud over the tops as I made my way up through the birch woodland from Lawers. It was a pleasant walk, and I was soon overtaken by a pair of runners carrying small packs with alloy ice axes and Microspikes dangling from them. "Morning! Let's hope the snow's good up there, eh?" Given the forecast for thin cover, I wondered if they had the right idea, and felt a bit over-equipped with my 70-litre pack.

A steady ascent led to the first Munro Meall Greigh, at 1001m. I met the first traces of a snowline at about 800m, but as I feared it was quite thin and damp until near the top – no need for crampons. It did look the part, though, and the views across to An Stuc and Ben Lawers were tantalising as layers of cloud parted to reveal steep mountain walls. The patchy sun was already melting off snow on southerly and easterly slopes.

For the next 4km, I followed a fence line along the gentle ridge, and conditions did improve with some deeper snow underfoot. I took my time on this section, pausing for frequent photos. Although there was still plenty of cloud about, it seemed to be lifting, and navigation was straightforward.



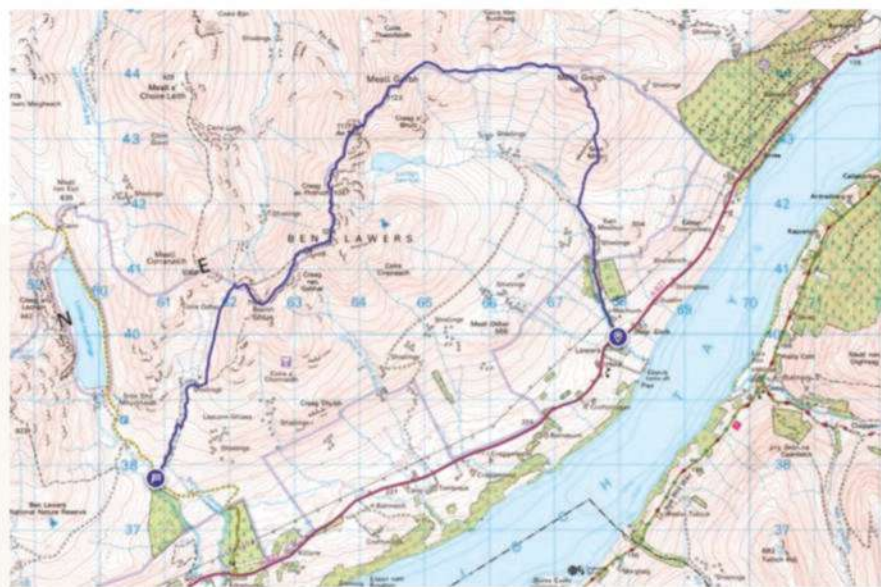
Traces of a temperature inversion over Loch Tay

By late afternoon I was thinking about where I'd camp. Would An Stuc be realistic? How did I feel about making that steep climb as the light faded? I used to climb at far higher grades than this, but add a heavy pack and questionable snow and it isn't a simple choice.

Reaching the bealach immediately before An Stuc, I looked around and realised I could camp here if needed. The slope

ahead looked steep and broken by crags; it was also in thick cloud again, but after poking around the lower slopes I realised it would be ok. I still had 30 minutes of light left and the snow on this high, north-facing slope was well-frozen. If An Stuc's sharp summit didn't offer a reasonable tent pitch, I could continue to Bealach Dubh just beyond.

The ascent proved enjoyable, climbing a steep but straightforward gully on hard snow. I noticed that the Microspike footprints of my runner friends went this way too, with occasional axe spike marks, and I reflected on personal risk thresholds. Runners go fast and light. I had a heavy pack and a more leisurely itinerary. Crampons were a sensible choice.



ALEX'S ROUTE

START Ben Lawers National Trust Scotland car park
FINISH A827 near Ben Lawers Hotel
Distance: 17km / 10.5 miles
Ascent: 1646m / 5400 ft
Time: Overnighter; could be done in a day but where's the fun in that?!

The fogbow
in all its glory



“I woke to calm conditions, ethereal golden haze and a Brocken spectre”

I reached An Stuc (1117m) just in time for sunset, and the first of my rewards: a perfectly flat tent-sized pitch just behind the cairn, and a bewitching cloud inversion into which the sun dropped like a fireball. Then out came a full moon so bright I didn't even need my head torch to put up the tent or cook dinner. The firm snow and calm conditions meant I didn't need to use snow stakes either – my normal pegs held well.

In windy conditions my airy perch would have been too close to an exposed drop, but with a flat calm instead, it felt like a graceful eyrie.

SUMMIT HALO

What a quiet, restful camp – perhaps my best of the Winter! The temperature dropped to about -5°C overnight, just enough to add a layer of hoar frost to everything. I woke to calm conditions, ethereal golden haze and a Brocken spectre. More secret mountain treats! My water bottles had even stayed warm inside my sleeping bag too. After a lazy breakfast, I struck camp, taking care to brush most of the frost from my tent before packing it to avoid sogginess later. Then it was off along the ridge, looking forward to the ascent of Ben Lawers directly ahead.

The 272m climb of Lawers' north ridge was initially straightforward, but above 1000m a steep snow slope was just exposed enough to make me proceed with caution. Fortunately it was very stable thanks to the overnight frost, and other walkers had left a good trench. Cloud swirled in and out, lending drama to the final section of the ascent. The suggestion of a huge fogbow formed around the sun and then vanished again like a ghost.

As I approached the 1214m summit, capped by a prominent trig pillar, I noticed two figures nearby enjoying the view. They weren't the runners, as I initially supposed, but walkers accompanied by a small dog. We exchanged enthusiastic hellos, mutual good feeling about the spectacular conditions, and chat about adventures. They had camped in the corrie just beneath.

As we conversed, the fogbow reappeared more prominently. Soon it spread out from the sun to dominate the sky above us, hanging like some vast symbol in the heavens: a hieroglyph from some ancient forgotten language, at once intense yet strangely gentle. 'Welcome' it seemed to say. We savoured the moment.

My new friends took their leave, heading back to their tent as I made my way in the opposite direction. I had one more Munro to go, Beinn Ghlas, followed by a straightforward descent. I soon met the first few walkers coming up from the Ben Lawers car park, but by now the majestic fogbow had gone. My fellow winter campers and I had enjoyed the most magical of conditions, a fleeting apparition denied to those who had come just for the day, simply by virtue of being in the right place at the right time. Yet with the right planning, kit and skills, these experiences are for everyone. ▲

ALEX'S GEAR CHOICES

JACKET: Rab Kinetic Alpine 2.0 Jacket

With a decent forecast, I knew I could go for a light shell. The Kinetic Alpine 2.0 is more softshell than waterproof, and very comfortable.

DOWN JACKET: Rab Mythic Ultra

I find a down jacket essential for high winter camps. This one is very warm, and has a high degree of weather resistance.

RUCKSACK: Exped Thunder 70

My go-to winter pack. It's overkill for a weekend but comfy to carry and I never have problems fitting in all my gear, including camera and camping equipment.

ICE AXES: Black Diamond Raven Pro and Grivel Air Tech

Although I didn't need two axes, I wanted to try both on similar ground to see how they compared. Both are general mountaineering axes well suited to typical Scottish terrain.

TENT: Snugpak Scorpion 2 IX WGTE

Although I wasn't expecting high winds, I almost always choose a four-season tent in Winter. This one is made from durable materials and can withstand snow loading. I always carry a varied selection of tent pegs, including several MSR Blizzard snow stakes (great for soft snow).

SLEEPING BAG: Robens Couloir 750

This weighs 1.22kg and is filled with 700fp hydrophobic down – not the lightest or highest spec, but more than warm enough for Scottish Winter. I add extra clothing when it gets below -10°C.

SLEEPING MAT: Exped Ultra 5R

A four-season synthetic insulated mat with an R-Value of 4.8, warm enough for camping on snow. I've experimented with numerous mat systems in Winter. Whilst layering a summer air mat and foam pad is feasible on snow, I find it bulky and fuffy, so have gone back to a single winter-spec insulated mat.

STOVE: Primus Express Spider

I like a remote-canister gas stove I can use for melting snow. This one is stable and has a pre-heat tube, which means you can invert the canister to deliver liquid gas to the burner in very cold conditions. I always carry a foil windshield and base.



Photo credit: Shutterstock

YOU SAY CAMINO, I SAY KUMANO

Japan's Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route was first twinned with Spain's Camino de Santiago in 1998. Years after walking the famous European route, **Phoebe Smith** heads east to become a 'Dual Pilgrim'

WORDS: PHOEBE SMITH PHOTOGRAPHS: PHOEBE SMITH (unless otherwise credited)

JAPAN

IT'S THROUGH A GAP in the cedar trees that I first spy it – a giant gateway looming above the sandbank and surrounding foliage, beckoning hikers under its great 33-metre arch. This is Japan's largest *torii* gate, Oyunohara 'Otorii', on the Kii peninsula, and it stands as a marker between the secular world and the spiritual one. Behind it, a palimpsest of mountains in varying shades of green overlap one another in earthen waves that rise and fall along the water's edge.


This is the Japanese equivalent of a place known in Spain as the Monte de Gozo, the point on the Camino de Santiago where weary but jubilant walkers spy their final destination at last. Although the walk I've done today is short, my journey has been tumultuous. Reaching this new 'hill of joy' has actually taken me several years.

Walking pilgrim paths began for me back in 2016, when I hiked what is arguably the most famous pilgrimage in the Western world. I'm not religious. I was on the Camino de Santiago for a work assignment, to interview other pilgrims and to find out what made them undertake a hike of several weeks or even months. One man I spoke to had walked to Galicia from Israel. Yet the more I spoke to them, the more I became unnerved. From the outside looking in, I had it all – a good job, a partner, the chance to travel – yet something wasn't right. By the time I reached the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, unlike all the others who jostled into the great hall to witness the *botafumero* swing through the centre of the building, dispersing scent as it has done for at least 900 years, I had completely lost my way.

In the years that followed I quit my job, walked out on my relationship, and began treading a new path, following Britain's most ancient trails to try to find my way once more. Like other pilgrims before me, I went through a lot during that time – toxic relationships, grief, an eating disorder and depression – but by following in the footsteps of our ancestors who all walked to try to find meaning, I began to heal.

Now and then

As a result, the person I am on this particular pilgrim path in Japan is not the same person that trod the Spanish Camino all those years ago. Now I am standing about a kilometre above the giant *torii* gate and things have changed.

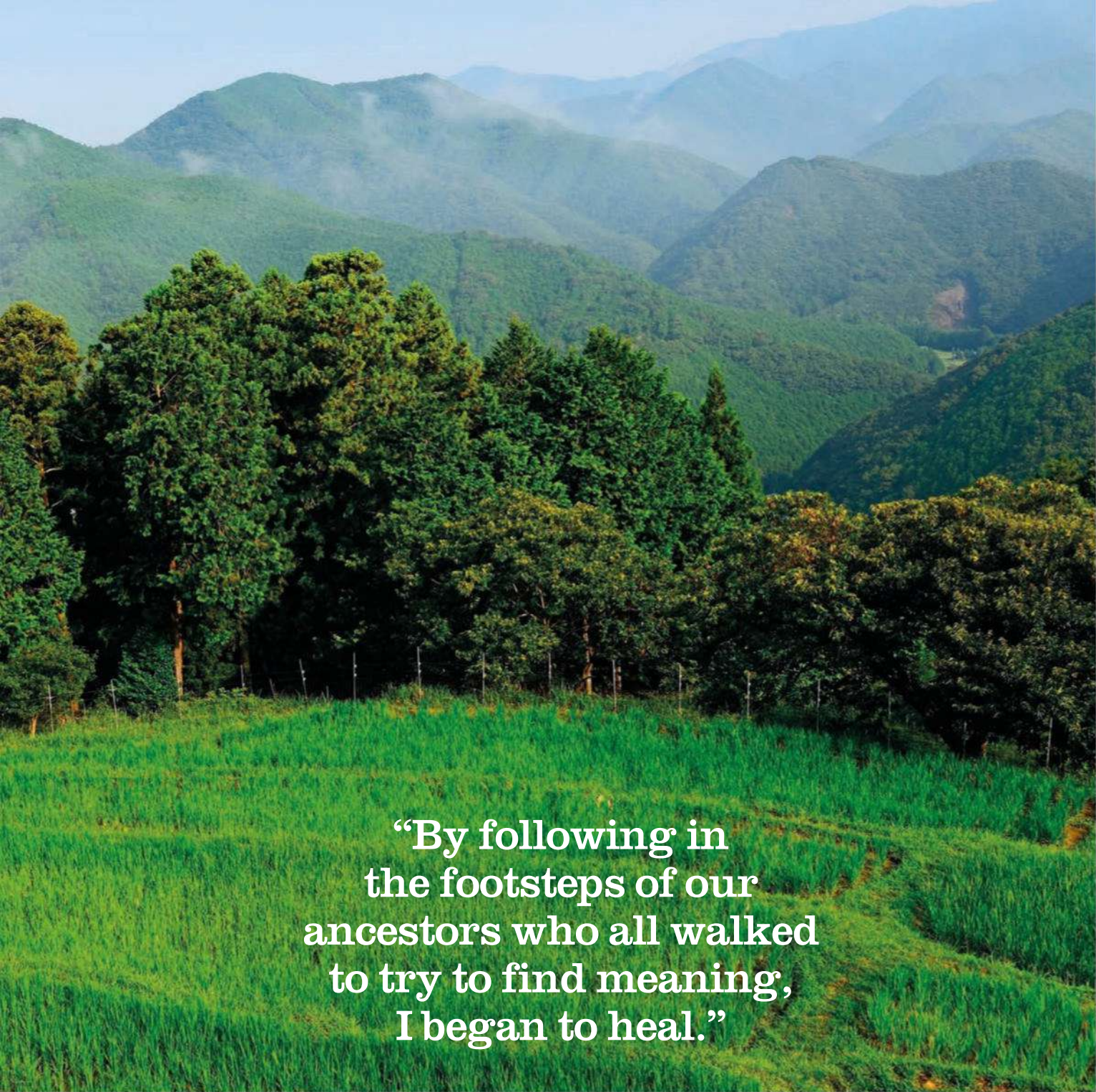
"Mummy – *torii*, *torii!*" my two-year-old son shouts in 

[previous spread] The Seigantoji Buddhist temple in front of Nachi Falls in Nachikatsuura [this spread, clockwise from top] Pilgrims on the Kumano Kodo in the Kii Mountains; Phoebe's partner and two-year-old son gaze out to the tree-covered Kii Mountains;

Stamping the pilgrim passport to prove your journey is vital to receive the Dual Pilgrim status; Oyunohara 'Otorii', on the Kii peninsula stands as a marker between the secular world and the spiritual one near the end of the Kumano Kodo

Photo credit: Shutterstock





“By following in
the footsteps of our
ancestors who all walked
to try to find meaning,
I began to heal.”





Photo credit: Shutterstock



excitement, knowing that soon we will reach the last of the three Grand Shrines of Kumano and get the final red stamp in our hiking passports that provides proof of our journey.

Doing this walk is special to me because it represents how much I have healed since my first pilgrimage, but also because it means I will become a 'Dual Pilgrim', an honour bestowed only on those who have walked both Spain's Camino and Japan's Kumano Kodo, a pair of officially twinned, UNESCO World Heritage Trails.

We began a few days earlier in the city of Osaka, where a 4-hour train ride deposited my partner, my toddler and me in Kii Katsuura Station on the south-east coast overlooking the Pacific Ocean. There is not one official route for the Kumano, but four; a 70km hike that starts at Koyasan, a 7km option that begins at Hosshinmon-oji (but must also visit two temples), and two more – measuring 30km and 38km respectively – all ending at the temple of Kumano Hongu Taisha. With a toddler to carry, coupled with high humidity and a longing to experience some Japanese culture en route, we opted for the shorter distance. But despite it lacking kilometres, it did still include those two other temple visits, each very different.

The right track

We start the first from Kii Katsuura, with a bus ride to a point known as Daimon-zaka Slope. Here we alight alongside a small group of Japanese pilgrims and are greeted by a man who offers us wooden pilgrim staffs for the 3km walk ahead, which we take to feel the part. Immediately after leaving the roadside, we plunge into a small hamlet that looks as though if it is plucked from Japanese history books. A wooden *torii* gate here tells us we are on the right track, whilst a small shop set up between the wooden posts of a house offers us the chance to dress as ancient pilgrims would have done in the Heian period (around 794AD, when this route is believed to originate). The men wear blue dress-like robes and a pointed black hat, the women a red dress and broad-rimmed veiled hat, and both wear *geta* footwear (wooden flip-flops) and white socks split at the big toe. For a moment we contemplate the challenge of hiking uphill with a child carrier in these outfits, then notice the charges are set by the hour. Decision made: at the pace we move, we simply don't have enough yen.

Cobbled steps lead to a forest of Japanese cedar known as the Meoto-sugi (translated as husband-and-wife), whose roots are said to intertwine beneath the pathway as though they are lovers holding hands. As we move uphill, we pass a number of small wooden shrines. Though ubiquitous on the Kumano Kodo, these only appeared on this trail during the Edo era



[clockwise from top] A *torii* gate marks the final walk to the waterfall of Nachi no Taki beyond Kumano Nachi Taisha temple; The Kumano Kodo is well marked with stone plinths; The temple at

Kumano Hongu Taisha is where Dual Pilgrims are permitted to bang the *taiko* drum; A woman wearing Heian period costume in Wakayama

JAPAN

(around 1400). Before then, the Kumano religion was similar to Paganism, insofar as nature was worshipped rather than particular gods. Mountains were climbed as a type of veneration – something that I, as a hillwalker rather than a disciple, can certainly get on board with.

We are aiming for a vermilion red temple called Nachi Taisha, where the first of our pilgrim stamps can be gained. The rain falls as we climb, but in the humidity it's refreshing, and the sound of the water dripping and splashing on the leaves of surrounding cypress, camphor and bamboo creates a comforting natural harmony. This is a trail I could tread endlessly but it is over fairly quickly, depositing us amidst the souvenir stalls that surround the base of the temple complex.

This is a disorientating mix of vending machines, wooden Buddhist statues and a tiny temple found by climbing inside a 600-year-old camphor tree, whilst plumes of sandalwood-scented smoke waft towards us from the burning incense that merges with the moist air.

The religious buildings mimic this merging – the red Buddhist temple interlinking with the unpainted wooden Shinto shrine, and another kilometre on, Nachi no Taki – the tallest single-drop waterfall in Japan (at 133m in height). When Buddhism came to the country in the 6th Century, its followers never sought to compete for authority with Shintoism; instead, the two religions co-exist harmoniously. I marvel at how the crowds are most drawn today to the waterfall – itself an even older pilgrim destination than any of the buildings.

Temple of nature

Later, we sample the local seafood at the fishing town of Kii Katsuura before staying in a *minshuku* – a traditional Japanese bed and breakfast complete with its own tiny *onsen* – a hot spring, perfect for relaxing sore limbs.

In the morning we navigate a more urban jungle to the town of Shingu, home to Hayatama Taisha – the second of the great Kumano temples. Much like the first temple, this one has been built in deep sympathy with the ancient Kumano worship of nature. It sits on the mouth of the Kumano-gawa River, which begins in the Kii Mountains far above. Twin *torii* gates – Shinto and Buddhist – sit side by side, and we wash our hands in the dragon-encrusted *tsukubai* (basin) before entering. An old Asian bayberry tree, its shiny green leaves almost reflective in the sunlight, is integral to this place of worship. It is believed to be at least 800 years old. The more that nature permeates into the religious spaces, the more I feel at home.

From here we make our way deep into the Kii Mountains to prepare for our final hike. The bus we ride on, filled with locals rather than tourists, winds between sheer-sided flanks, thickly cloaked in trees, that disappear into cloud, their summits



[clockwise from top right] A fritillary butterfly on one of the many zinnia blooms found on the trail; Reaching Japan's tallest single-drop waterfall Nachi no

Taki is more of a highlight than any temple on the Kumano; One of the Buddhist statues that lines the route to the temple at Nachi Taisha



Visit the Kumano Kodo

Phoebe undertook her Japanese Camino with InsideJapantours, who can tailor a three-night Kumano Kodo advanced hiking route into any self-guided adventure costing from £730pp. It includes four nights' traditional accommodation, breakfasts and dinners, luggage forwarding and Wi-Fi. They also offer a 14-night Pilgrims Paths self-guided adventure which includes five nights along the Kumano Kodo as well as stays in Tokyo, Kyoto and sacred Ise. The trip cost from £3160pp (excluding international flights) and includes all transport, including *ryokan* and temple lodgings, transport across Japan and more. InsideJapanTours.com

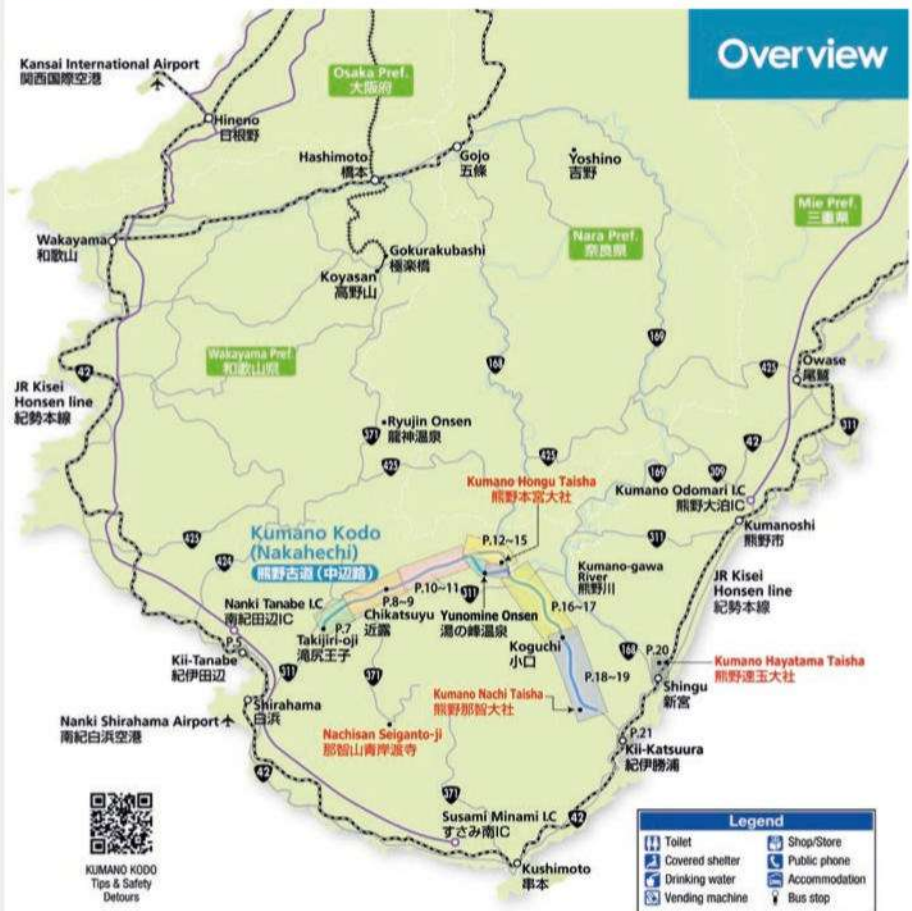
GETTING THERE: The nearest major city is Osaka, from where the excellent public transport system can be used to access Kii Katsuura in the east or, for a longer pilgrimage, Tanabe on the west coast. For an extended stay it's recommended to buy the competitively priced Japan Rail pass (japanrailpass.net/en) only available to tourists.

WHERE TO STAY: *Ryokans* (recommended at least once) and *minshuku* abound in the area and are highly recommended. Wild camping is prohibited, but there are some official campsites in Chikatsuyu, Kawayu Onsen, Watase Onsen and Koguchi.

PLANNING: No permits are required to walk the route, but you will need to pick up a passport to stamp to become a Dual Pilgrim – available from Tanabe Tourist Information Centre (next to the JR Kii-Tanabe station) and Nachi-Katsuura Tourism Association tourist information centre (next to JR Kii-Katsuura station). For helpful online maps and stamp locations, as well as route diversions, check out tb-kumano.jp/en/kumano-kodo

FOOD: As with other pilgrim routes worldwide, all the hiking routes pass through places where food and drink are available (but do check the route map before leaving). *Ryokans* and *minshuku* can provide a packed lunch, as well as breakfast and dinner. Those with dietary needs should pick up plenty of snacks in the major towns and cities. Wells with drinking water can be found en route – a filter or purification tablets are advised.

WHEN TO GO: Phoebe visited in September, but you can walk the Kumano Kodo year-round. Snow from December to February may mean some (not all) accommodation closes. May and September tend to be less busy, whilst March and April is cherry blossom season, and October and November offer autumnal colours.





[left] Walking down into Hongu Taisha, from where the Oyunohara 'Otorii' gate can be spied in the distance;

[below] The steps leading up to Kumano Hongu Taisha – the final destination for all pilgrims

invisible. This area is punctuated with bubbling springs that are hot enough to cook food.

A final walk

We overnight at Ryokan Adumaya, an inn that has been welcoming pilgrims since the Edo era. Our room is a simple *tatami* mat offering with sliding paper doors leading onto a balcony that overlooks the forest. We bathe in the on-site *onsen*, to prepare ourselves for the final walk ahead, before feasting on a traditional Japanese banquet of 9-12 courses, served in our room.

The following day, *bento* boxes are stuffed with rice, pickled veg, sushi and tempura for our journey, the finest food I've ever had in my rucksack. We are back in mountain country and the mist rests amidst the trees, miraculously suspended and unmoving. Gaining our stamp at the first temple, we ring a bell that sings out into the forest. We follow wooden waymarkers on quiet trails through nameless settlements. Small wooden houses, resembling elaborate bird boxes, mark the stamp locations as the trail passes ancient fountains used by pilgrims past. A smattering of farms, with honesty boxes alongside, offer us the chance to sample pickled fruit and veg, whilst orange and speckly black fritillary butterflies flutter between bright pink zinnias.

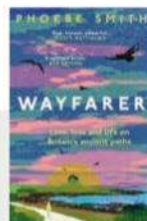
Finally we reach Fushiogami-oji, where two old women serve my son cold water and try to give him sweets; from here we climb to the viewpoint via a tunnel of trees – to spy our final goal: our 'mountain of joy'.

Dual Pilgrim


When we reach Hongu Taisha, I register as a Dual Pilgrim in the office and am presented with a certificate made from local Washi handmade paper, featuring the character for 'Way' in the background penned by the High Priest.

Since the trails were twinned, around 5000 pilgrims from 65 different countries have attained this status; and now, seven years on from when I walked the Camino, I feel blessed to join them. All Dual Pilgrims are invited to a special part of the temple for a short *taiko* ceremony, and before we leave, I too get the chance to bang the drum usually reserved for priests.

I feel that wave of bittersweet joy familiar to anyone who has ever completed a trail. When I began this journey, far away in the West where the sun sets, I was alone; but along the way I have found my own family to share it with. As I listen to the beat of the *taiko*, it feels fitting to have arrived in the Far East, where the sun rises and new beginnings await. 🏯



Phoebe Smith's *Wayfarer: Love, Loss and Life on Britain's Ancient Paths* was published in hardback by HarperNorth in 2024. The paperback is out soon.



The song remains the same

The new, updated version of the backpacking classic *High Summer* tells the story of *Chris Townsend's* bold and original 2600km traverse of the Canadian Rockies. We asked Chris to consider what has changed in the world of long-distance hiking in the years since his groundbreaking walk

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS CHRIS TOWNSEND

Camp fire by the
Muskwa River,
12 October 1988



BACK IN 1988 I set out to walk the length of the Canadian Rockies, an ambitious and probably audacious plan as it was something that had never been done before. I felt (and hoped) I had the experience needed – I had already walked the Pacific Crest (PCT) and Continental Divide Trails (CDT) in the USA, both much less developed than they are now. Whilst I did complete the Rocky Mountains walk, I discovered that I wasn't as well-prepared as I thought.

Running from the border with the USA to the Liard River valley in northern British Columbia not far south of the border with the Yukon Territory, the 1460-kilometre-long Canadian Rockies are a vast area of forests and mountains, much of it very remote and with wonderful wildlife including grizzly bears, wolves, caribous, moose and beavers.

FALLING IN LOVE

I went to the Rockies because I had fallen in love with backpacking the vast forests and mountains of western North America when hiking the PCT and CDT. Whilst on a ski tour, on my only previous visit to the area the year before, I discovered Ben Gadd's excellent *Handbook of the Canadian Rockies*. I read that no-one had walked the length of the range and knew immediately that I wanted to attempt it. It sounded exciting, a thrilling way to immerse myself and feel a part of deep nature again. And the ski tour had shown the Canadian Rockies were gloriously spectacular. I couldn't wait to return.

This year I've been revisiting *High Summer*, my 1989 book on the walk, in preparation for its republication. Reading it for the first time in many years, I feel somewhat detached from my younger self. Somehow, I can't quite believe I did this walk or that some of the incidents described really happened. Some events have made me feel frustrated. Why ever did I do that? It's hard to return to myself and that time.

I've also been thinking a lot about the practical differences between then and now. Since 1988 there has been a revolution in information, navigation and communications. In these areas the world really has changed. Has it made a difference to the experience?

INFORMATION AND NAVIGATION

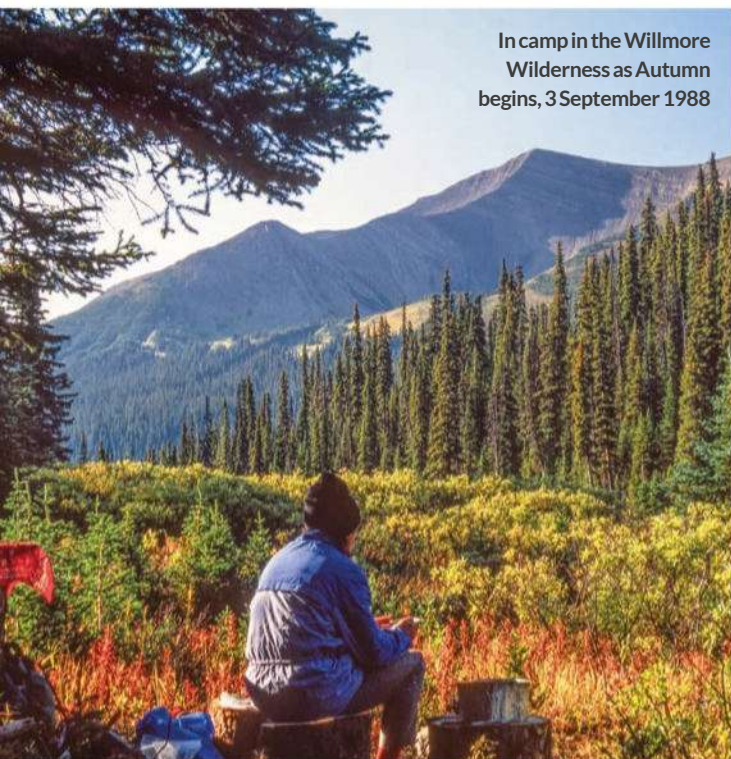
My 2600km walk (give or take a few hundred kilometres!) took four months. The southern half of the route was in national parks that even then had good, well-documented trail systems, but few trails existed in the more remote northern half.

Finding information on the remote northern Rockies was difficult. There was no Internet back then. Virtually all the books available only covered the national parks. I wrote many letters to land agencies and ranger stations, some of whom replied, but I didn't receive much useful information, so I set off with only a sketchy idea of a route outside the national parks. ➡

Canadian Rockies



Beside the Palliser River, 8 July 1988



In camp in the Willmore Wilderness as Autumn begins, 3 September 1988

Navigation outside the national parks was a challenge in a way it wouldn't be now with GPS and the Internet. The maps of the time did not have detailed information, especially regarding trails, if any, and I had little information on the nature of the terrain. Until I got there, I didn't know whether the walking in a valley would be easy or a thrash through dense brush, whether a high notch in a ridge was crossable or had a steep cliff on one side, or whether a river was fordable.

There was nowhere to find out beforehand. That certainly gave an edge to the walk and made it more of a challenge than if I'd been able to research information online. Back then this wasn't even a dream.

Being able to see my position on a screen was also inconceivable. The difference that would have made to the second half of the walk was enormous. For much of that time I didn't have a precise idea of where I was, and for one week (equipped with inadequate maps) I didn't know where I was at all – just that as long as I continued in a northerly direction, I would eventually meet a road. With GPS and smartphone mapping I'd have taken a different route to the one I did, taken less time, and never worried about where I was.

The walk would have felt a little less intense, but I don't think going into these remote wilderness areas would have been much easier physically. There are still few trails, and the terrain would still make for tough going.

On foot in the
Northern Rockies,
13 October 1988



Overlooking the Great Snow
Mountain Range and Keily
Creek, 9 October 1988





Lake Magog and Mount Assiniboine as the magic light of evening swept over the scene, 14 July 1988

“What a thrilling way to immerse myself and feel a part of deep nature again”

COMMUNICATIONS

Being able to communicate my position to others would have made a difference, and perhaps a more significant one. The communications revolution has been enormous. On this walk I knew that as soon as I left a road, I would be out of touch with no way to contact anybody. I literally disappeared into the wilds. At resupply points I sent letters and postcards and, when necessary, made calls from a payphone. Then I disappeared for a few more weeks. In the national parks I often met other walkers, though not every day, and didn't feel I was really cut off. Once out of the parks I rarely saw anybody else except at outfitters' camps and the occasional farm. No one knew where I was. I couldn't tell anyone my route in advance as I didn't know it myself; it all depended on where I found trails or the easiest going. I was acutely aware of how isolated I was, and I knew that there was little chance of being found if I had an accident.

Today I carry a smartphone and a satellite communicator. I let my partner know I'm OK from each camp. If she clicks on the link, she can see where I am. We can exchange texts and news. I feel remote and not remote at the same time. I'm still in a wild place but I'm only out of touch if I want to be, and that's not the same as having no choice. I find it hard, now,

to remember what it was like to really vanish into the wild. I've had a satellite communicator for 13 years, a smartphone a year longer. They've become the norm. I can't imagine being without them now. Thirty-six years ago, they were the stuff of science fiction. We humans adapt quickly.

HIKING AND CAMPING

Backpacking gear has changed too, but not in such a drastic way. The revolution in gear – the introduction of waterproof breathable clothing, nylon tents, inflatable mats, synthetic wicking base layers and more – had occurred in the previous decade. I had the benefit of it for this trip. My gear would have looked very different ten years earlier.

Many items came from brands familiar today: Lowe Alpine, Rab, Therm-a-Rest, MSR, Petzl, Craghoppers, Mountain Equipment, Hanwag, Helly Hansen, Rohan, Patagonia, Leki and Silva.

Most of the gear I used was much heavier than I would take now but it was just as functional. It coped well with thunderstorms, blizzards, strong winds and freezing nights. I never felt that my gear was inadequate. It wouldn't look out of place today, either. Designs have changed, but not wildly so. ■



THE GEAR CHRIS WOULD USE NOW

If Chris were to repeat his Rockies walk today, these are the key items he'd choose, all tried and tested on recent long-distance walks

1 PACK: Atompaks The Prospector EP60
A comfortable and tough, sub-1kg, 55+ litre pack designed for long-distance hiking, the Prospector would be ideal. With its stretch front pocket and optional hipbelt pockets, the volume is more than 65 litres.

2 SHELTER: Mountain Laurel Designs Trailstar with Solo InnerNet
Pitching with trekking poles, this shaped tarp weighs just 928g with mesh inner and pegs. It's roomy, adaptable to different terrain, very storm-worthy and hard-wearing.

3 SLEEPING BAG & INSULATED CLOTHING: PHD Sleep System
Rather than two sleeping bags, swapping to the warmer one halfway through the walk, I'd take the versatile down PHD Sleep System consisting of the Minim Ultra K sleeping bag, K Series Filler Bag, Wafer K Jacket and Wafer K Trousers. The total weight is 828g. I've used this system on other long walks with varying night temperatures and it's excellent.

4 SLEEP MATS: Therm-a-Rest Prolite Plus & MultiMat Superlite
Whilst air mattresses are comfortable, I wouldn't take one on a walk like this – I've had too many failures. Instead, I'd take the Therm-a-Rest Prolite Plus self-inflating mat, which

is the latest version of the one I had in 1988. At 450g it's 117g lighter than the original. I'd also take a MultiMat Superlite closed-cell foam mat weighing 180g for extra warmth, as a seat, and in case of failure. My mats would weigh 63g more than in 1988.

5 STOVE: Trail Designs Classic Ti-Tri with Inferno insert
I've used this meths/wood stove system on several long-distance walks and it's excellent. At 156g it's much lighter than the 340g gasoline stove I used in 1988, and easier to use. Meths is a heavier fuel but I'd be able to use sticks collected at the site to burn in the Inferno insert, wherever fires were permissible.

6 HARDSHELL: Outdoor Research Helium Ascentshell
The waterproof jacket I used in 1988 performed well but weighed a hefty 680g. Today I'd use something like the 330g Helium Ascentshell. This has stood up to some big storms in the Scottish Highlands, so it should be fine in the Rockies.

7 FOOTWEAR: Altra Lone Peak trail shoes
Having done every long walk in trail shoes for the last 25 years, I wouldn't go back to boots. For the cold and wet I would take waterproof socks though. I wish I'd had both the Altras and the socks in 1988.



The big developments have been in materials. In 1988 silnylon, Dyneema, titanium and many other tough, lightweight fabrics and materials didn't exist or were only just appearing. What lightweight gear there was lacked durability and so was unsuitable for a multi-month off-trail walk. I needed stuff that would last. My solo tent, the Phoenix Phreeranger, was made from polyurethane-coated nylon and weighed 1.8kg, which was not heavy for the time. A modern silnylon tent of the same design, the Trekkertent Phreeranger, weighs 1.25kg and is made of silnylon fabric that is just as durable.

Modern gear is more compressible too, so it fits into a smaller pack, which also saves weight. In the Rockies, I used a 100-litre pack, weighing over 3kg. Today I'd take a 65-litre one made of the latest materials that weighs less than 1kg.

With sleeping bags, there's only a little difference in weight between then and now. I used two down ones on the walk, swapping the first for a warmer one for the colder second half. The first, the Rab Micro 300, weighed just 624g and kept me warm down to +5°C without clothes and below freezing wearing long base layers. The second, a Field & Trek Golden Oriole, weighed much more at 1190g but kept me warm without clothes at -10°C. Modern bags with similar warmth



wouldn't weigh much less.

Head torches really have changed, though. I had a Petzl Zoom in the Rockies, the best available at the time. It weighed 170g and ran on a 4.5 volt battery that weighed 150g and didn't last long. It was a pain to fit too. A spare bulb was hidden in the housing as the incandescent bulbs were fragile. In the following decade LEDs appeared, much more durable and with far longer battery life. Nowadays, I carry a head torch that is just as bright, more versatile as it has variable lighting, and which has a rechargeable battery that lasts far longer. The weight with battery is a quarter that of the Zoom with battery.

Trekking poles were also in the future. In 1988, I did know a trekking pole was useful, but not that two were much better. Nor did I think of one serving double duty as a tent pole, although I did use the one I walked with to prop up a tarp, used as a cooking shelter when it rained.

Today, my photography gear is also very different. It's lighter and I take far more pictures. In 1988 we were still in the film era. I carried two cameras, three lenses and a tripod plus many boxes of film. On the Rockies walk I took 3000 colour transparencies. With digital equipment I'd take at least twice that many and I'd only need a few tiny, ultralight memory cards for them.

There wouldn't be the hassle of sending away films every time I reached a post office, or concerns about loss or damage.

THEN AND NOW

Despite all these changes, I don't think a similar walk would be so different now. The joys of walking in wild places haven't diminished; the feeling of immersion in nature when you walk and camp for weeks at a time is still the same. I haven't felt any reduction in my enjoyment of backpacking on recent long-distance walks. There's still a beautiful and spectacular natural world to explore and experience. Electronic gadgets can't take that away. [▲](#)



High Summer by Chris Townsend tells the story of the first successful end-to-end traverse of the Canadian Rockies. First published in 1989, the updated 2024 edition features a new foreword and footnotes by the author, along with a great many never-before-seen photographs. Published on 1 November 2024 by Enchanted Rock Press, the paperback (£14.95) and colour ebook (£8.99) can be ordered through Amazon and other online book retailers.



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THE GREAT OUTDOORS is the UK's original mountain magazine. We have been inspiring people to explore high places and equipping them with the knowledge and inspiration they need to do so for almost 45 years.

As your companion in the mountains, we're here to help you make the most of your time in the outdoors. Through compelling writing and beautifully illustrated stories, you will find the joy of adventure, the thrill of mountainous and wild environments, and the wonder of the natural world in these pages – for those occasionally necessary indoor days.

As well as stunning photography and top-class writing, our gear reviewers are the country's most experienced team – by a country mile – and we always ensure all clothing and equipment is independently put through its paces in the right places.

Our essential skills advice is also reinforced by top outdoor instructors and guides who are on hand to help keep you well-informed and safe out there.

Our roster of contributors ranges from world-renowned outdoor experts and authors to younger, up-and-coming voices who reflect a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts.

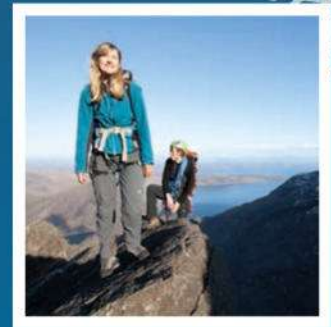
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HOW TO TAKE ON A TICK LIST

Ready for a New Year challenge? **Hanna Lindon** asks some of Britain's best baggers for their tips on how to plan and pull off your own tick list attempt



Some folk – like James Forrest here – are born with a bagging gene!

NOTHING SPLITS the opinion of hill folk like a tick list. Some are uncomfortable measuring the joys of getting outdoors in numbers, whilst others find motivation in having a definable goal. If you're list-curious, a bagging challenge could be just what you need to kick off a prolific year of hillwalking. And who better to turn to for advice than these seasoned British baggers?



ANNE BUTLER

The first female president of Mountaineering Scotland and vice president of the Munro Society, Anne is the first known woman to bag a 'Full House' of Scottish hills twice.

1 Decide whether bagging is for you: I think either you've got a bagging gene

or you haven't. For me, bagging gives me that extra sense of purpose, motivation and focus.

2 Don't fixate on a particular list: There was a time when I put the blinkers on and wouldn't climb up anything that wasn't a Munro. But there are so many other good hills out there...

3 Take days off: Every year I have a few months where I decide not to be driven by bagging. I climb the hills I want to climb for a nice day out, and that's really invigorating.

4 Pick an achievable goal: If you can only walk one weekend per month, you're not going to manage a record Munro round. Pick something you can do.



ROB WOODALL

Rob was the first person to bag all 1500 Marilyn's. He's now working on the global 'Ultra peaks' - mountains with a topographic prominence of over 1500m.

5 Technology is your friend: Apps and websites such as hill-bagging.co.uk are useful not just for visualising what you

have to do, but also to keep track of new hills, demoted hills, relocated hills, etc.

6 Embrace variety: I don't like to spend too much time in one area. Change is nice!

7 Follow the weather: If you're doing the Munros, for example, and it's bad in the west - go east!

8 One chunk at a time: When you're working through a big list slowly, ticking off sections will give you a real feeling of progress.



JULS STODEL

Proving that mountain challenges needn't always be about peak bagging, Juls has slept in every one of the UK's MBA bothies.

9 Keep a record: I use Instagram a lot but I also kept journals, and I'm so glad I did - there's so much detail I'd forgotten about.

10 Connect with others: The bothy community has always been incredibly welcoming and supportive towards me. The friendships I made were one of the best things about the experience.

11 Look after your basic needs: When everything seemed totally

“Set local targets – without a doubt, I built confidence and leg strength by getting out and about throughout the year, nearer home.”

miserable and overwhelmingly difficult, it often wasn't - I was just hungry, cold or tired!

12 Pen your own list: We have a phenomenal number of caves, tidal islands, battlefields, ancient geology, barrows, cairns and more to explore!



PAUL GAMBLE

Paul is a seasoned 'compleater' of Munros, Wainwrights and long-distance treks. He's based in Oxford and fits his bagging activities in around a busy work schedule.

13 Set local targets: For me, that's included the Thames Path and the Oxfordshire Way. Without a doubt,

I built confidence and leg strength for the Scottish hills by getting out and about throughout the year, nearer home.

14 Ask for company: Heading into the hills with friends or fellow walkers is brilliant support when you're starting out.

15 Put the effort in early: I very consciously focused on getting the trickier and longer hills done.

16 Save the best until last: On my Munro round, I deliberately left the whole of Kintail until almost the end - I wanted a treat section as part of the growing feeling of celebration.



JAMES FORREST

James is famous for his record-breaking bagging feats, which include climbing all 1001 mountains in the UK and Ireland in the fastest known time. You can read more about his adventures in his book, Mountain Man.

17 Plan your routes carefully. Tick off groups in one area - it's annoyingly easy to leave one peak left, and means more in travel costs too.

18 Get some overnights in: Whether you're bivvying on a summit or camping next to a tarn, wild camping is a magical experience - and an efficient way to tick off several summits into the bargain.

19 Track your progress: It's a lovely moment when you've finished a walk and can tick off the summits you've bagged. The free British Hills app has user-friendly check lists, or you can buy tick-list wall maps.

20 Enjoy every moment: Pick your battles - it's easy to become a slave to the list, which will only serve to spoil the fun.

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GEAR

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



Gear section

66 New reviews
69 Crampons
71 Winter sleeping bags



MSR launches Switch Stove System for use with any pots

Unlike MSR's other stove systems, the Switch stove has flip-out pot supports so it can be used with other cookware as well as the Switch pot. This pot has a unique design – a rounded base that sits inside a windscreen and allows more even heating and faster cooking times without the need for a heat exchanger. The 600ml pot also has a removable cork cosy plus fold-out handles. The burner has a pressure regulator for fuel efficiency and flame control, plus a piezo igniter. Power output is 7100BTU, and the Switch boils 0.6 litres of water in 2.5 minutes. The whole system weighs 392g, the stove alone 117g.

■ RRP: £135

msrgear.com/ie



Gear News

Patagonia's new waterproof shell has no 'forever chemicals'

The M10 Anorak is a waterproof/breathable shell built with an all-new innovative 3-layer nanoporous membrane and a recycled nylon ripstop face fabric. The fabric, membrane and DWR treatment are all made without PFCs/PFAS perfluorinated chemicals. The anorak has unique patterning and design features to give excellent mobility without needing stretch fabrics. Features are a helmet-compatible hood, a deep waterproof two-way front zip, a waterproof chest pocket, elasticated cuffs and a built-in concealed RECCO reflector. The M10 is made in a Fair Trade-Certified factory. The anorak has a slim fit and comes in men's XS-XL. It weighs 300g in size M.

■ RRP: £400

eu.patagonia.com/gb

Trio of warm Berghaus jackets

Berghaus's Nomad jackets use down, synthetic, or hybrid down-synthetic insulation. The £300 Summit-Nomad is filled with 800fp hydrophobic goose down, and has Reflect Technology. The Ridge-Nomad hybrid jacket features water-repellent Hydrodown at the chest and midriff, plus Thermore Ecodown Fibers Loft (made from recycled plastic bottles) in the arms, shoulders and hood. The £230 Ridge-Nomad has zipped underarm vents too. The £190 Trail-Nomad is filled with the Thermore synthetic material. All three have adjustable hoods and three pockets, and come in men's and women's sizes.

■ RRP: from £190

berghaus.com



Gregory partners with diverse outdoor US community

Gregory Mountain Products' latest pack collection has been designed in conjunction with Unlikely Hikers and includes Standard and Plus sizes up to 6X (equivalent to GB size 42). Plus-size packs include extended shoulder harness and hipbelts, and easier-to-access pockets. The collection includes the £45 Nano Waistpack 3.5 and the men's Miko 20 and women's Maya 20 packs. The Waistpack holds 3.5 litres and weighs 209g in the Standard size, and 218g in the Plus Size. The Miko and Mayo packs have a 20 litre capacity, zipped access and foam back panels. The Miko weighs 907g in Standard and 1020g in Plus size, the Maya 862g and 989g. Both cost £125.

■ RRP: from £45

eu.gregorypacks.com/uk-en



NEW REVIEWS

David Lintern and Francesca Donovan test exciting new gear



THE GREAT
OUTDOORS

HIGHLY
RECOMMENDED



PHD

Sigma synthetic
insulated vest
and trousers



Vest £250 Trousers £242  Vest 234g (M) Trousers 279g (L)

 best in class weight for warmth, very durable

 price

Fill: Primaloft Gold

Shell: Ultrashell (MX offered) vest, MX superlight (trousers)

Hood: optional on the vest

Hem: elasticated

Pockets: 3 on vest, 1 key pocket on trousers

Sizes: XS-XL, plus custom options.

Women's version? unisex

phdesigns.co.uk

David in Kintail
recently, wearing
the Sigma vest and
trousers



David Lintern keeps the cold at bay with some best-in-class insulation layers

In a break from our usual routine on these pages, I'm covering not one, but two products in the same line of clothing from Peter Hutchison Designs (PHD). Both are made from the same component fabrics and materials, but one is new to me this year, and the other is several years old.

The Sigma vest has been redesigned for 2024, but it's still stuffed with Primaloft Gold, a high-performing synthetic insulation. The fill is generous and the vest is very warm, despite the obvious lack of arms. The outer shell fabric comes in two flavours – superlight MX or Ultrashell. I tested the latter – very wind- and showerproof, but less breathable than the superlight MX option. Both are ripstop nylon and my sample still looks the same as when I received it in the Spring, though worn for many days in all conditions.

The feature set is simple – two giant handwarmer pockets, big enough for gloves, maps and snacks, plus another equally capacious chest pocket, all zipped, with big, glove-friendly pulls. Hems are elastic. I find the arm elastic just right – perfect for keeping draughts out but not tight, whilst the waist still tends to rise a little. The cut is long-ish on the body and high on the collar. A hood is optional; I don't have one.

The Sigma vest is hugely practical and comfortable. It's already been a great boost for a camp or belay jacket in cold weather, and in a sleeping bag at night, and it works equally well on the move, especially when paddling or scrambling – things you need plenty of freedom of movement for. Is it too warm for active insulation? That depends on how much you

feel the cold. As the mercury hovers around zero on the hill, I've found it perfect with a windshirt and baselayer for the first hour or two of walking; thereafter it's a layer I can throw on easily at rest stops.

The Sigma trousers are a slightly different beast. The fill is the same, but the shell on mine is superlight MX. The very baggy fit means I find them better for camp use rather than on the move. The design is even simpler: just a drawcord at the waist, a mini internal pocket and elasticated ankles. They are insanely warm for their weight and have kept me company on every winter camp and many cold-water paddles for at least 8 years. Yes, the fill has compressed a little; and yes, there are one or two tiny pulls on the shell fabric – but given the use they've had I think that's impressive. My other half always steals them when we cold-weather camp together, which says a lot.

As a paddler and winter camper, I'm a big fan of Primaloft. It retains its warmth when damp and dries rapidly. In winter especially, trousers are very likely to get wet at the ankles, seat and knees, so synthetic insulation makes perfect sense. Both products compress well and weigh little, valuable attributes as packed size and weight increase for Winter. The PHD house style is quite relaxed and might not suit everyone, but that boxy cut means the fill can expand properly to trap air and keep you warm.

The Sigma range is far from cheap, but it is well made from the best components and goes on forever. In short, it's bomber kit.

Photo credit: David Lintern

THE GREAT
OUTDOORS
HIGHLY
RECOMMENDED
★★★★★
**Red
Equipment**
Pursuit Robe

£210  596g (Regular)



Post-dip in Llyn y Ffyn
with Cadair Idris in the
cloud behind



 lightweight, packable, climate control

 expensive, hood

Materials: 86% recycled polyester, 14% elastane outer; 97% recycled polyester, 3% elastane interior grid fleece

Sizes: S-XL

Lengths: Regular / Long

Men's version? Yes

red-equipment.co.uk

Francesca Donovan tests a lightweight robe that suits multiple outdoor disciplines

In a bid to get changed and warm up effectively post-dip, outdoor swimmers have long been burdened with bulky changing robes, whether oversized fashion statements or absorbent towelling material. So, when Red Equipment announced the launch of a lighter-weight robe designed to be packable and bulk-free, I jumped at the chance to test it.

Not only does the Pursuit Robe weigh much less than many competitors, it easily packs into a 30 litre daypack whilst leaving plenty of space for other hillwalking and swimming essentials.

The sizing is a little on the small side so, if in doubt, size up. I'm 5in 6ft, and the Regular length just hits below my knee. Its slimmer fit leaves slightly less wiggle room for changing than other oversized robes – a consideration particularly if you swim in sleeves – but this never hampered my overall ability to get dressed after a swim. The fleece inner also dries fully within an hour thanks to grid design and minimal surface area. There is a waist cincher for more versatility off the hill.

The jacket features two inset stretch side panels that open up with three-quarter-length zips running from hem to elbow. Unzipped, they allow expanded space for changing and give plenty of room for hopping up and down on one foot as you attempt to gracefully remove neoprene boots. The four-way stretch material also offers an extra bit of give, allowing you to easily bend, stretch and sit down. When zipped up I've noticed the panels provide an extra layer of insulation around the legs.

When on the move, I have unzipped the panels for better freedom of movement when walking, especially on ascents. The front full-length zip is also two-way, so you can keep your chest warm whilst giving your legs more range and ventilation. Unlike

some other robes, the lining isn't prone to catching on midlayers.

The hydrophobic outer has proved extremely windproof, keeping me protected from chills in wind gusts of up to 40mph. However, the hood adjustability and lack of cinching at the chin was a drawback. A stronger peak would offer better protection.

The jacket's wipe-clean, PFC-free DWR coating coped well in light rain for half a day on the hills and in heavy rain for up to an hour. It will certainly keep you dry if sitting on wet ground.

I have not yet tested the robe in full winter conditions but I expect the windproofing and fleece lining, which warmed me quickly post-swim, will manage well.

I do run hot so a primary benefit of the Pursuit Robe for me is its 'total climate control', via a soft grid fleece-lined interior that regulates temperature and wicks away moisture. The zip and ventilation options also allowed me to keep the jacket on during long, gentle rambles in unseasonably warm autumn weather.

The robe is incredibly durable, and the outer has yet to snag. The zips are smooth – very important when you've got cold fingers – and the silicone grip tape cuff adjusters have proven less prone to snags and dirt buildup than traditional Velcro.

Extra useful details include an internal stash pocket to keep your undies close. There's a zipped chest pocket plus four fleece-lined pockets. Two are side-entry with zips for valuables. Swimmers will also appreciate the two extra top-entry fleece lined pockets, ideal for warming up wet hands.

The Pursuit robe is built with mostly recycled materials (details above) and Red Equipment is a certified B Corp. It is an expensive investment but the cost could well be worth it for those who value lightweight, understated, efficient outdoor kit.

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CRAMPONS

Adding 'spikes' to your boots aids grip in snow and ice, helping you to feel safer and more secure in the winter mountains.

Mountain Leader *Lucy Wallace* tests three sets of crampons



Petzl's Vasak crampons offer versatility for users with all levels of experience

IN WINTER, snow and ice can make movement difficult and even hazardous. Crampons provide traction and security, making it easier and safer to walk on snowy and icy terrain. They vastly outperform micro-spikes in deep snow and on steep ground due to their longer spikes, which bite deeper into the snow, and their front points, which can be used to aid uphill progression.

A wide variety of crampons are available, with those designed for walking and easy mountaineering typically being lighter and more flexible than models made for ice climbing. Some ultra-light models are intended for use on snow only, and may not be robust enough for walking and scrambling on icy rocks.

Crampons are rated based on their boot compatibility and come with several types of bindings that vary according to the flexibility of the boots they are designed to be used with. However, all require a semi-rigid boot for a secure fit. Stiff boots are also beneficial for kicking into snow and ice, even when not using crampons.

The most flexible binding types (C1) have

plastic baskets for the toe and heel that strap onto the boot and are compatible with boots graded B1 or more. If the boots have a heel welt, they are rated B2 or more and can be used with crampons with a heel clip ('hybrid' or C2), offering easier attachment and a more secure fit. B3 boots are fully rigid, and have a toe welt as well, allowing them to accommodate a fully rigid step-in crampon (C3) with a metal toe bail, this feature being found on crampons designed for ice climbing.

Crampon shapes also vary, with some designs being more curved and asymmetric than others. Smaller boots may not fit standard 12-point crampons, but will work with 10-point models, while exceptionally large boots may require an extender bar. Ensuring crampons are both compatible with your boots and provide a good fit is crucial.

Crampons with anti-balling plates are recommended, as they help prevent snow building up underfoot. Additionally, it's a good idea to stow crampons in a tough nylon bag, preventing the spikes from damaging other items in your pack.

Q Features

Points

Crampons designed for walking and easier mountaineering typically have 10 or 12 points, including two front points for steep terrain. Longer points give better grip on snow and ice but can snag, potentially causing trips or injuries, especially when new and sharp.

Adjustment bar

This allows you to alter crampon length for a secure fit. They should fit snugly, with no danger of coming loose during use. Some models feature a flexible bar, which accommodates softer boots. Extra-long bars are available for larger sizes. The bar may need to be cut to size to fit smaller boots.

Front binding

This secures a crampon to the toe of the boot. The type varies depending on the crampon's rating and boot compatibility, from basket designs (C1 and C2 crampons) to a metal bar (C3).

Rear binding

C1 crampons have a basic basket to hold the heel of the boot in place. C2 and C3 crampons have a lever that clips the back of the crampon onto the heel welt of the boot.

Strap

The strap fastens the crampon bindings to the boot, with an adjustable buckle for a secure fit. Tuck away or trim any excess.

Anti-balling plates

Vital for preventing snow build-up under the crampon, which can cause the points to lose grip.

Materials

Usually steel, sometimes stainless steel. Both are tough, but standard steel may be more hardwearing, while stainless steel offers corrosion resistance. Some ultra-light models are aluminium, which is less durable than steel.

Fit

Ensure crampons are the correct size and shape for your boots to prevent them from coming off or snagging. Sizes are supplied as a guide only. Proper fitting before heading out is crucial, as adjusting in the field can be challenging.

TESTING CONDITIONS

Testing took place during the Winter 2023-24 season in the west of Scotland, Munro-bagging and teaching winter skills as part of Lucy's work as a Mountain Leader. Weights supplied were obtained using her home digital scales.



THE GREAT
OUTDOORS
BEST IN TEST



Petzl

Vasak Leverlock
Universel

£175 880g (with C2 toe basket)

versatile modular system, good for larger feet

hard to fit to smaller sizes

Compatibility rating: C2 or C3

Number of points: 12

Materials: steel, plastic, nylon strap

Features: modular toe bail system, bi-position adjustment bar, adjustable heel clip, nylon strap with double quick-lock buckle

Fits sizes approx: EU36-50, UK4-15
petzl.com

What sets 12-point Vasak crampons apart is their extreme modularity, allowing them to adapt to various boots and scenarios. The Leverlock Universel, a C2/C3 version with a heel clip for B2 and B3 boots, comes with standard toe baskets for B2 boots, or a metal bar for B3 boots with toe welts. For my low-profile B3 boots, the standard basket provided the best fit. The Vasak also comes in a Flexlock format for B1 boots without welts and is slightly cheaper. Plus you can buy various bindings and front sections from Petzl's crampon range to modify the Vasaks for different uses, including more aggressive climbing, making this system highly versatile.

Fit-wise, the Vasaks have some limitations at the smaller end of the size range, but they include a clever internal system that secures the adjustment bar, minimising overhang at the back. The bar offers various settings for length and can even be tweaked to increase or decrease asymmetry. They're relatively easy to adjust with gloves on, though it's always best to do this in a warm, dry place before heading out.

In use, they give a positive feel, with notably long front points for steep terrain. The anti-balling plates work as expected, and the crampons are easy to put on and take off. Overall, they are a well-designed, versatile product suitable for winter walking, gullies and easier mixed climbs. They are ideal for novices looking to expand their skills, and experienced users seeking a crampon system that covers all bases.



Salewa

Alpinist Walk

£165 819g

light weight, clever strap design, aggressive points

extreme sharpness when new, best for larger sizes

Compatibility rating: C1

Number of points: 12

Materials: steel, plastic, nylon

Features: plastic toe and heel baskets, length-adjustable straps, anti-balling plates

Fits sizes approx: 235-330cm (EU39-49, UK5.5-14)
salewa.com

These crampons feature an aggressive design, especially for a flexible walking crampon. Their 12 points are impressively sharp straight from the box, which might be a worry for novice users who are more likely to catch a trouser leg. Even as an experienced winter walker, I reminded myself constantly that a careless moment could necessitate stitches to my clothing and possibly to myself! Even after several outings, the points retained their sharpness.

The forward-angled front points and aggressively slanted secondary points both favour front pointing. The anti-balling plates feature small spikes, and a ridge of teeth midfoot adds to the overall grippiness. This translated to a noticeably positive experience on the mountain.

The C1 bindings fit a range of boots, and the bendy adjustment bar makes them suitable for the flexible end of winter boot options whilst also reducing weight. They're easy to adjust with gloves on and feature a neat strap and buckle system that manages stray straps without the need to cut them.

A main drawback for some might be the limitations at the smaller end of the range, making a good fit harder to achieve. Happily, I had no issues with my size 42 boots. I enjoyed testing these crampons in various conditions, from snow slopes to water ice. I really appreciated the low weight, and the confidence inspired by the design. These crampons are ideal for winter walking and moderate mountaineering terrain.



Grivel

G10 New-Matic Evo

£130 858g

great value, compact, robust, excellent anti-balling plates

10 points provide less traction, relatively heavy for 10-point crampon



Compatibility rating: C2

Number of points: 10

Materials: NiCrMo steel, plastic, nylon strap

Features: anti-balling plates, adjustable heel clip, strap with quick-lock buckle fastening

Fits sizes approx: EU35-46, UK3-12.5 (long bars available)
grivel.com

The only 10-point model in this review, these are squarely aimed at winter walking, but will stray onto steeper stuff if needed. The two front points are more than functional enough for kicking into steep snow, and the secondary points are angled more down than forward, optimising grip on horizontal surfaces rather than vertical ones. I tested the New-Matic binding, which includes a heel clip compatible with B2 boots with heel welts and a classic plastic basket system at the front.

These crampons are compact and easy to adjust to a wide range of sizes, especially at the smaller end, where other models fall short. The heel clip can be adjusted through three settings to fine-tune the tension, snapping securely onto the back of the boot. The adjustments are straightforward and can be done without tools, although moving the heel clip requires some effort.

Grivel crampons are known for their durability, and the G10s are no exception. They offer an excellent balance of simplicity and performance. Whilst not as aggressive as some models, they are user-friendly and easy to get used to. They provide reliable traction on snow, rimed rock and ice, and are robust enough for easier mixed terrain and icy scrambles. The anti-balling plates shed snow better than any other model I tested. For a premium brand, the G10s are surprisingly affordable, offering high quality at a price accessible to entry-level users.

WINTER SLEEPING BAGS

Woodland Ranger Peter Macfarlane and Munroist Fiona Russell help get us ready for frosty overnights and snowy sleepovers



The Rab Mythic 600 offered "instant warmth"

CHOOSING A WINTER sleeping bag means balancing warmth, size and weight as well as the price. Because such bags need to be well-insulated, with a larger quantity of fill, they tend to be bigger, heavier and pricier than two- or three-season bags.

Winter sleeping bags will use either down fill – generally warmer and more expensive, or synthetic – heavier, bulkier and not always as warm, but usually cheaper.

An advantage of synthetic insulation is that it is capable of providing warmth when damp. On the other hand, down when wet can be soggy and cold – although there are now treated down fills to provide improved water resistance.

Your choice of winter sleeping bag will also depend on where you plan to use it. If you need to carry the bag for many days on a backpacking adventure, weight will be important. If you know your trips are in a windy,

wet or exposed location, you might want a warmer, heavier bag.

Your choice also depends on you! Everyone experiences cold in a different way, and if you are a 'cold sleeper' you should choose a sleeping bag with a lower temperature comfort rating. If you get cold feet, look for bags with extra insulation in the foot area.

Features to help keep you warmer include zip draught tubes, shoulder baffles, hoods and an outer shell that is water-resistant.

Winter conditions can be very variable in the UK, but we have chosen sleeping bags that aim to offer comfort below -2C. We have also sought to test women-specific winter sleeping bags where possible, designed to suit the female physique and physiology. On average, women are smaller with narrower shoulders and wider hips than men. They are more likely to get colder at night compared to men, and especially their feet.

Q Features

Insulation

Down is measured in terms of fill power, the weight of down used, and the quality of the down (for example 90/10 indicates 90% down and 10% feather). Synthetic fill comes in different qualities and weights.

Temperature ratings

There are three certified temperature ratings: Comfort, Limit and Extreme. In these reviews, we focus on the first – Comfort – which indicates a temperature where you can expect a good, undisturbed sleep. The Limit is where you might expect to get some rest, and Extreme indicates where the bag might keep you safe but not comfortable enough to sleep.

Construction

Down performance comes from its ability to allow the fill to 'loft', expanding to trap air and retain the heat coming from your body. Box wall construction aims to maintain an even density of insulation around your body but adds bulk and cost. Stitched-through construction is lighter and cheaper but can mean cold spots. Synthetic bags use layers of fine fibres that trap air and retain heat.

Entry

There's a variety of entry options, from full-length zips to half zips to no zips at all. Longer zips give easier access and will let you cool off easily. Shorter or no zips reduce pack weight but can make a bag tricky to get into

in a small tent. Zips should be 'baffled' to prevent heat loss.

Hood

Hoods vary greatly in style and range of adjustment. The most basic are insulated with a simple drawstring around your face, whilst a fully shaped and insulated hood gives maximum protection.

Shoulder baffle

An internal baffle that can be tightened up just above your shoulders traps the warm air inside the bag. It can also help maintain warmth if you need to loosen the hood for comfort. Easy adjustment of this feature is important.

Fit

Most sleeping bags have a tapered 'mummy' shape: the bag is wider at the shoulders and narrower at the foot. This improves efficiency by removing dead space that slows the warming process. The amount of taper varies and can affect comfort depending on your natural sleep position.

Footbox

Good footboxes are shaped to accommodate your feet whilst still allowing the insulation to fully loft to maintain warmth.

Other features

Some bags come with pockets, which can be useful for keeping camera batteries warm or stashing a head torch where it's easy to reach. Water resistance is especially useful in a winter bag.



WOMEN'S WINTER SLEEPING BAGS *by Fiona Russell*

TESTING NOTES

Fiona is 173cm tall and a UK10. She is a cold sleeper. She is also a side sleeper and likes to be able to move her legs around and curl up inside a sleeping bag. These bags were tested in winter temperatures below 0C across the winter Highlands and weighed on Fiona's own scales.



£450 1255g (regular)

warmth, fit, versatility, women's shape

weight, cost

Fill: 797g 750+ fill power RDS-certified goose down with Ultra-Dry Down treatment

Shell: recycled 20 denier nylon shell and lining; 10 denier nylon waterproof-breathable hood and footbox

Construction: box wall baffle, plus vertical chest baffles and horizontal baffles lower half

Zip: 3x 2-way zips: full-length, half-length & toe box

Length: 170m (reg), 185cm (long)

Rating: -9C Comfort

Sizes: regular, long

Men's version? yes

seatosummit.co.uk

There is very little to fault in the Sea to Summit Ascent women's sleeping bag. It is very well constructed and roomy enough to move around in. The bag is wider at the hips and narrower at the shoulders to better suit the female physique.

The fabric is light, which allows the down to loft well. When fully zipped up with the hood tightened around my head, I felt delightfully sealed in and cosy, even when temperatures dipped well below zero. There are two lovely soft-feel cord pulls around the shoulders, too. It's also possible to let in air and cool off if needed thanks to an array of zips.

The full-length zip is two-way, plus there is a two-way half-zip on the other side and a two-way zip along the base of the toe box. The zips are backed by draught tubes and there is a generous shoulder baffle, too.

There's a nod to sustainability with RDS goose down, and polyester in the main body fabric that is 100% Recycled Claim Standard (RCS)-certified. The down includes a water repellency treatment, which kept me warm and dry.

The bag is at the weightier end of the spectrum but it packs down neatly into its own zipped stuff sack. It's not cheap but it is versatile, and would serve well as a 3- or 4-season bag. One minor grumble is the zipped internal pocket, which is barely big enough to accommodate more than a set of keys; otherwise this is excellent.



From £792 965g (custom)

warmth, weight, customisability

cost

Fill: 950 fill power European goose down

Shell: Ultrashell ripstop nylon, 7X ripstop nylon lining

Construction: straight wall baffle

Zip: 1-way half-zip

Length: 200cm (custom)

Rating: -10C Comfort

Sizes: standard, short, long, extra long (also slim-fit, wide and extra wide) unisex, customised fit

phdesigns.co.uk

The Greenlandic 500 is the high-performance, customisable option here. It's not as wide as other bags in this review, but there was some wriggle room. The bag's weight-to-warmth ratio is hard to beat, and PHD uses a 950 fill goose down, adjusted to give the same warmth rating whatever width and length of bag you choose.

Prices change as you customise your bag – length, width, wind and waterproofing, zips and footboxes can all be specified by you ahead of purchase.

The three fabrics on offer are 7X, which is a fine ripstop nylon. For the outer fabric, you can also pick Ultrashell (my choice), a wind- and water-resistant ripstop nylon. The most breathable and waterproof outer fabric is Dri-LX.

The more windproof or waterproof the fabric choice, the more weight you add, although it's small in the scheme of things (Ultrashell fabric adds 18g to the weight of the standard bag).

Otherwise, the feature set is small. There is no shoulder baffle, and the zip is one-way with no zip garage. The zip fastener at the top of the bag is a basic fabric tab and Velcro. There's no compression sack included. I have knocked off half a point on the score because of the cost, but this PHD bag is amazingly warm for its weight.



Mammut

Women's Relax
Down Bag -2C

£320 900g

weight, fit, price

warmth



Fill: 280g 700 fill power, responsible down, 90% grey duck down, 10% grey duck feather
Shell: 52% polyester, 48% polyamide; lining: 100% polyester & 55% polyamide, 45% polyester
Construction: box wall
Zip: 2-way full-length
Length: 205cm
Rating: -2C Comfort
Sizes: medium
Men's version? yes
mammut.com/uk/en

This lighter-weight bag just meets the criteria for our winter sleeping bags, but is still a good option for cold conditions where weight matters. If you are a cold sleeper or it's going to be consistently below -2C, look elsewhere or be prepared to boost the warmth by wearing extra clothes inside.

The length is great, made to fit women between 165-180cm height. The width gives room for some movement inside the bag. I especially appreciated the soft feel (and quiet!) fabric on the inside of the large hood. The bag comes with ear plugs and an eye mask for complete isolation from fellow bothy or hut sleepers.

The inside is bright orange, allowing better visibility at night, and the central two-way zip is big and easy to use. However, the zip baffle is only just big enough to cover the back of the zip and no more.

An adjustable cord at the shoulders allows you to cinch the bag around you and keep out draughts, but a shoulder baffle would be a useful addition. There is also an internal zipped pocket for storing valuables, although if the items are too big you will end up lying on top of them.

Mammut has adopted eco-friendly credentials with this bag: bluesign certification, a fluorocarbon-free DWR, RDS down and Fair Wear.



Big Agnes

Roxy Ann 3-in-1

£350 1470g (regular)

versatility, women's shape

weight, usability

Fill: 482g (total) 650fp DownTek, bluesign PFC-free water repellency
Shell: nylon ripstop, PFC-free water-repellent finish; lining, GRS-certified 100% post-consumer recycled polyester taffeta
Construction: box wall
Zip: 2-way full-length zip, 2-way half-length zip
Length: n/a
Rating: -3C Comfort
Sizes: regular, long
Men's version? yes
bigagnes.com

I like the idea of the three-in-one system. You can take all or part of the bag with you depending on the trip and season, so it seems very versatile. However, in practical use the full set-up is a bit fussy.

Fitting the inner and outer together before sleep is workable, but the layers get mixed up easily if you exit in the night. The inner has a front zip, whilst the outer bag has a side zip that added to my nocturnal confusion. The sleeping pad attachments, which ensure the outer bag stays put on an inflated mattress, are useful. However, because the outer bag stays still, I found myself getting tangled inside the inner bag.

The regular bag is fairly short, made to fit a woman of 168cm (5ft6in) tall. I would normally expect 'regular' to be longer than this. The zips are basic and their pulls are small, but they are two-way. There is a baffle behind the zip that feels lacklustre compared to other bags, and there is no shoulder baffle. There is a carry bag, but no compression straps, plus a stuff bag.

The comfort rating of the bags is confusing. Combined, they are meant to offer between -9C and -18C, yet the 'Comfort rating' is listed as -3C. I'd suggest using the bag in temperatures no lower than 0C, unless you're a warm sleeper.

The inner and outer fabrics feel lovely and silky but the down is a bit 'clumpy' inside the box walls. The outer seems quite breathable, but by the same token not hugely windproof.

Accreditations include PFC-free, bluesign and GSR.



MEN'S WINTER SLEEPING BAGS by Peter Macfarlane

TESTING CONDITIONS

Peter is 180cm tall, at the slim end of a size large, and is a side sleeper. He used the bags at camp and in bothies from late Autumn 2023 to Spring 2024 over a variety of conditions and temperatures. Weights were taken on his digital scales.



£660 886g

comfort, weight, performance

price

Fill: 600g of 900FP European goose down with Nikwax fluorocarbon-free hydrophobic finish
Shell: 10D recycled Atmos 27gsm polyamide with fluorocarbon-free DWR, inner and outer
Construction: chevron pattern trapezoidal baffles, zip baffle, adjustable hood and shoulder baffle
Zip: ¾-length two-way
Length: 215cm
Rating: -5°C Comfort
Sizes: one size
Unisex
rab.equipment

The Rab Mythic is by far the lightest bag in the test, yet there have been no corners cut to reach the weight. The fabric and components are very light and the quality of the down is very high.

Happily, the bag isn't cut too close either, allowing good upper body movement and easy knee bending. I slept very comfortably. The toe box is shaped to allow your feet to rest slightly splayed without compressing the baffles around your feet – a little detail perhaps, but it does add comfort.

There is a well-shaped shoulder baffle, which is easily adjusted with a bungee. The hood feels a little minimalist but is well filled with down, gives good protection and is easily adjusted with its own bungee, which faces inwards. The baffled, lightweight main zip can snag quite easily when I'm inside and zipping up, but with a little patience it does run smooth. It is extremely comfortable inside with a very soft fabric against the skin. The warmth is immediate. Loft is excellent and the bag is extremely compressible for packing.

The DWR finish is also very good. Wetting out takes a long time to occur, and the down inside is hydrophobic to retain performance when it does get wet. Other features are limited to hanging loops, in keeping with the minimalist, lightweight nature of the bag.

The weight, packed size, comfort and performance all come together to make the Mythic excellent for carrying into the winter hills for high camps as well as campsite and bothy use, but this performance does come at a price.



£540 1545g

comfort, performance, heat pad

weight, packed size

Fill: 700g 90/10, 800+FP RDS-certified goose down, lavalan AlmWolle wool upper layer
Shell: recycled, breathable and water-repellent ultralight 20 denier 380T nylon outer, recycled nylon inner
Construction: V-shaped chambers, box chambers, wool overlay, zip baffle, external zipped pocket, adjustable hood and shoulder baffle, powerbank-compatible heat pad in foot box
Zip: 2-way full-length
Length: 215cm
Rating: -5°C Comfort
Sizes: one size
Unisex
gz-bag.de

This is an extremely comfortable bag with a cut that's a little relaxed. I can lie in varying natural positions with my elbows out and my knees bent. The hood is large and warm and can be cinched right in if need be, and the hood and baffle adjusters are easy to operate whilst inside.

The main zip pull has a wide plastic attachment that seems to greatly reduce snagging. The down fill lofts well after packing and the bag is nicely warm soon after climbing in.

Unusually, the top of the bag has a thin layer of wool to aid moisture transfer, add insulation and prevent condensation that might otherwise affect the performance of the down. It's impossible to see how well this is working inside, but the performance is good, and the bag doesn't seem to get as soggy at the ends as other bags do in a small tent.

The bag has a pocket on the left chest, to slip in a power bank that connects to a thin wire that runs down to the foot box. Here, it connects to a small heat pad. This adds relatively little weight or bulk, but it is excellent if you need a boost of warmth.

There is also an external zip pocket, which is handy for a head torch. The underside has anti-slip pads and loops for securing to a mat. The outer fabric DWR is effective enough for splashes, but the fabric does wet out over time if pressed against a damp tent inner.

The features and elaborate design add up to extra bulk and weight, which for me makes this better suited for winter base camp use rather than one I'd carry onto the hills.



THE GREAT
OUTDOORS
RECOMMENDED
★★★★★

Robens
Serac 900 -20°C



£352 1490g

comfort, performance, price

weight, packed size

Fill: 900g of 600 FP 85/15 RDS-certified duck down
Shell: recycled 20D 400T nylon ripstop outer, recycled 20D 400T nylon taffeta inner
Construction: stretch box baffles on upper body, box baffles, zip baffle, adjustable hood and shoulder baffle
Zip: ¾-length two-way
Length: 220cm
Rating: -12°C Comfort
Sizes: one size
Unisex
robens.de

The Serac looks like it has quite a trim fit, but once inside the stretch seams on the upper body baffles allow very good arm movement whilst keeping the down close to your body and lots of warmth generated as a result. It's very comfortable and natural to sleep in, and I can move around normally. The comfort extends to the well-shaped hood and the shoulder baffle, which fit and function well. These are easily adjusted from inside the bag via a toggle that has different-shaped cords running through it to adjust the upper and lower hood, and a bungee inside for the baffle.

The main zip runs smoothly and an anti-snap strip on the baffle functions reasonably well. I also like the footbox, which is shaped nicely for a resting position with just enough room to wiggle and move my feet whilst keeping the insulation close.

The Serac has a duck down fill, which tends to be unusual for a bag of this rating – we're more used to seeing goose down promoted as the higher-performance option these days – but the bag lofts incredibly well, is soft and compressible, and has the best temperature performance rating of all the bags I tested.

The inner fabric is very soft and comfortable against the skin, whilst the outer fabric has a good DWR that beads well and only wets out after repeated rubbing against a damp surface. There are drying loops at the foot.

The weight is quite high at a kilo and a half, and the packed size is chunky, but the performance is high – a fact almost hidden under a price that is very good indeed.

THE GREAT
OUTDOORS
RECOMMENDED
★★★★★

**Mountain
Equipment**
Glacier 700



£400 1180g (regular)

comfort, performance

slightly narrower fit

Fill: 699g of minimum 700 fill power Down Codex-approved duck down
Shell: Drilite Loft polyamide outer with FC-free DWR, recycled polyamide inner
Construction: trapezoidal and slanted box wall baffles, zip baffle, adjustable hood and shoulder baffle, lode lock magnetic closure
Zip: ¾-length two-way
Length: 205cm (regular)
Rating: -6°C Comfort
Sizes: regular and long
Women's version? yes
mountain-equipment.co.uk

The Glacier is a clean-looking bag, a classic mummy outline with horizontal baffles and no extraneous features at all. Even the hanging loop for drying and airing at the foot is as minimalist as can be, with just a single small shell fabric tunnel to thread your own loop through.

Performance is excellent, and it's the second warmest in the bags I tested. When inside, the feedback and warmth are instant, and as a result the Glacier is a lovely bag to climb into at camp. However, it is cut quite close and I find movement not quite as easy or as natural inside as with others on my test, especially in the leg area. The footbox is well-shaped and roomy, and at the other end the hood is small but an excellent fit with good protection. It has different-shaped cords running through the cord lock for adjusting the upper and lower hood separately and easily in the dark.

The shoulder baffle has a bungee adjuster and an unusual magnetic closure that works well. There's a textured fabric tab to undo it easily. The zip runs smoothly through most of its length, but because of its slimmer fit I tended to snag it near the bottom. The down fill lofts extremely well and is protected by a superb DWR finish on the outer fabric – this bag just doesn't want to wet out! The weight is also impressive and a neat, compressed packed size means it's a good fit in a winter pack. Overall, it's well designed for high camps in the winter hills.

WILDWALKS

Our walks this month



James Roddie

1 **Ladhar Bheinn**
via **The Old Forge**
Knoydart



Alex Roddie

2 **Stob Coire**
Sgreamhach via
the Clachaig Inn
West Highlands



Ian Battersby

3 **Nine Standards**
Rigg via **The Black**
Bull Pennines

6 **Hopegill Head**
via **The Ruddings**
Lake District



Vivienne Crow

4 **Lonscale Fell** via
The Horse and Farrier
Inn Lake District

7 **Whernside**
via **The George**
and Dragon
Yorkshire Dales



James Forrest

5 **Coledale**
Round via **the**
Coledale Inn
Lake District



Andrew Galloway

8 **Tal y Fan** via **the**
Tŷ Gwyn Hotel
Carneddau



Lara Dunn

9 **Worcestershire**
Beacon via **The**
Wyche Inn Malvern



Fiona Bartrop

10 **Golden Cap** via
the Anchor Inn
Dorset

10 varied routes in Scotland, England and Wales



Many of us walk miles and miles to breathe in the fresh air, allow the mind to slow down and take in sweeping vistas that can make us feel comfortingly small in the landscape. But sometimes, oxymoronic though it may seem, the indoor cosiness and warmth of a good pub (ideally complete with low beams to duck under and crackling fires to huddle beside) and the wide-open great outdoors go together as well as fish and chips. In their most challenging assignment yet, here our experts compile their favourite peak 'n' pub walks – including two different takes on familiar Lakeland fells, with different inns in which to sink a pint while your boots dry out!

Francesca Donovan
Content Producer



1

22.1km/13.8 miles/9-12 hours

Ascent 1393m/4570ft



Ladhar Bheinn via The Old Forge Knoydart SCOTLAND



Following the forestry track from Folach Gate



James Roddie walks a long way for a remote pint and a meal

LADHAR BHEINN is one of Scotland's remotest Munros, and surely one of the most memorable. To reach its summit by any route requires considerable effort, and will involve walking into the heart of the beautiful Knoydart peninsula. This is a unique place with a sad and complex history, but alive with a tangible sense of optimism and community.

Some will choose to approach Ladhar Bheinn via a tough (but excellent) walk from Kinloch Hourn. Most popular, however, is the route described here. A boat trip from Mallaig harbour takes you to the small village of Inverie, where the route begins and ends. Whilst the initial few kilometres are not particularly inspiring, this is quickly forgotten when the views begin to reveal themselves as you gain height.

This is one of the UK's finest mountain landscapes. On a clear day, Ladhar Bheinn's summit view is amongst the best in Scotland. To reward your efforts, end your walk at The Old Forge in Inverie, for a very well-earned pint and meal. ➔



Ascending towards Ladhar Bheinn's summit



A well-earned pint at The Old Forge



The view from the summit of Ladhar Bheinn

ROUTE

Start/finish Inverie Pier
GR: NG765002

1 NG765002 From Inverie pier, follow the road SE into Inverie village. Just before The Old Forge, turn left onto a forestry track bearing NE, curving round left to head NW. Follow the forestry track past houses and through plantation. After 1km, you will exit the forestry onto moorland. Continue following the track for just over another 1km until Folach Gate, where another forestry track heads off right.

2 NG766027 From Folach Gate, follow the track NE through plantation, eventually leaving the woodland again where the track reaches the banks of the Abhainn Inbhir Ghuiserein. Continue along the S bank of the river along the track. This becomes less distinct as you enter a small birch woodland. Eventually you will reach a bridge over the river.

3 NG791033 Cross the bridge and turn E to follow a minor track along the N bank of the river. Follow this for 1km, passing a ruined house on your left. Just after the ruins, the track becomes fainter, but starts to head uphill NE towards the bealach at An Diollaid. Follow the track. This is a slog – you have to ascend approximately 600m over a distance of 1.5km. The terrain gradually becomes a little rockier with height. Eventually you will reach the bealach, where the views N will reveal themselves.

4 NG810045 From the bealach, pick up a minor track heading uphill, ESE towards the summit of Ladhar Bheinn. Pass around and through parallel bands of rock. It can be easy to lose the track here, but just keep following the line of least resistance uphill. A small lochan at **NG8118704415** is a good place to refill water if you are running low (use a filter/chlorine tablets). If you are intending to wild camp on the hill, there are a few possible spots to pitch a tent in the vicinity of this lochan. Continue up the shoulder of Ladhar Bheinn's west ridge until you reach a shattered concrete trig point at 1010m. From here the ridge narrows dramatically – follow it SE to reach the true summit at 1020m.

5 NG823039 Once you have taken in the tremendous view from the summit, continue along the narrow ridge to another

very minor summit. This is where a very rough descent to Bealach Coire Dhorrcail begins. Descend SE on a minor track, passing some small lochans. From here you must pass over or around several rocky knolls, with some minor scrambling required. This is time-consuming! Once at the bealach, ascend to a small summit cairn at 849m.

6 NG840027 From point 849m, descend SW along the Aonach Sgoilte ridge. Before long the ridge splits into two 'arms'. It is easiest and safest to follow a minor track between them, leading through a gully, before reaching a minor summit at 758m. Continue descending the broad ridge until reaching a much flatter area of peat moorland at Mam Suidheig.

7 NG814014 It is easy to lose the track on the descent

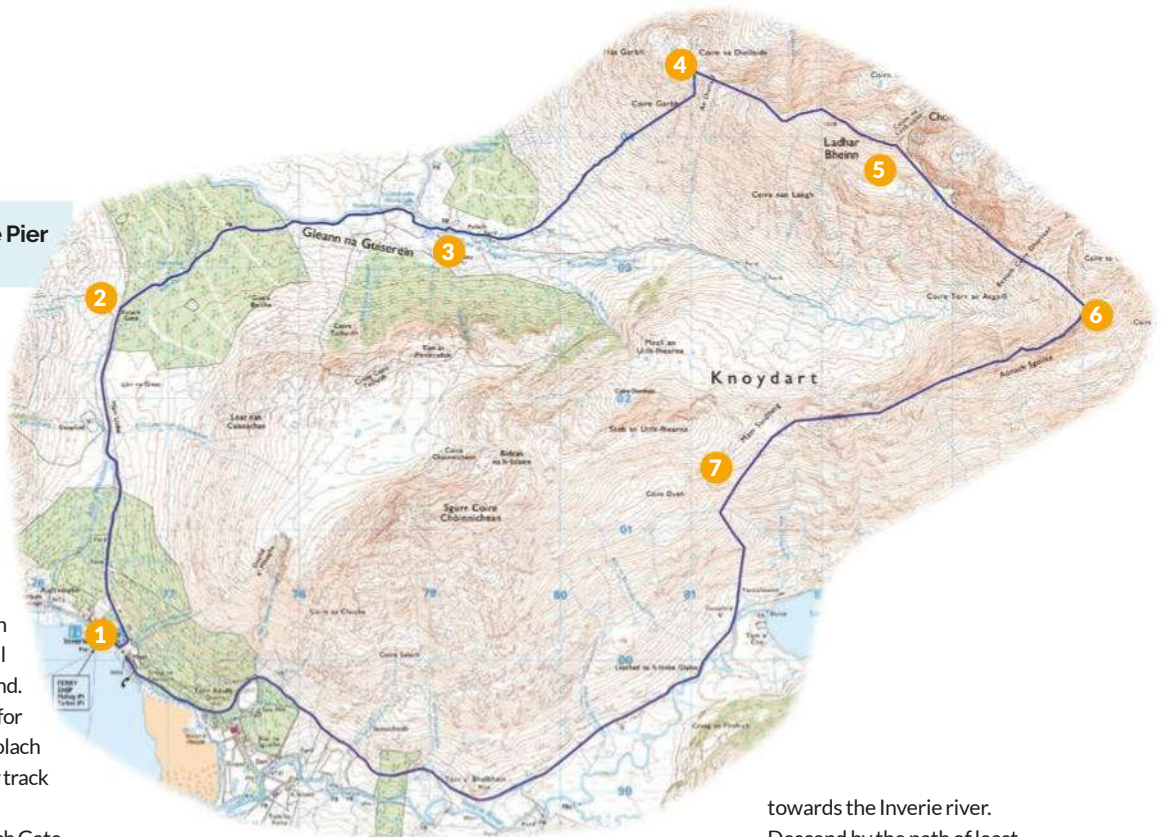
towards the Inverie river. Descend by the path of least resistance, eventually entering a bracken field in the last few hundred metres before you reach the glen. In mid Summer this can be shoulder-deep and infested with ticks and midges. Reach the 4x4 track in the glen with great relief, and follow it for 4km to reach the woods surrounding Inverie. Continue along the track to reach the village, and get yourself a well-earned pint at The Old Forge inn.

Further information

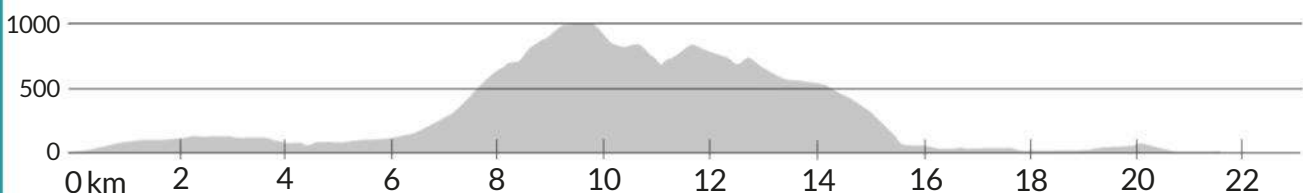
Maps: OS Explorer 413 (1:25k)

Transport: Mallaig can be reached by train from Fort William. A small passenger ferry to Inverie runs from Mallaig Pier. Inverie can only be reached by ferry or by foot.

Tourist information: visitknoydart.co.uk



Gradient profile Metres above sea level



2

22.1km/13.7 miles/9-12 hours

Ascent 1069m/3507ft



Stob Coire Sgreamhach via The Clachaig West Highlands SCOTLAND



The flat basin of the Lost Valley was once used to conceal stolen cattle



This circuit gets all the best views and is great in Winter, says Alex Roddie

I'LL NEVER FORGET the first time I climbed Bidean nam Bian in Winter, striding along that snowy crest. Stob Coire nan Lochan is another perennial favourite. However, Bidean's other close neighbour, Stob Coire Sgreamhach, has a somewhat aloof vibe – it wasn't even recognised as a Munro until 1997, and getting to the top requires a bit more effort than an ascent of Bidean.

Yet it is so worthwhile – especially in Winter, when this mountain takes on the atmosphere of a towering Himalayan or Alpine giant (think I'm exaggerating? Just go and look for yourself!). It's not an easy climb from any side, with even the normal approach up the gorgeous Lost Valley involving a steep snow slope verging on Grade I. It's best avoided if you aren't competent with ice axe and crampons. And check the avalanche forecast beforehand (sais.gov.uk).

However, if you have the skills, this long day out, starting and finishing at the Clachaig, is one of the best in the West Highlands. You'll particularly enjoy the amphitheatre of Coir' Eilde on the descent. ➔



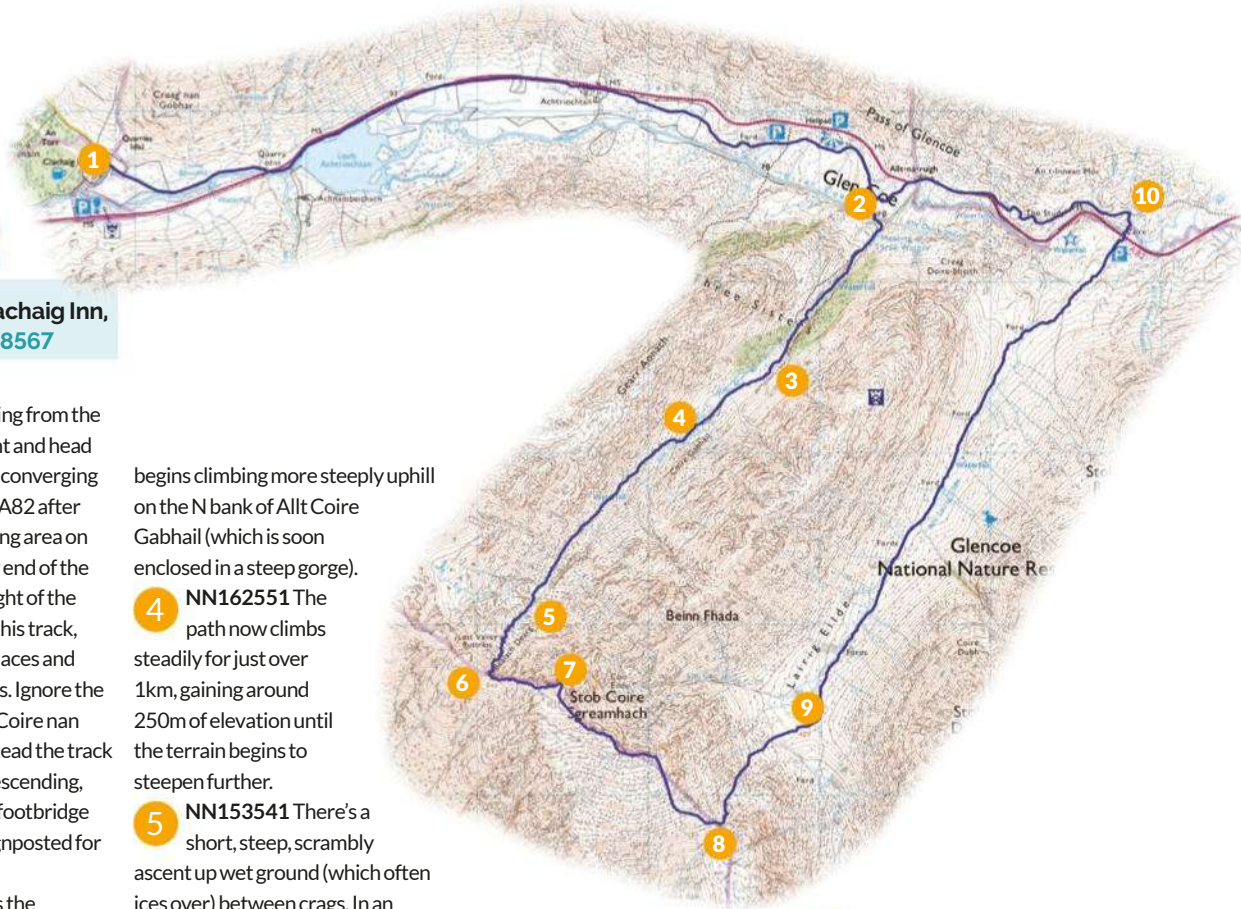
A closer view of the headwall, Stob Coire Sgreamhach looming above



Bidean nam Bian viewed from Stob Coire Sgreamhach



Back at the Clachaig



ROUTE

Start/finish Clachaig Inn, Glen Coe GR: NN128567

1 NN128567 Starting from the Clachaig, turn right and head SE along the minor road converging with the A82. Cross the A82 after 1km and enter the parking area on the other side. At the far end of the car park, a path heads right of the barrier. Keep following this track, which hugs the A82 in places and diverges from it in others. Ignore the fork heading S towards Coire nan Lochan after 4.5km; instead the track climbs slightly before descending, 5km from the start, to a footbridge across the River Coe, signposted for the Lost Valley.

2 NN173564 Cross the footbridge and follow the path, which begins climbing steeply through birch woodland. The trail heads uphill towards the deep V-notch of Coire Gabhail. The path soon plunges back into gnarled birch woodland amongst huge boulders. Cross the burn on stepping stones after just under 1km, and then ascend about 50m elevation to arrive at a prominence with spectacular views deeper into the valley. The obvious triangular peak left of the valley head is Stob Coire Sgreamhach.

3 NN168555 Descend slightly towards the flat rocky meadow in the heart of the corrie. According to folklore, this is where stolen cattle were once concealed; it also makes a great camping spot. Cross the level valley floor, then trend right when the terrain begins steepening again; the onward path is obvious where it

begins climbing more steeply uphill on the N bank of Allt Coire Gabhail (which is soon enclosed in a steep gorge).

4 NN162551 The path now climbs steadily for just over 1km, gaining around 250m of elevation until the terrain begins to steepen further.

5 NN153541 There's a short, steep, scrambly ascent up wet ground (which often disappears under snow above this point, but in Summer eroded and loose scree leads (very steeply) all the way to Bealach Dearg at 944m. In Winter, after assessing the slope for safety, begin climbing towards the bealach, trending left of technical craggy ground. The easiest line is usually slightly right of the central chute, but adapt to the conditions as you find them. There may be a cornice but it has usually been cut by prior parties.

6 NN151537 Bealach Dearg can be a windy spot. Turn left and begin climbing the short, steep W ridge of Stob Coire Sgreamhach.

7 NN155537 You'll soon arrive at the 1072m summit. The views back towards Bidean nam Bian, as well as NE towards Beinn Fhada, are stupendous. To descend,

head first due S and then SE, following the comparatively broad and gentle SE ridge.

8 NN164528 After descending 331m of elevation, to an unnamed 741m bealach just before a small prominence, there is a safe descent heading NE into the Lairig Eilde. This can be hard to find from the top – don't try to descend steep ground before you get to the bealach. Descend NE, taking care to avoid veering too far E into a gully, to reach the broad bealach (489m) at the head of Lairig Eilde.

9 NN170534 Cross soft ground to reach the main Lairig Eilde path, which is very boggy in places. Follow it N for just over 3km to reach the car park on the A82.

10 NN188563 Cross the road and climb briefly to join a track; turn left and follow it past the ruined Allt-na-ruigh. Here cross the road and descend back to the junction with the Lost Valley path. Retrace your earlier steps back to the Clachaig.

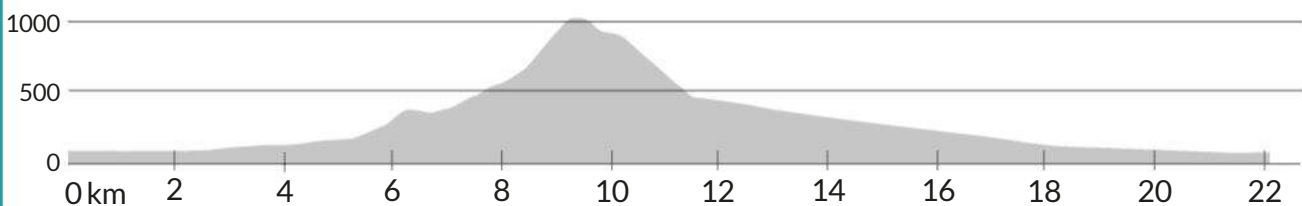
Further information

Maps: OS Explorer 384 (1:5k), OS Landranger 41 (1:50k), Harvey British Mountain Map Ben Nevis & Glen Coe (1:40k)

Transport: Scottish Citylink 915 coach to Glencoe village from Glasgow or Fort William; ask to be let off for the Clachaig

Tourist information: discoverglencoe.scot or visitscotland.com

Gradient profile Metres above sea level



3

15.9km/9.9 miles/6 hours

Ascent 614m/2015ft

Nine Standards Rigg via The Black Bull Pennines ENGLAND



Nine Standards Rigg



Ian Battersby uncovers treasures in the shadow of nine strange cairns

IT COULD BE claimed that Nine Standards Rigg makes for a fairly nondescript hill from afar, but its position on the border between Swaledale and the old county of Westmorland may have saved it from obscurity. The motivation for the famed nine standard cairns perched just north of the summit has been misplaced in time, but they may have been used to mark this border. They can be seen against their skyline here well before reaching the top. Whatever the reason, the cairns make a unique and fascinating draw, and deliver an all-embracing panorama that ranges from Wild Boar Fell and The Howgills, past the Lake District skyline, and up towards Cross Fell (rooftop of the Pennines). Its western flank is shaped by alluring edges, gills and limestone upstarts, and hidden deep within a wooded ravine Lathwaite Beck forms an exceptional waterslide at the foot of Ewbank Scar.

All these are visited by this route, prior to real ale and hearty meals served by the fireside at The Black Bull in Nateby. There's plenty of room for chattering, rosy-cheeked hikers. ➔



The Howgills from Nine Standards Rigg at sunset



The last of the day at Nine Standards Rigg



Waypoint 1 - The Black Bull, Nateby



ROUTE

Start/finish The Black Bull, Nateby **GR: NY774067**

- 1 NY774067** Head N along the road from The Black Bull and almost immediately turn right down a track to a lane. Turn R to reach a beck and cross the ford or use the footbridge beyond. Follow the bridleway NNW by the beck, passing the farm and crossing a track to reach a T-junction with the Pennine Journey bridleway. Turn R, heading NNE for 500m to reach the dismantled railway. Just before a bridge turn L through a gate (signed Poetry Path), drop down to the railway and turn R, heading NE under the bridge. Pass benches and an old brick building, then, just before the next bridge, veer L up a path to reach a track over the bridge.
- 2 NY780077** Turn R over the bridge and take the path by the wall heading SE up to a gate/stile. Continue SE through trees to another gate/stile. Continue by wall between trees, dropping S to use a gate/stile on the L. Bear L through a small gate, dropping down a path to a wall. Turn R on a path through the woods marked by yellow arrows with

- diversions around fallen trees. The path veers S with Ladthwaite Beck on the L, then bends E, passing Ewbank Scar and its surprising water torrent, reached on a small diversion L. Keep climbing E to cross a footbridge and exit the trees at a gate/stile. Turn L immediately through a metal gate and climb NE to an arrowed post. Take the path ESE along the ravine edge. After the trees the path joins the beck, heading NE, then bending R through more trees, heading SSE direct for Ladthwaite Farm using a stile, then gate, then bridge over the beck. Cross and turn R to the farm track at a gate. Turn L, heading N, soon bending E and climbing to a junction of tracks.
- 3 NY799075** Use the wooden gate before the cattle grid and climb past gorse to meet a bridleway at a gate. Turn R, climbing SE then S to meet a wall. Follow this ESE past sheepfolds at Reigill, then turning E to a mapped fork with a

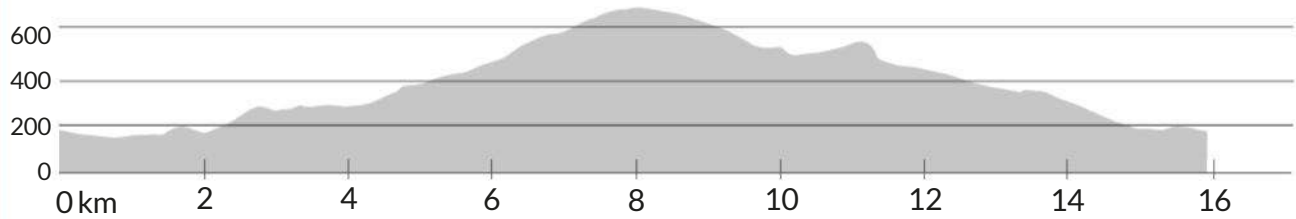
- disappeared bridleway. Fork R, heading SE to reach the next signposted junction (480m).
- 4 NY810067** Fork L on good path heading ESE for Nine Standards Rigg, through Faraday Gill. At the cairns (650m) follow the path S, passing a viewpoint indicator at a fork in the path. The trig point is a little further S.
- 5 NY824064** From the viewpoint indicator drop SW on minor path, which improves to meet the Coast-to-Coast Path (580m). Continue SW to reach the head of Dukerdale Gill. Cross the gill and take the middle of three tracks, heading WNW directly to Tailbridge Hill (547m), ignoring a right fork. Drop NW down the trackless flank to reach an unmapped track (480m), heading SW to the B6270. Head R along the road to metal rails.
- 6 NY796052** A fading path heads S to a memorial cairn by the beck. Follow the beck SW

past a pit and cross the shallow gill. Roughly contour SW then W to reach the northern end of Long Crag. A track drops NW down the ridge to a gate/stile by trees at Hunger Hills (265m). The path continues NW down through a walkers' gate (235m). Ignore a track heading R, keeping L of the beck to a footbridge crossing (230m). Cross and turn L heading NNW through a gate and past the farm, through another gate to reach the road. Now turn right for that pint in Nateby!

Further information

- Maps:** OS Explorer OL19 (1:25k), OS Landranger 91 (1:50k)
- Transport:** Trains to Kirkby Stephen station within a mile thetrainline.com
- Tourist information:** Kirkby Stephen visituppereden.org.uk 017683 71199

Gradient profile Metres above sea level



4 16.2km/10 miles/6-6.5 hours
Ascent 717m/2350ft



Lonscale Fell via the Horse and Farrier Inn Lake District **ENGLAND**




Helvellyn from the Whit Beck path



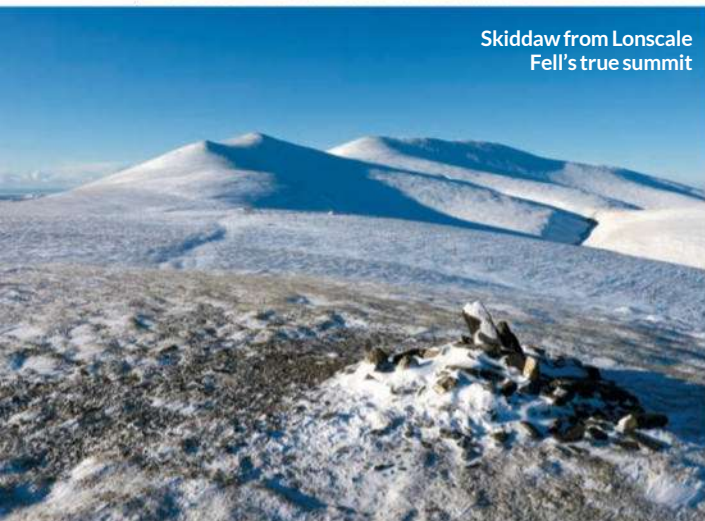
Vivienne Crow climbs a little-walked ridge to a Skiddaw outlier

WHEN YOU'VE got celebrities for neighbours, it's easy to go unnoticed. Sitting between Blencathra and Skiddaw, that's exactly what's happened to Lonscale Fell. And yet this 715m peak has more to offer than the smooth, heather-clad slopes seen from the A66...

From Threlkeld at the base of Blencathra, this route uses the deep, steep-sided trench carved by the Glenderaterra Beck to head Back o' Skiddaw. The pyramidal Lonscale Fell dominates this early part of the walk. Nearing Skiddaw House, the Burnt Horse ridge provides a little-known route on to the high ground. Lonscale Fell's true summit proves rather uninspiring, but its eastern top, perched on crags high above the Glenderaterra, is a lot more interesting. After descending those aforementioned heathery slopes, the route heads valley-ward via the northern flank of Latrigg to join the Keswick Railway Path. Threlkeld, at day's end, is home to the popular Horse and Farrier Inn; or, if that's too busy, The Salutation is just a little further down the road. 



Lonscale Fell seen from the approach to the second footbridge at waypoint 2



Skiddaw from Lonscale Fell's true summit



With Lonscale Fell ahead, the track heads into the valley of the Glenderaterra Beck

ROUTE

Start/finish Blease Road car park on north-west edge of Threlkeld
GR: NY318256

1 NY318256 Leave the car park and turn right along Blease Road. Climbing all the while, this later becomes a rough track. Beyond the Field Studies Council's Blencathra Centre, you get your first uninterrupted view of Lonscale Fell on the far side of the valley. You can now see straight up the Glenderaterra Beck too. The fell dominating the view beyond the head of the valley is Great Calva.

2 NY296278 Soon after a sheepfold, cross the first of two wooden bridges in quick succession. With the pyramidal Lonscale Fell straight ahead, the track now passes through a gate and climbs gently beside a drystone wall. About 230m beyond the gate, ignore the trail peeling off left.

3 NY293287 On reaching a gate across the path, don't go through; instead, turn left to climb beside a fence on the right. After a stile near the top of the first rise, head out along the Burnt Horse ridge. Lonscale Fell's dark, north-facing slopes look formidable from here but our route bypasses the craggy ground. Drop off the ridge into a slight dip where another stile is crossed. Head straight up the grassy slope, beside the fence. Initially, it's a steep climb, but it's relatively short-lived.

4 NY283272 Eventually, you cross the main ridge fence. A few strides beyond this, turn left along a faint path that climbs to the tiny cairn on Lonscale Fell's true summit. It continues across the top and then drops slightly to recross the

fence at a bend. Head north-east along a faint trail to reach Lonscale Fell's other, more satisfyingly exposed summit. With the ground dropping away dramatically to the north and the east, this is a good vantage point to gaze into the heart of the Northern Fells and across to Blencathra.

5 NY288272 Drop south from this eastern top. Keep to the edge of the high ground for now, swinging back in towards the fence in 200m or so. (If it's windy or misty though, you're better off returning to the fence straight away.) Follow the fence down the heathery hillside, with the Helvellyn range's northernmost hills straight ahead.

6 NY293260 Turn right on reaching the track at the bottom of the slope - through a gate. With views of the Scafell group and the many peaks of the North-Western Fells, this cuts easily across Lonscale Fell's lower slopes and then fords Whit Beck. Beyond a gate, follow the wall/fence on the right until you reach

a set of gates leading to the parking area at the end of Gale Road.

7 NY280253 Don't go through the gates; instead, turn sharp left along a wide track with a fence/wall on your right at first. This track skirts the northern edge of Latrigg and eventually drops to a rough lane, along which you turn left. Almost immediately, go right.

8 NY298247 In the valley bottom, just before the lane crosses the Glenderaterra Beck, turn right through a gate. After the next gate, turn left along the route of the old Cockermouth, Keswick and Penrith railway line, built in 1865 and now a shared-use trail. After 1.8km, the path zig-zags its way up to the A66. Turn left along the pavement and take the next road on the left. Just after passing

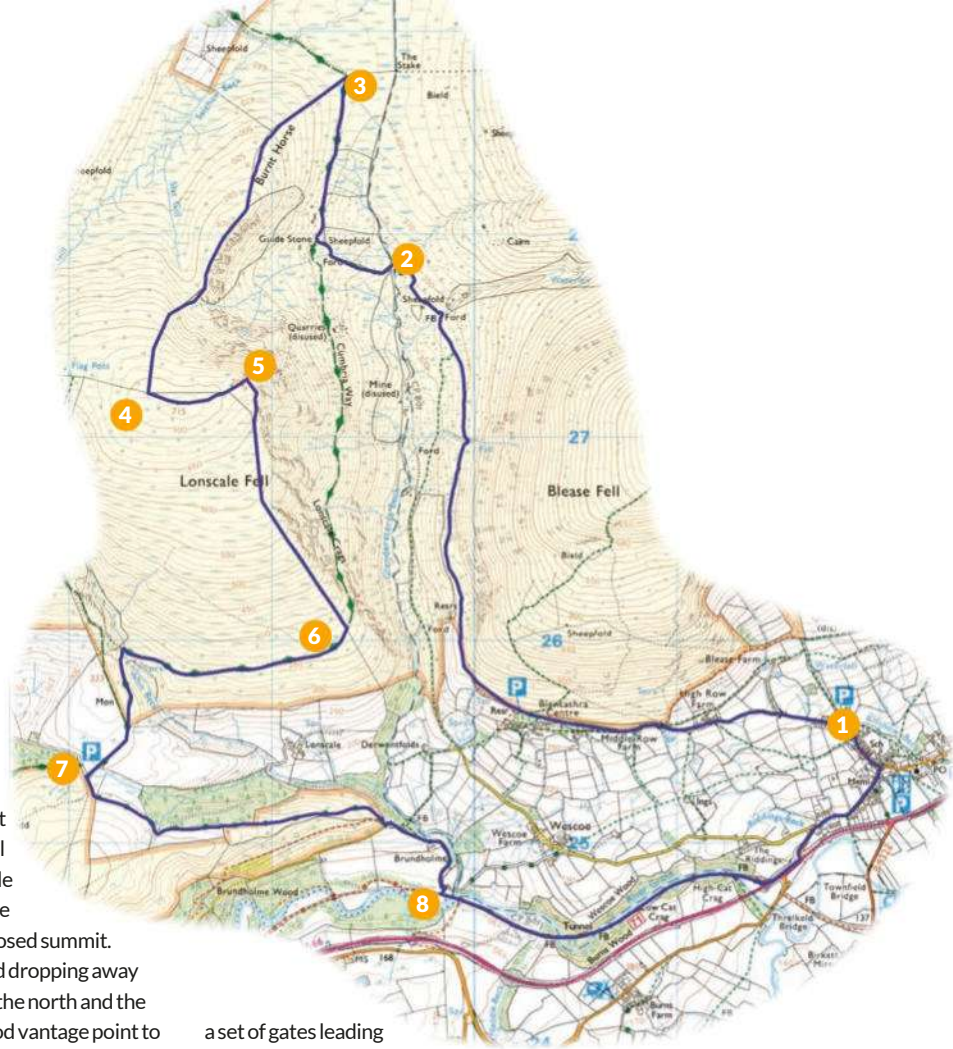
Threlkeld's village hall and coffee shop on the right, take Blease Road on the left. The car park is 270m ahead on the right - or you could continue along the main village road for a further 250m to visit the Horse and Farrier Inn.

Further information

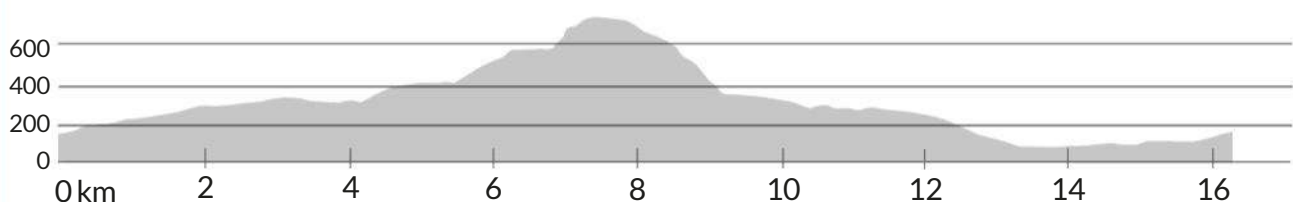
Maps: OS Explorer OL4 and OL5 (1:25k), OS Landranger 90 (1:50k), Harvey Superwalker Lake District North (1:25k)

Transport: Bus X4/X5, Workington to Penrith via Keswick, stagecoachbus.com

Tourist information: lakedistrict.gov.uk, 0845 901 0845



Gradient profile Metres above sea level



5

16.8km/10.7 miles/7 hours

Ascent 1429m/4688ft



Coledale Round via The Coledale Inn Lake District **ENGLAND**



James Forrest bags eight wintry Wainwrights plus a well-earned pint



The Skiddaw massif seen from Grisedale Pike

JOURNEYING from peak to pub, this classic route combines one of the Lakes' most iconic horseshoe ridge walks with one of its best pubs. The Coledale Round is a high-level, summit-bagging classic in the North-Western Fells, whilst the Coledale Inn (a former woollen mill) is a traditional country pub with Georgian and Victorian heritage, an outdoorsy vibe and an enviable hillside perch above Braithwaite.

The Coledale Round is a supremely versatile route with a near-endless array of options. In this version, we opt for eight Wainwrights (Grisedale Pike, Hopegill Head, Crag Hill, Sail, Scar Crag, Causey Pike, Outerside and Barrow). You could skip Barrow and Outerside, or add Wandope, Grasmoo, Whiteless Pike and Whiteside for a 12-summit epic.

Our route is feature-packed, including a wintry ascent of Grisedale Pike's shapely eastern ridge, superb views of Lorton from Hopegill Head, and an airy hike along the lumpy-bumpy arête from Scar Crag to Causey Pike, before a visit to the delightful Coledale Inn. [➔](#)



Views of Hobcarton Crag from Grisedale Pike



Witnessing a Brocken spectre from The Scar ridge



Hiking up Causey Pike with views of Derwent Water

ROUTE

Start/finish small car park off the B5292 Whinlatter Pass
GR: NY227237

1 NY227237 From the car park, take the wooden steps heading north-west, marked 'Public Footpath Grisedale Pike' at a fingerpost sign. Climb on the good, clear path before looping sharply south over bracken-covered slopes. Go through a gate and continue on a grassy path that climbs west and then south-west to Kinn. Continue south-west on a wide, grassy track, remembering to turn round to feast on the excellent views over Keswick and the Skiddaw massif. Veer west as the ascent steepens, passing the Lanty Well spring to gain the Sleet How ridge. The final push south-west and west for the top is along a rocky, narrowing arête, but there are no technical difficulties. Pass old metal fence posts and arrive at Grisedale Pike's summit.

2 NY198225 Descend south-west following an old, derelict drystone wall. The path briefly bends left and right before arriving at a col. Climb over rocky terrain – including a short section of easy scrambling – to reach the 739m top of Hobcarton Crag. Descend briefly west and, at a cairn, fork right to follow a wall to a col. Climb the path ahead, sticking close to but safely away from the edge of the crags to the north, to reach Hopegill Head's 770m summit. Retrace your steps down south-east briefly, fork right, descend to a mini col, and ascend easily ahead to the summit of Sand Hill. Descend south over loose, stony terrain to Coledale Hause. Directly ahead the ascent is blocked by crags, so fork right and ascend south along a stream. At a four-way junction, turn left and steadily climb north-east to Crag Hill's trig pillar.

3 NY192203 Veer right and descend east along The Scar ridge – including some easy scrambling – to a col. Climb easily ahead to the summit of Sail, which is located slightly to the left off the main path. Descend north-east and east on the winding, zig-zagging switchbacks of a machine-built path to reach another col. Climb north-east to the cairned summit of Scar Crags. Descend the ridge east-north-east to a col and ascend easily over undulating, lumpy-

road as it veers right and heads north-west to the Coledale Inn, which will appear on your left. After your refreshments, take the road north-west past the Orthodox Parish of St Bega church, and veer right over the bridge across Coledale Beck to arrive at the B5292 Whinlatter Pass. Turn left on the narrow road, taking care of traffic, and ascend the road west and then north. As the road steepens, arrive back at the small car park at the foot of Grisedale Pike's eastern ridge.

4 NY227218 Descend Barrow's north ridge on a good, well-trodden path. Ignore a turn-off to the left bearing towards Barrow Gill and instead continue north-north-east to Braithwaite Lodge. Pass through the gated farmyard and through a field to arrive at the road. Turn left and head north-north-west through the village. At the village shop, turn left and head south-west on a minor road past houses. Follow the

bumpy terrain to Causey Pike's dramatic summit. Re-trace your steps back to the col and fork right on a shortcut path curving west and then north to High Moss. Climb ahead to the summit of Outsider. Descend north-east to Low Moss, skirt south-east around Stile End on narrow trods to Barrow Door, and ascend gently east and north-east to gain the summit of Barrow, the final Wainwright of the day.

Further information

Maps: OS Explorer OL4 (1:25k), OS Landranger 89 (1:50k), Harvey British Mountain Map Lake District (1:40k)

Transport: Stagecoach's Keswick-Workington X5 bus stops at Braithwaite.

Tourist information: visitlakedistrict.com

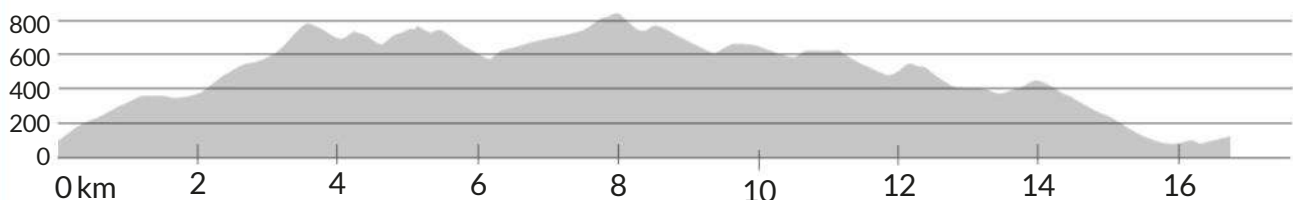
Further information

Maps: OS Explorer OL4 (1:25k), OS Landranger 89 (1:50k), Harvey British Mountain Map Lake District (1:40k)

Transport: Stagecoach's Keswick-Workington X5 bus stops at Braithwaite.

Tourist information: visitlakedistrict.com

Gradient profile Metres above sea level



6

14.7km/9.1 miles/7.5 hours

Ascent 1235m/4051ft



Hopegill Head via The Ruddings Lake District ENGLAND



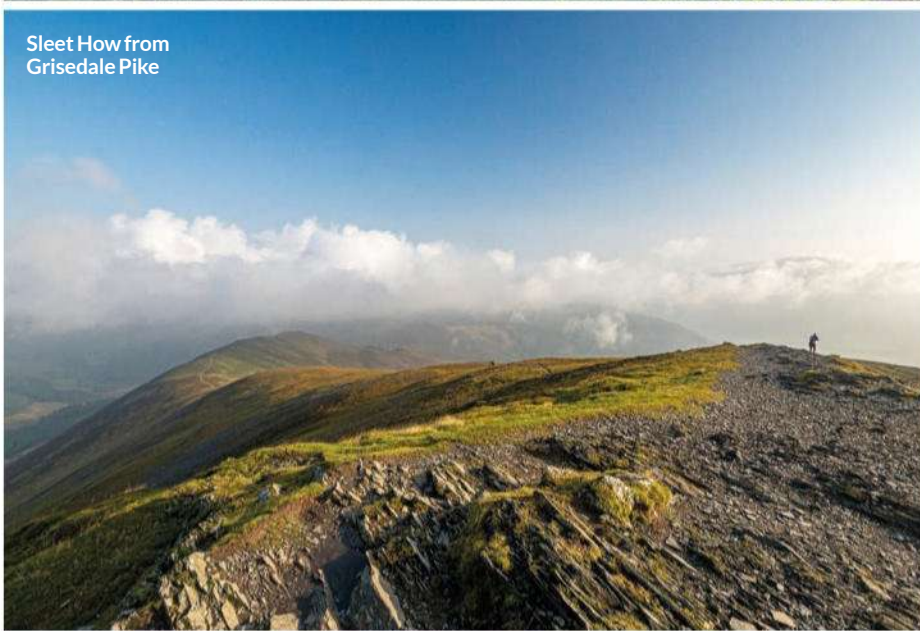
Dawn at Braithwaite How



Ian Battersby visits mountains tucked behind a welcoming pub

THE RUDDINGS was built early on in the 20th Century and named after the ancient fields where it was sited. It has a front-seat view of Skiddaw, which lies just across the valley, and extends a hearty welcome to both walkers and their furry friends despite stylish appearances. The menu caters for groups and all diets and allergies. With the mountains laid out before you it's a great place to seek inspiration for the next challenge.

But if you're to set out from the door, you can't do much better than sneaking round the back and legging it around Coledale. Grisedale Pike sends a slender ridge down to Braithwaite, and the carrot of Crag Hill across Coledale is difficult to resist, but first there are abysses to teeter along on a diversion to Hopegill Head atop Hobcarton Crag, a steep, vegetated place that's thought to be the only English habitat for the red alpine catchfly. Crag Hill can be an easy saunter from its western col, but the northern ridge offers hands-on-rock action and thrills that will be relived over well-earned food and drink to come.



Sleet How from Grisedale Pike



Grisedale Pike from Crag Hill north ridge



Causey Pike from Crag Hill

ROUTE

Start/finish The Ruddings Hotel Restaurant and Bar, Braithwaite
GR: NY233239

1 NY233239 Head S from The Ruddings to the T-junction. Turn R heading SSW along Thornthwaite to the B5292. Turn R following the road as it weaves through and climbs out of Braithwaite, turning N to reach a small official car park on the L (130m). Enter the car park, but turn right immediately to find the Grisedale Pike path (signposted).

2 NY227238 Bear NW up steps through trees to a sharp L bend. Follow the path now climbing S, with far-reaching views over Braithwaite How beyond Keswick, dwarfed between Skiddaw and Derwent Water. Out of the trees the path follows the crest of an elegant ridge, heading SW up over Kinn where it flattens for 500m before climbing NW, then WSW over Sleet How, finishing with a steep rise W to the graceful peak of Grisedale Pike. From here the ridge drops SW into a shallow dip, then climbs a little to reach the start of Hobcarton Crag, which disappears into the gulf off the northern flank of the ridge. Drop W down the opposite side, and climb, turning NW, with fearsome cliffs on the R, to reach Hopegill Head, noting a path joining from the S just before the top. The summit is fashioned from an outcrop of bare rock, with impressive ridges and fringes dropping away in all directions.

3 NY186222 Head SE, taking the path noted earlier, heading over the broad rise offered by Sand Hill, then dropping S steeply down scree into Coledale Hause. There are numerous paths here. Take the right-hand path heading S past the waterfalls of Liza Beck to reach the main path crossing the col from Coledale. Ignore this and take a lesser path, which climbs the ominous-looking north ridge of Crag Hill, climbing SE towards Eel Crag, then S, directly up the crest. The ground is steep and rocky, and there is plenty of 'hands on rock' to enjoy, but without exposure to worry about. Past this the ridge angle eases and climbs Mound, which is as gentle as it sounds, the path bending SE to reach Crag Hill's summit trig point, perched back from an edge that plunges to Coledale. The mountain eases away to the W but

everywhere else formidable carries block the way, except for the eastern ridge named The Scar, which is less fearsome than it sounds, but presents two easy rocky steps.

4 NY193204 Follow the edge SE to find the ridge which drops E then climbs the rounded rise of Sail where the path splits. Keep to the main path, heading ENE and dropping steeply down multiple zig-zags into the col before Scar Crag. Turn L, dropping NE through the crags of Long Comb. Ignore the first minor L turn and keep to the main path as it turns gently R into High Moss col, with a cairn marking a path junction.

5 NY209211 Fork L heading N on grassy path crossing the damp ground of High Moss, then follow good path climbing NE up the ridge to Outerside. Continue


NE, dropping to Low Moss (also damp) and follow the path E then NE to climb Stile End. The path takes the slender NE ridge down to the left edge of Barrow Gill, and follows it down to a lane. Follow this NNE to a T-junction.

6 NY230235 Turn R, and follow the lane round a sharp left-hand bend, dropping down to a T-junction. Turn L over a bridge and bear L to a T-junction with the B5292. Turn R then fork L down Thornthwaite to return to The Ruddings.

NE, dropping to Low Moss (also damp) and follow the path E then NE to climb Stile End. The path takes the slender NE ridge down to the left edge of Barrow Gill, and follows it down to a lane. Follow this NNE to a T-junction.

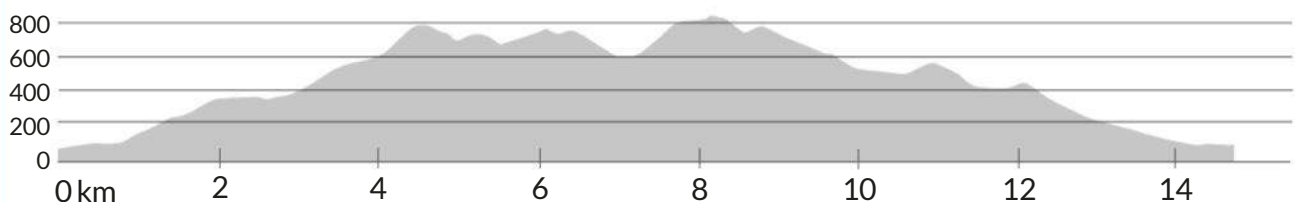
6 NY230235 Turn R, and follow the lane round a sharp left-hand bend, dropping down to a T-junction. Turn L over a bridge and bear L to a T-junction with the B5292. Turn R then fork L down Thornthwaite to return to The Ruddings.

Further information

-  **Maps:** OS Explorer OL4 (1:25k), OS Landranger 90 (1:50k)
-  **Transport:** Bus X5 and 77 stagecoachbus.com
-  **Tourist information:** Keswick lakedistrict.gov.uk 01539 724555



Gradient profile Metres above sea level



7

19.2km/11.9 miles/5.5-6 hours

Ascent 698m/2260ft



Whernside via the George and Dragon Yorkshire Dales **ENGLAND**



The Lake District fells line the horizon on the descent back into Dentdale



Vivienne Crow tackles Yorkshire's highest hill from delightful Dent

MOST FOLK approach Whernside from the east, but this walk climbs to Yorkshire's highest point from the west – from Dentdale in Cumbria – leaving Cumbria for only a few hundred metres, in fact. Ever since the local government reorganisation of 1974, a large proportion of Whernside, including its all-important trig pillar, has fallen outside of North Yorkshire's borders.

Assuming you're sticking with me – and you're not a Yorkshire patriot offended by this shocking fact – this route uses old tracks to get to Whernside. A moderately steep climb brings you to the summit. Crossing into Yorkshire, we briefly share the ridge path with Three Peakers before striking off over less frequented (Cumbrian) ground again. Now we visit moorland that is home to the Whernside Tarns, a breeding area for golden plovers. (This section is not on a right of way and crosses access land where there is a dog ban in force.) A green lane then drops into Dentdale, where riverside paths lead back to Dent's cobbled streets – and the George and Dragon pub. ➔



Turn left along the busy ridge path after waypoint 6



Climbing towards the wall corner at waypoint 5



Sub-zero temperatures and wind combine on one of the Whernside Tarns

ROUTE

Start/finish pay-and-display car park in Dent, 9km south-east of Sedbergh
GR: SD704870

1 SD704870 Leave the car park and cross the road diagonally left to head up Dragon Croft. Keep straight on at the far end of the green. Beyond the lane-end, a narrow, stony path continues uphill, later broadening as it enters the wooded ravine of Flinter Gill, home to the Wishing Tree. To make a wish come true, walk three times clockwise through the tunnel created by its twisted roots. Beyond the trees, continue climbing.

2 SD698859 Turn left on reaching a T-junction. This walled track, known as Occupation Road, curves around the northern and eastern flanks of Great Coum, the northern tip of a ridge that is also home to Lancashire's highest point, Gragareth.

3 SD710846 Turn right at the next track junction. The steep, dark western slopes of Wherside dominate the landscape as you gain height. We'll be heading up there before too long.

4 SD723822 Turn right along a minor road at High Moss for 400m and then cross the stile next to the gate on the left. A beck has to be forded before gaining the rough track heading uphill. Keep left at the top of this short rise, continuing the ascent beside the fence and then a wall. The wall corner is reached after a steep section near some shake holes and rock outcroppings.

5 SD731816 Continue straight on for a few more strides and

then fork right to skirt the top of a boulder-covered slope. The distinctive peak straight ahead is Ingleborough. About 130m beyond the wall corner, head east-south-east along a trail through peat hags and then up a steep, stony slope. This leads directly to Wherside's trig pillar.

6 SD738814 Squeeze through the wall stile to reach the main ridge path. Turn left along this. Part of the Yorkshire Three Peaks challenge route, this can be fairly busy at times, but the sudden appearance of the beautiful Dales landscape to the east is a welcome distraction from the sudden onslaught of fast-moving hikers.

7 SD740823 Having walked the high ridge path for about 800m, cross a stile in a low fence up to the left. A grassy path heads out across the moorland towards the Wherside Tarns. Dodging the worst of the boggy ground, it follows a slightly convoluted route, but the general direction is slightly east of north. Pass to the right of the tarns and then veer north-east to descend gently. The path becomes less obvious when it reaches the corner of a wall/fence. Continue downhill with the wall and fence on your left.

8 SD746845 Turn left when you reach a grassy track, soon enjoying distant views of the Lake District's high fells as you descend. On dropping to a minor road, turn right and then, at a T-junction, go left.

9 SD720860 Just after crossing Deepdale Beck, turn right along the Dales Way. Beyond a gate, the fenced path heads right and then left along the field edge. You're accompanied by Deepdale Beck at first and then the River Dee.

10 SD710871 Having followed the beck and the river for about 1.8km, the path swings away from the Dee. After the bridge over Keld Beck, turn sharp right and follow the

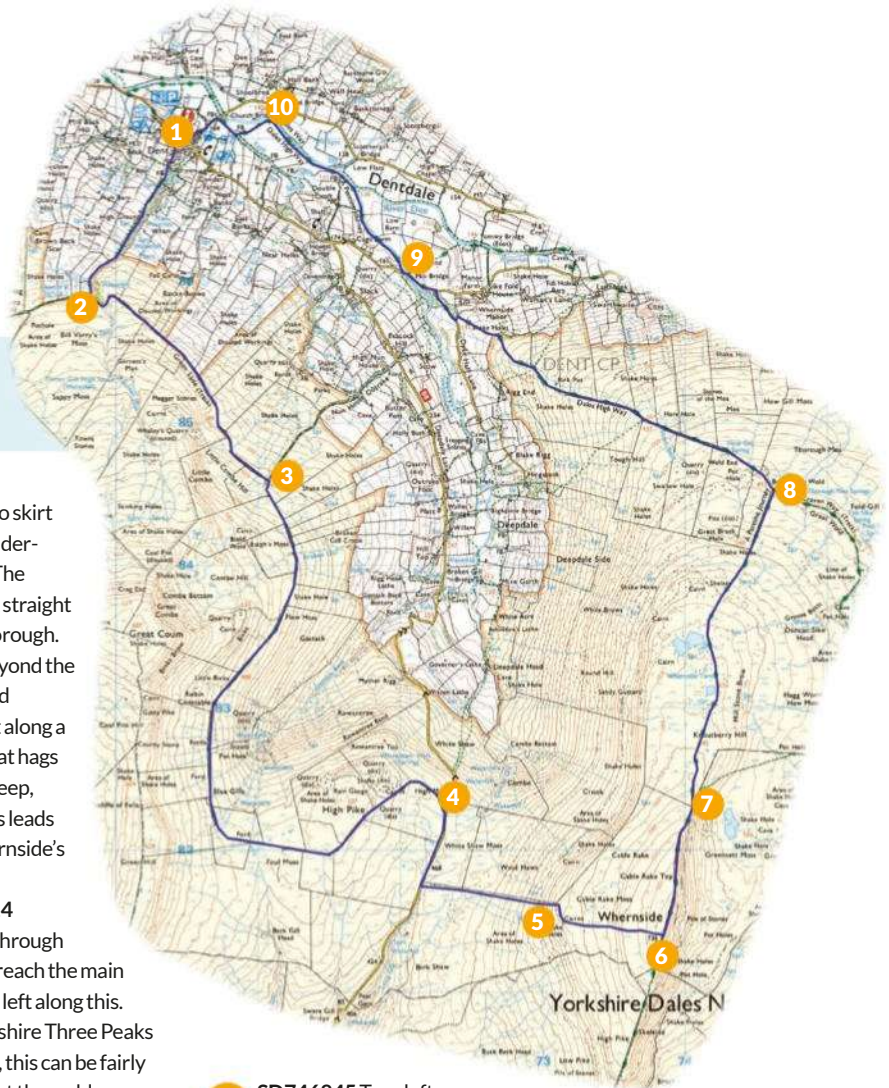
beckside path to Church Bridge. Turn left along the road and follow it through Dent. The village car park is on the right about 50m beyond the end of the cobbles.

Further information

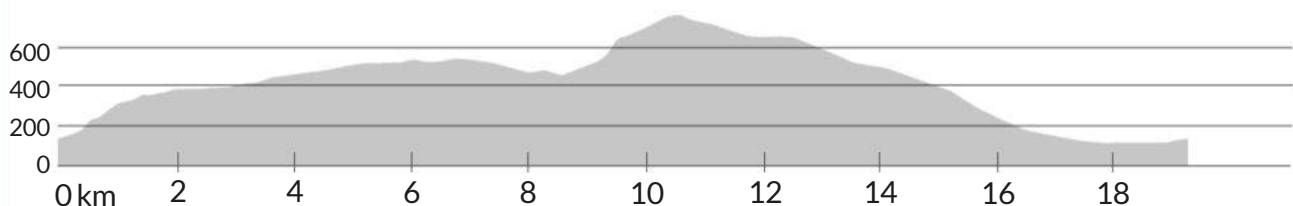
Maps: OS Explorer OL2 (1:25k), OS Landranger 98 (1:50k); Harvey Maps Superwalker XT25 Yorkshire Dales South West (1:25k)

Transport: Dent Station, on the Settle to Carlisle Railway, is 7km from the village

Tourist information: Sedbergh Information Centre, 72 Main Street (015396 20125, sedbergh.org.uk)



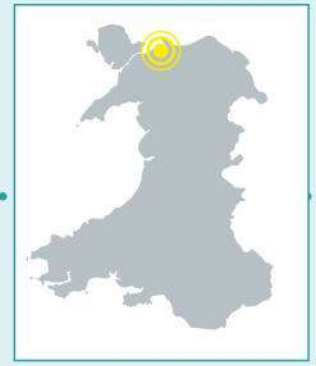
Gradient profile Metres above sea level



8

13.5km / 8.4 miles / 5 hours

Ascent 660m / 2165ft



Tal-y-Fan via the Tŷ Gwyn Hotel Carneddau WALES

A ruined quarry building on Tal-y-Fan



Andrew Galloway visits a landscape steeped in history – and a watering hole!

THE Tŷ GWYN HOTEL in the village of Rowen provides a refuge for walkers on the North Wales Pilgrim's Way. Once suitably refreshed, would-be pilgrims find themselves heading northwards, through the woods of Parc Mawr, up onto the rugged hinterland above the village of Henryd. A narrow pathway, bounded on either side by high walls, leads to a stone church. This dates from the 12th Century and is dedicated to Saint Celynnin, who established a Christian settlement here 600 years earlier. On the open moorland above the church are even older remains. Caer Bach is an Iron Age fortified settlement occupying a dramatic viewpoint over River Conwy. West of the fort rises Tal-y-Fan, an outlying peak of the Carneddau Mountains. At just 610m (2001ft) it barely qualifies for mountain status. The col at Bwlch y Ddeufaen truncates Tal-y-Fan from its loftier cousins. From here the course of a Roman road leads to a field containing the remains of a Neolithic burial chamber known as Maen y Bardd and believed to be 5000 years old.



Conwy Castle with Tal-y-Fan in the distance



Pub, anyone?



Requisite pony pic

ROUTE

Start/finish Tŷ Gwyn Hotel, Rowen* **GR: SH759719**



1 SH759719 The first 3km of the walk, to St Celynnin's church, follows the North Wales Pilgrim's Way. From the pub walk westwards through the village. After 150m, turn to the right, taking the narrow road to the north towards the Cefn Cae campsite.

Follow the track on the south side of the camping field for 100m. Through a gate, turn left and follow a path to a gravel track. Turn right and walk 100m along the track to a wooden stile by a Victorian grave dedicated to the memory of Wallace, 'a fine hound and a faithful companion'. Cross the stile and walk northwards along the margin of the field for 100m towards a coppice. Look for the 'Hi Tiddle' marker nailed to a post and turn to the left. Follow the path westwards for 180m then pass through a metal gate onto a minor road. Turn to the right and follow the road for 160m, taking the rough track branching to the left. After 130m the track bends to the left. On the right is a tall ladder-stile. Climb it! Now head northwards across a field towards the woods. Fifty metres short of the woods, look for the North Wales Pilgrim's Way marker on a post. Go through the wooden gate and follow the wall towards the woods.

2 SH756730 Pass over a metal stile, cross a small stream and

continue 20m, looking for the welcome sign for the Parc Mawr woods. Now follow the path along the lower edge of the woods. After 300m, paths cross. Take the path to the left, climbing steeply through the woods for 300m to where the path crosses a forestry track. Cross the track and continue westwards along the path for 100m and pass through a metal gate. Continue along the path, with high walls and thick vegetation on either side, for 640m to St Celynnin's church.

3 SH751736 From the church continue westwards along the North Wales Pilgrim's Way onto open moorland. After 560m the path divides into two. Take the path to the left heading southwards, passing Craig Celynnin (sic) on the left. After 740m arrive at the fortified settlement of Caer Bach.

4 SH744729 From Caer Bach take the path to the north-west for 1km to a disused quarry. Locate the ruined building

to the south of the quarry.

Climb towards the south-west for 500m to reach a prominent stone wall. Keeping to the north of the wall, follow it along a broad ridge to a ladder stile on the summit of Tal-y-Fan (610m). Cross the stile to reach the triangulation pillar.

5 SH729726 From the summit follow the route of the Cambrian Way west, keeping to the north of the wall for 360m to a col where paths cross. Continue to the west for 1.8km, descending to Bwlch y Ddeufaen, where the path intersects the route of a Roman road.

6 SH712718 Pass through an iron gate and follow the route of the Roman road to the south-east. Here there are two prominent prehistoric monoliths, one on either side of the road. The stones provide this ancient mountain pass with its name, Bwlch y Ddeufaen, which translates into English as 'the pass of the two stones'. After 1km pass through a gate to a parking area

where the trackway becomes a minor road (surfaced). Continue along the road for 1.2km to where it branches into two. Take the gravel track to the left for 1km. In the field to the north of the track stands the Neolithic burial chamber known as Maen y Bardd, the poet's stone.

7 SH741718 Return to the track and continue to the north-east for 600m to a hostel. From here the road is once again surfaced. Follow the road for 1.3km, turning left into the village to return to the Tŷ Gwyn pub.

Further information

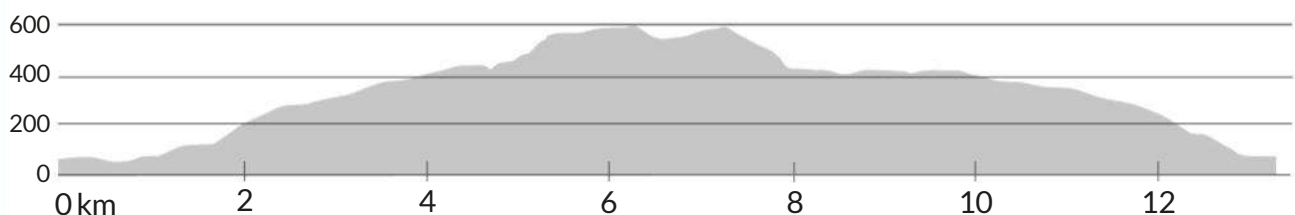
Maps: OS Explorer OL17 (1:25k)

Transport: Llew Jones operate the number 19 bus with regular services from Conwy to Rowen. Check timetables here: llewjones.com/bus-timetables

Tourist information: visitconwy.org.uk

*Before parking at the pub, please ask permission. Otherwise there is ample parking and public toilets by the Memorial Hall. Tŷ Gwyn is a rural pub in a quiet village, so please check the opening hours on its website: tygwyn-pub.com

Gradient profile Metres above sea level



9

16.4km/10.2 miles/5.5-6.5 hours

Ascent 943m/3094ft



Worcestershire Beacon via The Wyche Inn Malvern Hills **ENGLAND**



Looking south along the ridgeline



Lara Dunn walks a ridgeline to the highest pub in Worcestershire

THE MALVERN HILLS, clearly visible from the M5 motorway as a sort of Alps in miniature, stretch for around 10 miles from their most southerly point in Herefordshire almost directly north to their end point above the Victorian spa town of Great Malvern. The source of the famous health-giving water springs that made the town so popular with well-heeled Victorian travellers, the hills are still very much a draw today for those looking for an active break.

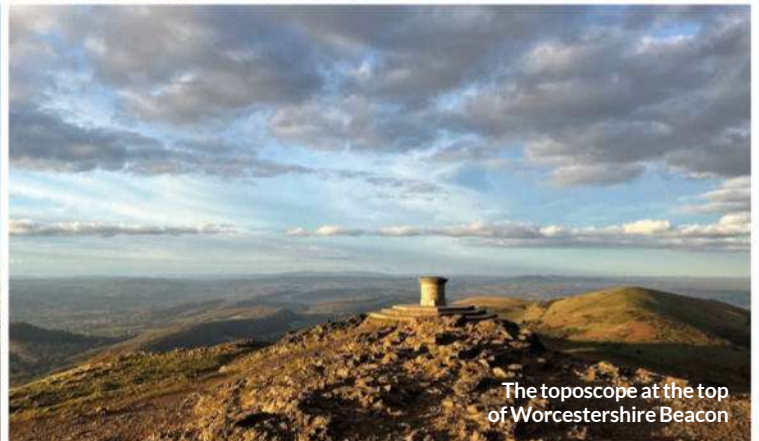
This linear route along the full length of the hills is undulating, with many relatively modest peaks including the highest in the county – the 425m Worcestershire Beacon – giving a challenging walk when taken in a single push. It offers unparalleled vistas over the countryside of both Herefordshire and Worcestershire (and on a good day as far as Wales), and is fairly straightforward to follow. The terrain is rough but not overly taxing, and it's ideal for year-round hikes in any weather – particularly given the inclusion of some excellent, cosy hostelries along the way!



Views east to the Vale of Evesham, Bredon Hill and the distant Cotswolds



Highland and Belted Galloway cattle are the Malverns' natural lawnmowers



The toposcope at the top of Worcestershire Beacon

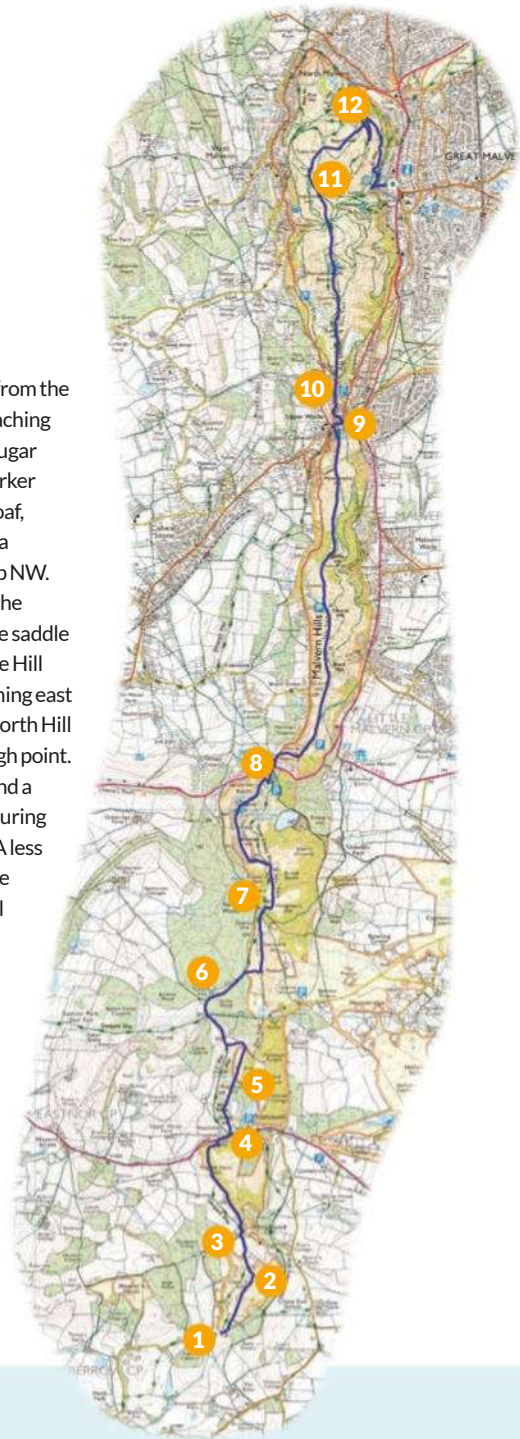
ROUTE

Start Chase End car park GR: SO757349
Finish Great Malvern GR: SO774460

- 1** SO757349 From the car park ascend the track, passing through woodland and into open grassland with a path to Chase End Hill. From the trig point, the ridgeline snakes away and the open fields of the Severn Valley stretch towards the Cotswold escarpment.
- 2** SO761355 Take a steep path down NW, continuing through mixed woodland that frames these hills. Emerge onto the road into the hamlet of White Leaved Oak.
- 3** SO760359 The turn NW is next to a set of stocks and trends uphill to pass through a metal gate before contouring around the slopes of Raggedstone Hill. Verdant Herefordshire countryside is visible through gaps in woodland. The path drops to meet the A438 through Hollybush and follows the road uphill to the Malvern Hills Trust car park.
- 4** SO759369 Through the metal gate, the path heads up the hillside, climbing steeply through dense woodland to emerge onto the open slopes of one of Malvern's two Iron Age hill forts: Midsummer Hill.
- 5** SO760374 It is a great spot for a tea break, with spectacular views towards Eastnor Castle and a small shelter should the weather turn. The path down is easy to follow, trending vaguely N before arriving at a junction of trails.
- 6** SO756381 Ignoring the cattle grid, go through the metal gate. The path contours upwards gently along a stretch of the Three Choirs Way. Follow it until a cattle grid and gate, then branch off uphill to rejoin the ridgeline. From here, the trail is rough but easy to follow, keeping to the undulating ridge.
- 7** SO762390 On descending, there's a junction of several paths. Trend upwards to meet a waymarker stone set in the bank pointing to Hangman's Hill and Broad Down. Follow the steep, eroded gully up to join the main ridge. From here, Millennium Hill and British Camp, the second Iron Age hill fort, lie ahead. The steps up are a steady plod but worth the view. From the summit, descend to meet the wooded trail down to the car park and A449 at Wynd's Point.
- 8** SO762404 Here, Sally's Place serves hot drinks, cakes and butties. Across the road is the Malvern Hills Hotel. The route bisects the A449 to re-join the ridgeline via a steep, rutted path a short distance behind the hotel before heading N, following the ridgeline over several summits, including Black Hill, Pinnacle Hill, Jubilee Hill and Perseverance Hill. Rejoin the road at the Wyche Cutting. Follow the tarmac through the cutting.
- 9** SO770438 You may now wish to stop at The Wyche Inn, the highest pub in Worcestershire! When you're ready, follow the steep path that runs behind the pub.
- 10** SO769439 Taking an off-road path to the side of the main tarmac gives a wilder feel and follows a gorse-bordered trail up to Summer Hill, then to the climb up to Worcestershire Beacon (425m) with its toposcope and 360-degree panorama. Follow one

of the many routes down from the top, keeping N in mind, reaching the saddle at the base of Sugar Loaf, with another waymarker stone. Passing E of Sugarloaf, follow the main path until a junction and take a path up NW.

- 11** SO767460 Follow the grassy path up to the saddle between two peaks – Table Hill and North Hill, before turning east to take the final climb to North Hill summit, the walk's final high point. It's then possible to descend a steep route to join a contouring path into Great Malvern. A less slippery path runs from the saddle between North Hill and Table Hill.
- 12** SO772465 From the contouring path, turn off onto a zig-zag path that joins the popular path Lady Howard de Walden Drive to head back south, finishing just above the Victorian Donkey Shed on the road down to the town and its numerous pubs, cafés and restaurants.



Further information

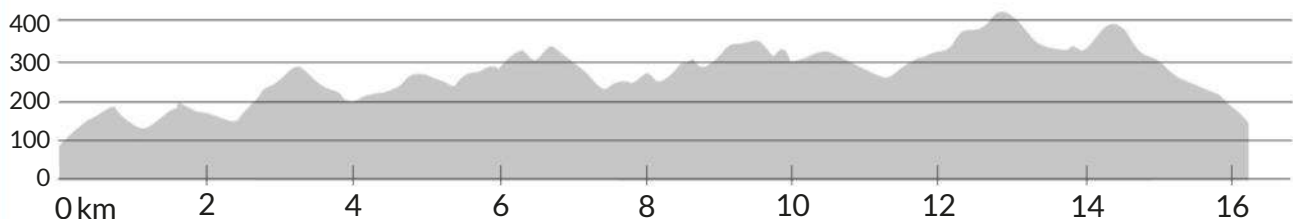
Maps: OS Explorer 190 (1:25k), OS Landranger 150 (1:50k)

Transport: Easiest is to book a taxi from Great Malvern railway station to the start, or arrange a lift. The end point is only a short walk from

the station. If driving, be aware the car park at Chase End only has six spaces. If it's full, nearby Hollybush car park (SO759369) is an alternative option.

Tourist information:
 Visit the Malverns, visithemalverns.org

Gradient profile Metres above sea level



10

14.3km / 8.9 miles / 5 hours*
Ascent 662m / 2172ft



Golden Cap via the Anchor Inn Dorset ENGLAND



Looking over Lyme Bay from Golden Cap



Fiona Barltrop recommends a pub and a peak, both with great views

FOR A 'PUB TO PEAK' walk in the south of England, you can't do much better than the Anchor Inn at Seatown, from where you can climb straight up to the highest point along the southern coastline of Britain: the 191m/627ft flat-topped summit of Golden Cap. From here there are stunning views along the coast in both directions.

The multi-award-winning pub is in a beautiful tucked-away spot above the beach, at the end of a no-through lane. There is excellent walking along the coast path in either direction, with far-reaching views from Thorncombe Beacon to the east as well as Golden Cap to the west.

The Jurassic Coast is world-famous for its geology and fossils, which can be found at many locations along the Dorset coast, including Seatown and nearby Charmouth. A voluntary code of conduct operates: collecting from the beach is acceptable practice, but digging in the cliffs is not. The Charmouth Heritage Centre is a good place to learn more about the fossils to look out for.



The view back over Seatown on the climb to Golden Cap.



Anchor Inn, Seatown



Golden Cap from the beach near Charmouth

*If short of time, out-and-back extension to Charmouth could be omitted.



ROUTE

Start/finish beach car park, Seatown GR: SY420917

1 SY420917 Turn right along the lane from the car park and continue to the South West Coast Path (SWCP) turn on the left. The route to Golden Cap is well waymarked. The terrain is part of the National Trust's Golden Cap Estate, which encompasses a variety of terrain – hills, fields, valleys and coastline – with over 25 miles of footpaths and bridleways. The patchwork pattern of fields has been preserved and traditional methods of farming have encouraged a wealth of wildlife. A long, steady ascent on grass with some steps to finish leads you to the trig point on the summit plateau – Golden Cap itself takes its name from the honey-coloured sandstone that crowns it. On a clear day the views extend from Portland in the east to Start Point in the west. Also on the summit is a memorial to the Earl of Antrim, Chairman of the National Trust in the 1960s and 1970s. He spearheaded the fundraising campaign, named Enterprise Neptune, to purchase stretches of unspoiled coastline, thereby saving them from development. The Golden Cap Estate was part of this, parcels of land being added in stages over the

years. Now, 780 miles of coastline are in the care of the National Trust.

2 SY407922 Walk to the far end of the summit plateau and head down the zig-zagging path to a kissing gate and junction, continuing on the SWCP down grassy slopes. The path descends through vegetation to cross a footbridge over a stream above St Gabriel's Mouth, and thereafter two more footbridges are crossed. Further on, climb a flight of steps. Bear left at the top to the grassy clifftop plateau – Cain's Folly viewpoint, with Lyme Regis in view across the bay.

3 SY379931 Keep ahead at a signpost (car park signed to the right) to go through a kissing gate, and follow the SWCP downhill, crossing a bridge at the bottom to the car park, with the Heritage Centre beyond. (Note: the western end of Dorset is particularly prone to landslips, which have resulted in a number of coast path diversions over the years, notably east of Charmouth; follow diversion signs if need be.)

4 SY364930 Retrace steps back uphill. Turn left along the grassy path to Stonebarrow

Hill car park, turning right there along a track passing the Old Radar Station (now a National Trust holiday let) to the car park at the far end.

5 SY390935 Turn right through a gate and fork right down the grass (signed 'St Gabriel's & Golden Cap') – Golden Cap ahead of you – soon on a defined track. Carry on downhill to Upcot farm, turning left at the farm buildings, and continue along the track to a signposted junction, Pickaxe Cross.

6 SY399930 Turn right and continue down the access road to St Gabriel's. The large thatched house, an 18th-Century manor house, is now divided into National Trust holiday cottages. This is the location of the former hamlet of Stanton St Gabriel, once a thriving settlement dating back to the 11th Century.

7 SY401924 Continue on the bridleway past the ruins of the 13th-Century St Gabriel's Chapel. Keep ahead where a footpath forks right. A little

further on, the bridleway turns right up the northern slopes of Golden Cap, and then left, signed for Langdon Wood. At the next junction bear right along the bridleway signed for Langdon Hill. Continue on the bridleway along the southern edge of Langdon Hill woodland. At the next fork bear right, signed 'Seatown, To Coast Path', heading downhill, with fence on the left, to rejoin the outward route. Retrace your initial steps to the start.

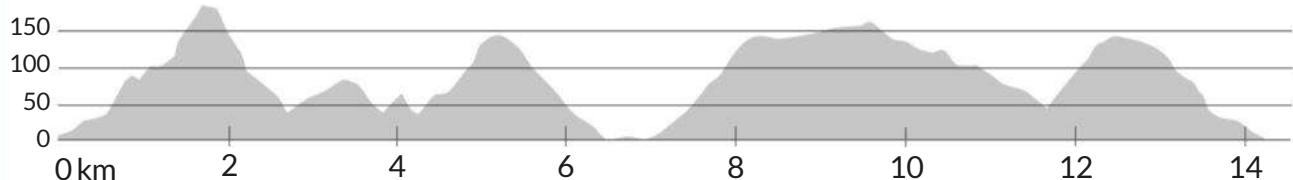
Further information

Maps: OS Explorer OL10 (1:25k); OS Landranger 197 (1:50k)

Transport: X51 from Dorchester to Axminster and X53 from Weymouth to Axminster both stop at Chideock, 0.7 mile from Seatown, and Charmouth

Tourist information: Bridport TIC (01308 424901), visit-dorset.com

Gradient profile Metres above sea level



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- Neringa 12/04/2023

outdoorduo.co.uk



OutdoorDuo

Gnome discomforts

Emma Schroeder found peace pitched up at night – unless a particular pot figure was in sight

HUMANITY is pretty weird when you think about it. We lost our fur over a million years ago in order to cool down. Then we decided it was a bit chilly, actually, so we started pinching pelts from other animals to warm up again. Today, we've taken this hunt for comfort to new heights. We sit indoors fiddling with thermostats and humidifiers, creating tiny personal ecosystems. Ocean sound effects lull us to sleep whilst digital birdsong serenades us awake. It's a meticulous effort to recreate what once came naturally, and it shows how detached we've become from the world outside our cosy, curated, climate-controlled habitats.

Now, I'm not suggesting we all eschew electricity and go back to living outdoors, but maybe the odd foray into nature is recommended. You can't spell 'content' without 'tent', after all!

I used to believe the perfect camping spot waited just around the corner, saving itself for me. It was a game I played, racing against the setting sun, convinced that the universe would deliver if I could just hold on a little longer. But then the melancholy blue of twilight would come and swallow up the landscape, bathing everything in an eerie light. As the darkness fell, so did my standards. The mission ethos in picking a pitch changed from "must be absolutely perfect" to a resigned "eh, good enough".

Once my tent was up, I found night-time incredibly peaceful. People would ask if I ever got scared, and I'd tell them that being outside in the wild was when I felt most calm, recalling the slow flashing of a distant lighthouse, the waves gently lapping on the shore, the soft hooting of an owl. What I didn't tell them about was my new-found fear of a seemingly innocuous outdoor feature. I am, of course, referring to garden gnomes. Yes, those rosy-cheeked ceramic men who lurk on people's lawns. Let me explain...

Have you ever heard of something called the 'uncanny valley'? It's not an oddly named location like Boggy Bottom in Hertfordshire or Scratch Arse Ware in Dorset. Uncanny valley is a term that describes the sense of unease you may feel upon encountering things that look almost – but not quite – human. It's the no man's land where robots, mannequins and other pseudo-humans reside; the doll with a bit too



As daylight dwindles, the pressure to pitch grows...



Have head torch, will banish bogeymen



No gnomes here, happily




“In the daytime, garden gnomes are quaint at best, tacky at worst.”

much personality in its glassy eyes; the wax figure you could have sworn just winked at you.

In the daytime, garden gnomes are quaint at best, tacky at worst. But at night, illuminated only by a head torch, they transform into something more sinister. You can almost hear them whispering when you turn away. Spin around quickly to check and you could swear they've shifted position. Hell gno.

Fishing gnomes are particularly disturbing. The implication is that they are able to eat fish and thus must have a functioning digestive system. So, to me, it's not much of a stretch to assume that they are perfectly capable of consuming human flesh.

Indeed, in embracing the dark, I found fear wasn't always rational. It had less to do with what was outside and more to do with what my own bizarre imagination conjured up. It reminds us that when the lights go out, our inner worlds awaken, alive with possibilities – and maybe the odd *idée fixe* about garden gnomes.



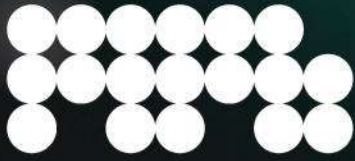
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