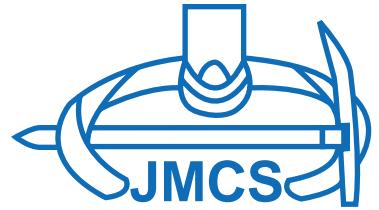


# JMCS

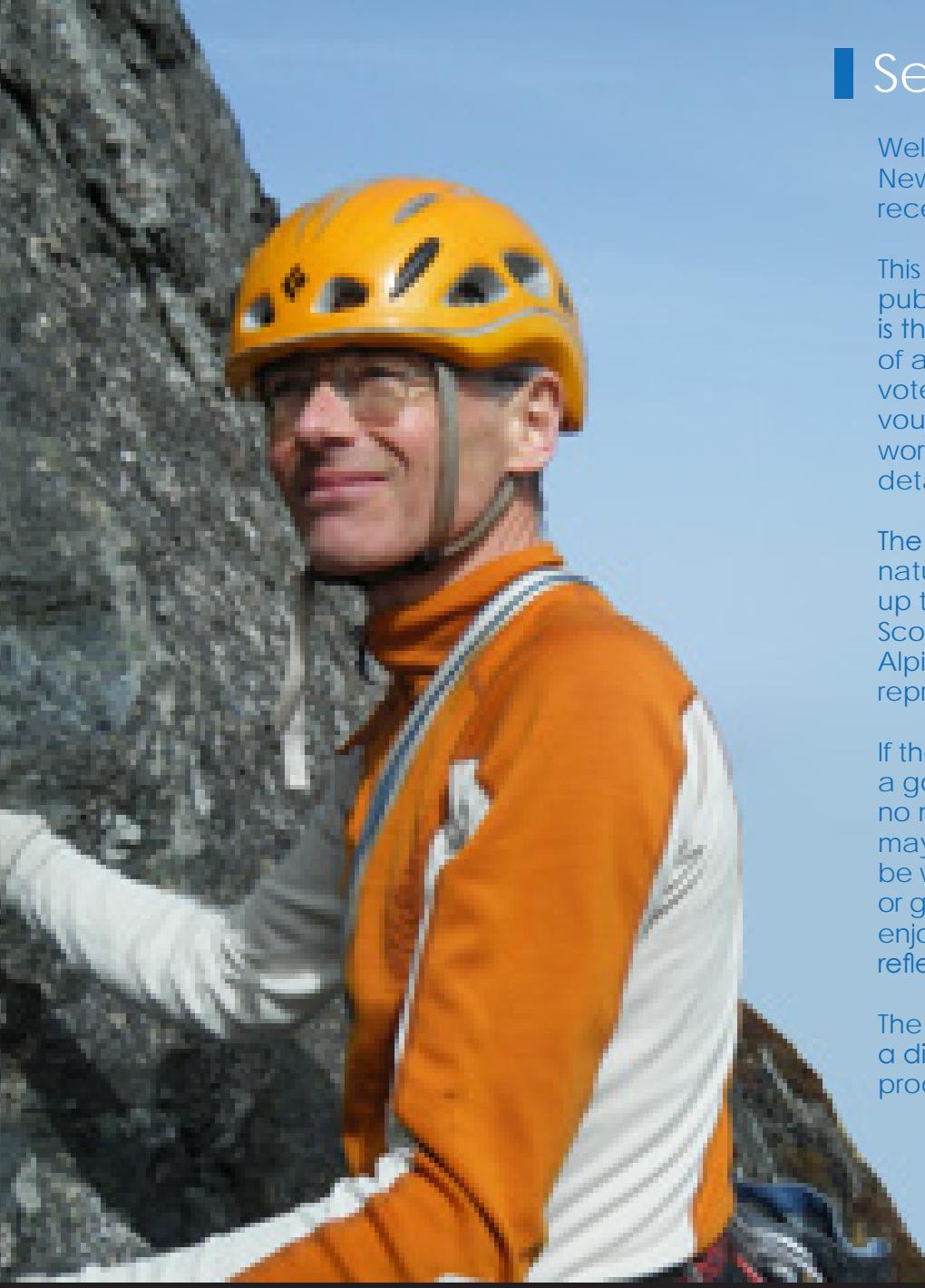
## Winter Newsletter 2011



2011

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# Secretary's Introduction

Welcome to the 2011 edition of the JMCS Winter Newsletter, bursting with accounts of members' recent mountain activities.

This is the second edition of the Newsletter to be published on the Internet rather than on paper. It is the first edition to feature the JMCS equivalent of a Pulitzer Prize. Members will be invited to vote for the article they liked best and a Tiso voucher will be presented to the author whose work attracts the highest number of votes. Further details of how to vote will be circulated by email.

The articles this year reflect the wide ranging nature of mountain activity which members get up to and the different places they go. Sun rock, Scottish ice climbing, hill walking and scrambling, Alpine mountaineering and ski touring are all represented, as is sailing to the island hills.

If there is a common theme it is that everyone has a good time and comes back safely; there are no major epics (although Big T and his Munroists maybe came close). Mountain literature wouldn't be what it is if every tale had to be one of death or glory. I hope you enjoy by proxy, as it were, the enjoyment of the mountains that these articles reflect.

The Club is indebted to Sarah Wright for turning a disorderly pile of manuscripts into the quality production that you are now reading.

David Small

# Season of Smith's and Melting Routefulness

## Ruth Love



Below Smith's Gulley - second time around

In the last JMCS circular, our respected Secretary commented that nobody had chosen to write about the glorious winter season of 2009/2010. Given that I enjoyed over 30 winter routes in that period, I thought that a few retrospective lines on the subject were due. And there definitely were some good lines. Don't worry; I'm not going to take you through all 30+ of them! Just some highlights with everything from easy gullies to the steep stuff and with a cast of tens...

Comparisons were made to the exceptional winter of 1947 when, my father tells me, his uncle Jack who was a village "Carrier" died in the course of his work because his blood froze! How grateful we should be for our technical clothing that keeps us snug today.

But I was over dressed for the first route of the season. Good friend of long standing (and on winter belays he often is long standing) Graeme Tough (Underwater Hockey/Ferranti MC/SMC) and I had been on a state of alert to nip up to The Pentlands and find that grade I gully to climb. We both live near the venue and near to each other. Inspired on JMCS slide night by our member Charles Stupart's photographs of his night time adventure in The Pentlands with Sue Marvell, I gave Graeme a phone. He was free that Saturday morning but needed to tie in with his family's activities. So given a morning pass, we agreed to meet (Red) Ruth (his partner) and son Josh afterwards for some sledging up at Hill End! Donning full mountaineering kit, taking a rope and a shed load of gear we set off to find the gully

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snow conditions were unusually continental and therefore avalanche risk was high for quite a period. Climbers took advantage of near to road ice and I was lucky enough to climb “Oui Oui”

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on what turned out to be a most beautiful day. The Pentlands were snow covered and looking fabulous. We played around on some other gullies before discovering the main objective. I was due to climb in The Norries with a new partner the following day and wanted to practice a few “moves”. Of course we ended up soloing this delightful gully and the Tough – Love team emerged on the ridge looking like Doug Scott having climbed Everest. People walked past with their dogs and children, not quite in T shirts but distinctly relaxed and wondered what on earth we were up to! “Is it dangerous down there?” they asked. But I did find an understanding kindred spirit back at the café after sledging. It was JMCS member Julian Hall waiting on his daughter’s skiing lesson to finish. We JMCSers get everywhere!

Warm up completed, things became harder but there were one or two old favourite routes on the list as circumstances dictated. As you will probably remember, snow conditions were unusually continental and therefore avalanche risk was high for quite a period. Climbers took advantage of near to road ice and I was lucky enough to climb “Oui Oui” (Creag Dubh) with Nina Tilston, The Steall Falls with David Small and Eas Anie (Ben a Chuirn) with Lorraine McCall on New Year’s Eve. Just the last one on NYE that is! Walked out in a full moon and made it home to Simon and a bottle of vintage chardonnay on

time for The Bells! I just missed out on The Grey Mare’s Tail but Stuart Bauchop would I’m sure relate his tale of it!

Every time I climbed on Ben an Dothaidh the sky was blue and the light fantastic. Secretary Small, Admiral Weller and Dr Love were a jolly JMCS trio on Taxus Direct (Ice fall finish) in early February and were described by the only other climbing pair that we met that day as “A bunch of whippets”! We were particularly fast and efficient and beat them to the route. A route with Heike Puchan on that crag gave more stunning photographs and another top day. But I think that Dave Amos and I were the luckiest there with a route that everyone has been waiting for. It rarely comes into condition but Cirrus IV 4\*\* obliged on 21st February. Having helped a lady with a stuck car (Ever gallant Dave) and encountered a whole army, it seemed on a climbing holiday, we had to queue. But it was well worth the wait and with Dave wearing a red fleece there were more superb photographs.

Now both the above mentioned climbers are linked with the title of this article. Season of Smiths it was indeed as I enjoyed the eponymous (highlight) route of the season twice within three weeks! I climbed Smith’s Gully on Creag Meagaidd first with Heike who is famed for her extreme alpine starts. I am as keen as mustard but 3.00am is the earliest I have ever set my alarm in winter from Edinburgh. Heike lives in Dunblane

so a shorter drive from there but that would not have made any difference to her. An army like march in had us at the crag on time to slot in to the constant stream of Smith's hopefuls. We waited for one pair to get going - not long but it gave us time to gear up. Heike had climbed the route before with her husband Brian and so I knew this could be my chance for a good shot at leading. More familiar with mixed leading at that grade, I felt that I could do with a few more steep ice leads under my belt (or harness I suppose!). Heike kindly encouraged me to go for it. So off I went up the first pitch which is arguably the hardest and got to work. And one did have to work the ice as it was very compact and had been chewed up a bit by the dozens of previous climbers. Narrow, twisted and overhanging towards the exit of the pitch I perversely relished the excitement and was very pleased on reaching the belay. Thereafter we alternated and I got another pitch of steep ice. It is a truly great and aesthetic route with its high side walls and feeling of being in the heart of the mountain.

When I repeated the route with Dave Amos, it was on the fourth day of what can only be described as a Sun Ice Fest! The owners of the dental practice I work at granted me a Monday off at short notice which attached to my regular Tuesday off enabled me to join Dave for this mini break. Recovering from illness and having been kept awake by



The Admiral, the Dentist and the Secretary after Taxus Direct

neighbours the night before leaving, I struggled at first. But these problems soon melted away as fortunately the ice did not! Organ Pipes Wall and Peter Pan Direct at Beinn Udlaidh saw us getting started. I was to return to this arena for more great ice climbing later on. Cirrus (already mentioned) was next before we moved around to Creag Meagaidh. I had always wanted to climb The Pumpkin, another Cold Climbs classic and so we did. Arrived the last day of the tour and I had seen Dave looking longingly at Smith's. A most considerate person, Dave recognised that I had done the

route recently but it was too good an opportunity to miss. Conditions that day suggested that the Pinnacle Buttress area would be safer and better. We thought about Diadem etc but Alastair Buchanan whom we had met, confirmed our initial thoughts about options. Anything would have been a bonus after such a marvellous few days so that I really did not mind doing the route again. A deal was struck that I should lead the pitches not led already. Much better weather than the first time but the ice had kinda shrunken a little. Still a stupendous route and though my pitches were slightly

easier, they were longer and I could really relax and flow. We started the climb this time after 8.00am but barely had to wait. Just the way it goes sometimes but Smith's was an extremely popular route this particular season; people queuing from 3.00am some days!

Later in the season David Small and I climbed Smith's little brother Ritchie's Gully just up from it. It is shorter and supposedly a grade easier than Smith's but deceptively steep on the first pitch – Two people I met when with Heike took fright and ran away! (From Ritchie's not us!). The smart money was on Ritchie's that day as blog reports proved. Mountain Guide Jonathon Preston and his wife were ahead of us on the route and I think we were the only people to complete anything on Meggy that day.

We are not finished with the season of Smith's so I will now transport to the Ben. I climbed Smith's Route on Gardyloo Buttress as part of a series of "Coaching" days with Richard Bentley an MIC who was also one of the assessors for my Summer ML. Richard has given me a lot of help with technique for improving my leading grade and introduced me to harder climbing in winter. I am fortunate in that he lets me lead appropriate pitches and thus it was with Smith's. It was the second route of the day, the first being the technically harder Kellet's Route, left of Smith's which Richard described in the CIC hut climbs book as

"Pokey". It was a bold lead and I am glad that he led it.

Thereafter we were all at sixes and sevens. East Face Route in Stob Coire Nan Lochan, Glen Coe, provided my first attempt at seconding a technical 7. I thoroughly enjoyed it and decided it was "Engineery". We had however to abandon this route for another as it was all falling apart.

Cold Climbs classics featured highly throughout the season. Too many to mention but I finished the season with mad journeys to The Ben in late April, again with Dave. Two "Shots in the Dark" you could say on the first trip which was on a Monday night after work. One was trying to find the CIC hut in the swirly snow and pitch black. The second being the eponymous route on Indicator Wall area. Delicate stuff with amazing exposure. Determined to be the last people to leave The Ben; we travelled up to the CIC hut again the following Friday night after work. I had planned to rise at 3.00am to beat the predicted melt. But a certain trio including hut custodian Robin Clothier persuaded us to compromise and all five of us headed up Observatory Gully together at a later time, weaving between the mini avalanches! On to safe ground and Dave led the first pitch of Caledonia. I was only about a metre above the moving Gardyloo Gully and Dave and I could not hear each other for the roar. On arriving at the first stance,



*I was only about a metre above the moving Gardyloo Gully and Dave and I could not hear each other for the roar*



Dave told me that he had not known whether I would be on the end of the rope or not!

And so we finished in the sizzling sun and descended to Coire Leish with chocolate box views and chocolate to eat! The others had climbed Psychedelic Wall and had left the hut when we returned to it. Robin had a rendezvous somewhere. We did not leave the hut for some time. Why? Was it cups of tea? Was it sunbathing? Was it falling asleep? No. Dave had found a frozen scrunched up T shirt near the summit cairn and was melting it by the fire!



Bruce in the Couloir

# An almost non-climbing year

## Euan Scott

Weather-wise the 10/11 winter was a good cold one with plenty to go at. So lots of evening chats in the Starbank Inn after suitably late starts at Alien Rock - potential partners keen to go, routes to be done, families to be ignored. This boundless wall of enthusiasm obviously resulted in lots of enjoyable trips. Err..... well one day trip resulting in two routes done with a club member I had not met before.

These routes then turned out to be the only two multi pitch routes I did all year. These were combined with a sunny afternoon at Kingussie crag with the family, one late evening trip to Hawkraig, one to Traprain and one horror story at Auchinstarry. This would not seem to add up to a very good year from an adventure point of view. However there are three reasons why it was a good year. All easily summed up by future promise.

First there was a late winter trip with Bruce to the Norries. After a few club members being unavailable, but suggesting Bruce as a potential partner I gave him a ring and a few false starts later we managed to arrange a day trip up North. The northern corries were the obvious choice and true to form it was

raining at the car park. However within half an hour the sun was peeking through the cloud and we were off. Heading into the main corrie our planned route was the Fiacall couloir. Snow and ice were in good condition and it felt good to have the first route of the season ticked off and with a new partner. Bruce seemed reassured that even though I had straight shafted axes and used leashes I had a vague recollection of what I was supposed to do. So stood at the top of the route Bruce kept on pointing out an icefall down in the Corrie.

So a quick detour via Aladdin's Direct on the way back to the car was in order. From a leisurely stroll to the bottom of the route it turned into a mad dash for the base of the route as two others also were heading for it. Having got there first and being well out of breath it was very easy for me to make sure Bruce lead the first pitch. Glad he did, as I did it with no style and was relieved that the rope was going up from my harness, not down. Back at Bruce's front door 15 hours after picking him up all added to a fine day out. Unfortunately three weeks later the big thaw set in and that was winter done.

Second trip was an afternoon cragging with the family at Kingussie crag. There

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*The Force 5 beat down  
the Sound of Mull  
on Sunday blew any  
cobwebs away!*

”

Neil and John heading back to Tobermory



was some glorious early summer sun which combined with fantastic views across the Spey valley and some pleasant easy climbing. Our eldest, Alex (12), has been to Alien Rock and Rathon a few times, but this was only his second time outdoors. Both times he has been enjoying it. Though he might be labouring under the idea that rock climbing in Scotland is always sunny. Hopefully the climbing bug has bitten. Only a few more years and he will be carrying the heavy sack and then only a few more and he will be carrying his Dad! We were at Jock's for a few days, so he also managed to get some mountain biking at the Wolftrax centre just beyond Lagan. Fiona and Alex also managed an afternoon skiing. Only part of the top run was open, but again it was a sunny afternoon. I think he may be getting in all his good weather days in early on. More importantly he is enjoying the outdoors.

The last trip was something different as the highest point reached was the Mishnish Bar in Tobermory, all of 4 metres above sea level! It was an end of year trip with Neil Boyd and a friend John, to take John's boat from Loch Melfort to Loch Creran (30 miles) where it was to be left overwinter. On Friday evening on the way to the boat we stopped off at the Real Food Cafe and a bit of scheming by Neil and myself resulted in us going via the West side of Mull as well (110 miles). Apart from me feeding the fish at the South end of the Sound of Iona it felt like a stolen trip - totally unexpected with a great sail passed the Treshnish Islands. Ben More stayed under cloud cover, but we had views of Rhum, Eigg, Muck and Coll. Saturday's sail was finished off with a sunny meander into the fleshpots of Tobermory. A few beers and a pub meal and a whisky meant a contented crew.

**The Force 5 beat down the Sound of Mull on Sunday blew any cobwebs away!**  
A great weekend with a real feeling of “being out there”. With it being very late sailing season we were the only boat on the west side of Mull and the day had a very similar feel to a long winter day on a remote hill where you see no one else. On previous trips John has said before that he doesn't really understand climbing and why we do it, but I think having two climbers wittering on about the similarities sort of made him see what we got from it.

So the future promises - another club member who is prepared to climb with me, a son with great Sherpa potential and a friend with a new boat and a spirit of adventure. Maybe not much done this year, but so much promise!



# Kalymnos Sport Climbing

## Bryan Rynne

This year, for our ‘traditional’ early season climbing trip abroad, Patrick and I decided to give long, multi-pitch routes (and associated thunderstorms) a miss and try out Kalymnos - a Mecca for fans of single pitch sports routes. Over the last few years we have heard a string of people come back from trips to Kalymnos raving about how good it is. Even die-hard, anti-bolt fundamentalists seem unable to avoid admitting they have enjoyed themselves there. In light of this, Patrick and I went out there in April, and after the experience I would say it lives up to the

rave reviews. In fact, I thought it was so good I went back again in October, with James Dalgarno.

In terms of the number, quality and range of routes Kalymnos is now probably the best sports climbing area in Europe. The current guide has 64 sectors and about 1,700 routes, mostly easily accessible from the main centre of Masouri (20 minutes counts as a long walk in here). There is a lot of sharp slabby limestone, but also lots of pocketed routes and bridging and hand jamming. In some

areas the routes end in a layer of tufa type material, which takes a bit of getting used to but is OK when you do. There are also a large number of steep juggy routes if you operate at 7a and above, and an enormous cave, the Grande Grotta, which is very steeply overhung, and whose roof is covered in tufas and bizarre, large stalactites on which you can climb, or even lie down on some of them and have a rest! It is also worth noting that the bolting is almost invariably extremely good, while the grading is slightly on the soft side – you might even come home

having achieved a personal best.

The obvious competition, in terms of size, is the Costa Blanca, but having been to the Costa Blanca on a large number of occasions I preferred Kalymnos (however, the Costa Blanca has the long routes on the Puig Campana and is maybe more amenable in the depths of winter).

Patrick and I had 10 days there in late April, and James and I had a week there in late October. In all that time the only rain I had was one drizzly morning, and I was able to climb the rest of the time in sunshine, except when the crag was in the shade. The guide tells you which way crags face, and when they get the sun, and this means that it is usually possible to find something suitable for either hot days or cool windy days.

Of course, most days were spent on single pitch sports routes, but Patrick and I did succumb to the temptation to do both of the long routes 'Wings for Life' 6a, 250m 11 pitches and 'Wild Country' 6a+, 265m, 9 pitches, up either side of the 'Crystal Cave' on the island of Telendos, in the bay just off Masouri. These were both highly enjoyable days out. Overall, Wild Country is considerably harder than Wings for Life, being much more sustained and having harder cruxes. In fact, the first 6 pitches of Wings for Life were overgraded and took Patrick and me about an hour, even pitching them as normal. The walk in to the cave from the small ferry is about

1 hour (assuming you go directly to the correct cave...), and the walk back to the jetty is about 1.5 hours. We both felt that Wings for Life was actually much more fun than Wild Country, and I did Wings for Life again with James when I went there in October.

The accompanying photos give some idea of what the place it like. Overall, I would say - 'go there, it is great'!

Some practical details:

### Travel

The trickiest part of going to Kalymnos is simply getting there!

There are two main options:

(a) fly to Kos, then get a bus or taxi to Mastichari, then a ferry to Pothia on Kalymnos, then another bus or taxi to Masouri.

(b) fly to Athens, then fly directly to Kalymnos.

The main problem with (b), when I looked into it, is that it seemed to be fairly expensive and the flights did not match up, so you needed to spend a night in Athens each way - however, this may not still be the case.

I did alternative (a) on each trip. There are a lot of charter flights to Kos, but they do not start up until May, when it seems to



*most days were spent on single pitch sports routes, but Patrick and I did succumb to the temptation to do both of the long routes*



be too hot to climb, so in April Patrick and I flew to Gatwick one evening and then to Kos next morning (both with Easyjet). We managed the return journey in one day. In October, Easyjet had stopped flights to Kos, but James and I got the final Thomson holiday flight of the year to Kos from Newcastle. Both these options seemed to work relatively well (well, see below for a caveat to that).

NB due to striking air traffic controllers, and bus and taxi drivers, our journey out in October made the Odyssey seem like a Saga holiday. So, to slightly modify my above advice - go there when the Greeks have stopped wrecking their own economy, don't even think about it before then.

### Accommodation

There is a lot of cheap accommodation available in Masouri and you don't need

to hire a car - you can walk to many of the crags from Masouri, and there is a fairly good bus service that gets you to most of the others (the maximum distance you need to go is about 6 miles). Alternatively, there is a thriving trade in scooter hire.

The standard accommodation consists of 2 or 3 bed apartments with toilet and shower, a small sink and tea-making area, with a fridge, so you can do your own breakfast, and a balcony looking out over the bay to Telendos.

The going rate seems to be about 15-25 Eu twin, and 25-35 Eu triple, per night.

### Temperatures

In both April and October it was often quite hot during the day, but it could be fairly windy, and cold in the shade first thing in the morning. Also, you often find yourself sitting on balconies eating (breakfast in your apartment and dinner in a restaurant), and this can be fairly cold, so it is worth bringing both skimpy tops and a down jacket or buffalo shirt!



Sales of Goretex were good that year



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*The Met Office had issued a weather warning with strong winds and heavy rain forecast. It was just like 21 years earlier when I attempted a Scottish hill, Ben Vorlich above Loch Earn*

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## A wee gentle stroll with Big T

### Thomas Beutenmuller

I joined the JMCS in 1999. As I have always been employed in the care profession, and have to work a lot of weekends, I am not always able to come along to weekend meets. Last October I had a good enough reason to organise my own meet: My last Munro party!

As my “Munro campaign” drew to a close it became apparent that “the last one” would be Sgurr Choinnich to the southeast of Achnashellach, in the BernaisOberland. I started to think about who I wanted to invite. Apart from my family, I wanted to

have the people who have been climbing with me since I joined the JMCS. The next consideration was a venue for the après climbing, and suitable accommodation. Ruth Love suggested Ratagan Youth Hostel, which made the Kintail Lodge Hotel the ideal choice for the celebratory meal!

To make sure that there would be no nasty surprises on the “big day”, I went for a “recce” a fortnight before the set date. The weather was fantastic: sunny, warm and no wind. From the summit of

Sgurr a’Chaurachain I could see Kyle of Lochalsh and even the islands of Eigg and Rum. However, a fortnight later the weather could not have been any more different: The Met Office had issued a weather warning with strong winds and heavy rain forecast. It was just like 21 years earlier when I attempted a Scottish hill, Ben Vorlich above Loch Earn, for the first time. New to Scotland, I was not convinced that there were “proper” mountains in this country: I saw a hill on a map which was quoted as 984 metres high...come on, back home in the Black



*As we were mainly all crazy peak baggers to some extent or another nobody wanted to turn back, because the tick is everything!*



Forest some of the car parks are higher than this! However, I was bewildered when I was battered by the strong gales and had to crawl behind a boulder for cover! Time to reassess! I returned a few weeks later and was fortunate to climb Ben Vorlich on a cold and crisp autumn day, enjoying extensive views across the Southern Highlands from its summit. This experience ‘hooked’ me instantly, and I was keen to climb more Scottish hills. It actually took me four or five years after this first hill to realise what a Munro was! An article by Cameron McNeish in a German travel magazine enlightened me to this folly and by the time I moved to Scotland permanently in 1995, I possessed my own copy of the SMC guide to the Munros.

So it was that last October my family and

I set up base in Ratagan Youth Hostel. The children spent the time drawing their dad “Last Munro” cards and pictures. I suppose I have talked about this subject rather a lot recently. I asked myself what on earth would talk about in the future? Would I just turn into a taxi driver for my kids and the only thing I would climb in the future would be the stairs in Ikea? On the other hand, I had been a bit obsessed over the last years. All those drives up the A9 after work, camping in car parks, walking or cycling up obscure tracks. Going along a ridge and keep “ticking” before facing the long tired drive back home again. Good job Stewart Bauchop had introduced me to bivvying! A few years ago we had walked the entire North Shiel ridge over a weekend and had bagged an astonishing nine Munros in the course of the outing! This saved a lot of effort really, as we did not have to set out from the valley each day. I also applied this technique to the Grey Corries, the Fisherfield Forest and the Fannichs. As I said, I was a bit obsessed in those days. Maybe it was not a bad thing that my three children and wife would see a bit more of me again at the weekends. Perhaps they would even like to go for a wee walk up a hill with me from time to time.....

The people I had invited for the “last one” arrived in dribs and drabs on the Friday evening. The YH wardens were very relaxed and allowed me to play host for the evening. I had prepared a big pot

of soup and was keen that everyone got something warm in their stomachs. As it turned out, we would need all the sustenance we could get....

Saturday, 30th October 2010 started with a bang-literally. A loud clap of thunder at 4 am probably woke up everybody in the county! I did not sleep much thereafter, and was a bit worried about the day ahead. The sensible thing would have been to cancel the event, but as the wheels were very much set in motion this was easier said than done....So, a few hours later we had a rushed breakfast and set off to the forest commission car park behind Gerry’s Hostel in Craig. We were greeted by Dave and Mary-Lucy More and Brian Donaldson, who had travelled down from Ullapool. Seventeen of us set out across the railway line and into the wilderness. Things did not look too bad to begin with, but the closer we came to the mountain we could see the clouds being blown along the summit ridge; the signs were set for a storm.

The first major obstacle was to cross the wire bridge at Pollan Buidhe. The path continued and brought us to the Bealach Bernais. Things took a turn for the worse from there on. The rain started in earnest, and it also became seriously windy. Every member of the party was battered by the onslaught and blown over at least once. I became more and more concerned. I had come to celebrate my big day,



Objective hazards claim another victim

not to re-enact the Cairngorm tragedy! An outsider would have assessed the situation analytically: high winds, heavy rain showers, get the hell out of here! As we were mainly all crazy peak baggers to some extent or another nobody wanted to turn back, because the tick is everything! So we carried on, at one point taking shelter in a shallow cave consulting the GPS, and praying to the weather god. We were so close and everybody was in good spirits. So eventually we managed to reach the summit of Sgurr Coinnich, my last Munro. It was too windy to get the champagne or the bagpipes out of the rucksack, and even drinking some sips of whisky out of a hip flask had its challenges, as some of the liquid went straight into my eyes! After some photos were taken a hasty retreat back down to

the valley was called for. I had to wait for my friend Alastair to play a tune on the pipes until we got back to the car park. I'm sure I've heard him play better, but his fingers were in the early stages of frostbite, so I did not complain... What a nice end to a wee gentle stroll..... Like the first Munroist AE Robertson all those years ago I also kissed the cairn before the wife, because in my case she and the children had stayed at the base in the valley.

Unfortunately the More's were not able to come back to the hotel with us, and Brian Donaldson and Stewart Bauchop also had to return home early. The rest of us had a very nice evening in the Kintail Lodge Hotel. Some people made more of an effort than others to blend in

with the locals at the hotel's Halloween party that night..... At about 11:30pm the party moved from the hotel to the hostel. Fortunately "lights out at..." and "no alcohol allowed" are things of the past, so the sitting room became our late night venue. Some other guests also staying the night at the hostel remembered having met me in Shenavall bothy a few years ago and kept filling my glass with whisky. I got my guitar out, and things went along nicely. Somehow none of us had remembered to put my son Calum to bed, and everybody had a great time. At the stroke of 2 o'clock, as Ruth Love was pole-dancing, still wearing her witch's outfit, the door opened and my wife Esther enquired about the whereabouts of our firstborn, and I suddenly found myself alone in the room..... What an end to a great day. Not only had I ticked off my last Munro and potentially endangered the lives of a third of the active members of the JMCS Edinburgh, I also introduced my son to late night partying! I am confident that it won't take long before "the ticking bug" will pass on to Calum as well, and God only knows what he and his pals will get up to after his last Munro.....

Thanks to all the folk who came along and made my day such a memorable one. Thanks as well to all of you who helped me exploring the Scottish Highlands over the years. I would not have been to half the places without the one or other helping hands you all gave me over the years.



# A Solo Tour

## Stuart Buchanan

It's just before Christmas, and the forecast is good. While the blanket of snow of early December has receded, there's still good snow in the hills. I've got a pass to go skiing, but no-one else can come out to play. Freedom awaits.

It's early in the morning in Glenshee car park. Well worn leather boots are old friends on my feet, skins put on skis skis the night before (an old trick from Davy), and I start up the ski slopes by the

chairlift towards Glas Maol. Up and over the first rise, stripping skins off to make the most of the all too short descent, then a second climb to the wide col below Glas Maol itself, a rounded mass not quite conquered by the ski lifts.

I had hoped that previous walkers and skiers would have left a trail of steps up the steep, always icy slope, but no such luck today. Skis strapped to the back, I bend almost double to chip away at the

crust with a ice axe that's too short to make indentations. I tiptoe up the slope wishing my boots were a bit more sturdy and I could kick steps.

Soon enough the slope lessens, and I can get back on the skis for the final rise to the summit cairn. There's not a cloud in the sky and the sun is bright but provides no warmth. It's a baltic morning, and I'm alone. A quick bite to eat and the skins are off. My aim today is Tom Buidhe

and Tolmont, small munros on the rolling plateau that extends east from Glas Maol all the way to Lochnagar, Broad Cairn and Driesh.

The descent from Glas Maol is icy, and the wind chill excruciating. Three pin bindings, leather boots and straight edged skis feel skittish under foot, but I still manage some turns on the way down the broad shoulder towards Cairn of Claise.

Having eked out as much of the running as possible, it's time for some wax and a balaclava to restore feeling to my ears. Then a lazy langlauf round the side of Cairn of Claise. A fox jumps out of the snow and runs ahead of me, my only company. The skiing is excellent (slightly downhill) and before too long I reach the bottom of the final climb to Tom Buidhe, joining some old clawprints from a man on crampons and his dog. A short skin to the summit, then a lovely ski back down the slope towards Tolmont, carving long radius telemark turns on the easy angled snow.

The skin to the summit of Tolmont is again easy, though I leave the skis just below the rocky summit and have a nice lunch looking down Glen Callater. The air is still and silent, only broken by the rustle of my clothing as I eat my piece. To the east I can see the undulating hill heading off into the distance – so many

tops I could ski to with more daylight and a car in Glen Clova. Sadly I have to turn back towards Cairn of Claise. A couple of turns are followed by some free-running down the slope, trying to keep as much momentum as possible to get across the flat col once more. Skins back on then a plod up to Cairn of Claise, forced to slow my pace as I realize my mind is writing cheques my legs can no-longer cash. Lack of fitness has caught up with me.

From Cairn of Claise it's a gently descent towards Cairn an Tuirc. The snow remains perfect for nordic touring – a couple of inches of sublimated powder on a firm base. I overhaul a group of alpine tourers just as I reach the summit – the only people I've seen all day away from the ski slope. They take the steep descent straight from the summit, while I descend more easily by dog-legging to the North. The snow is fantastic, a foot of ethereal powder. Unfortunately I'm not good enough to make the most of it, and descend with a mixture of tentative telemark turns and snowploughs, with only the occasional slip onto my side.

The slope shallows and I can descend with more style down the broad stream banks towards the road, carving turns with only the hiss of the snow and the running water for company.



*Having eked out as much of the running as possible, it's time for some wax and a balaclava to restore feeling to my ears*





# Golden Eagles, Midges and Hummingbirds

## Roy Harrison

Isle of Rum, 10-13 June 2011

Roy Harrison, Terry Lansdown, and a large number of Grontmij employees

### Arrival

This trip was organised by the walking club of Grontmij Ltd, the firm of consulting engineers where I work, as our annual fundraising charity walk for the Wateraid Corbett Challenge. The objective of the challenge was to get a team onto the summit of every Corbett in the country between 12pm and 2pm on the 11th June; our targets were Askival and Ainshval on the Isle of Rum, which we would complete

as part of a traverse of the Rum Cuillin. Terry, attracted by the opportunity to visit Rum, came along with us; we planned to extend the trip and do some rock climbing while we were there.

The weekend began with the long drive to Mallaig, to catch the ferry for the scenic sail past Eigg to arrive at the pier on Loch Scresort, about 1km from Kinloch Castle. Terry, with an eagle eye, spotted the sachets of ketchup in the ferry cafe and, expecting they would come in useful for our impending camping, decided to take a few. This was definitely not appreciated by the grumpy woman working in the cafe,

who gave Terry a ticking off and some very stern glares; it was possibly only because of the absence of police on our island destination that she didn't threaten to call the authorities. We decided against eating any of the sorry selection of deep-fried foodstuffs on offer (instead opting for a rather fine selection of antipasti, bread and fruit that we had brought with us – for some reason much to the amusement of our fellow party), although our 'free' sachets were more than paid for by deciding to have a delicious (?) can of Tennent's each, which cost considerably more than a pint of premium lager in an expensive George Street bar.

Upon arrival, a short 10 minute walk led Terry and I to our camping spot; a lovely grassy clearing by the sea, with a small wooden shelter perfect for rainy cooking and late night whisky drinking. The rest of the party continued to the hostel, which had also sent a car to meet the ferry and collect everyone's bags. Our decision to camp could have been a mistake in horrible weather, but in the warm sunshine it turned out to be a fantastic choice. Whilst everyone queued for showers in the cramped and overfull former servant's quarters (resplendent with a large 50th birthday party group of heavy-drinking Aberdonians), Terry and I had exclusive use of two brand new toilets and two warm, gas-powered showers.

After setting up camp we had a brief discussion about whether to begin the weekend with a quick walk into the hills, but instead we opted to sit in the sun on a pretty stone pier, drink a bottle of red wine and enjoy the views. Sometimes there is more to life than climbing! The weather was absolutely incredible for most of the weekend, and it was nice to get updates from people elsewhere: London, Leeds, and Edinburgh all reported horrible rainy weather. I hope I'm not the only one who secretly enjoys good weather in Scotland more if I know that others are enduring miserable wind and rain. However, in typical Scottish style the good weather was a double edged sword, and the lack of wind permitted our old friend Culicoides impunctatus (the Highland midge) to emerge in full force.

## The Castle

The island was bought in 1888 by John Bullough, a wealthy Lancashire man who made his fortune from innovations in the design of spinning and weaving machinery. Around the turn of the century his son George built Kinloch Castle, predominantly as a grand hunting lodge, using sandstone from Annan in Dumfries and Galloway. The castle itself featured various design innovations, such as air conditioning rising from the floor of the games room, which meant that windows could be left shut, keeping out the dreaded midge. To undertake the construction work, men were brought up from Lancashire, and at Bullough's whim were instructed to wear kilts. Shocked by the horror of the Highland midge, the men complained about having to wear skirts, so to placate them Bullough offered a pay supplement to anyone who smoked, in a vain attempt to keep the midge numbers down. Bullough was by most accounts an eccentric character, who for example kept a heated conservatory full of hummingbirds. When they all died due to a heating failure he promptly had them all stuffed and put in glass cases, which remain in the castle to this day.

On the final day before leaving, Terry and I took a tour around the castle; it was fascinating and well worth the money. The tour includes well preserved bedrooms, dining rooms and games rooms. There is the chance to see fascinating things like the 'orchestron', an electric driven organ that plays music from perforated card



*Today the island has no police presence and a definite sense of isolation; it feels like it's probably full of wanted criminals, fleeing the authorities after a spate of Post Office hold-ups in the 1960s*



rolls; it is one of only three in existence, and the only one that still works. Also part of the tour is a strange little dental surgery, full of macabre-looking historical dental equipment. Unfortunately time is taking its toll on the property, with water leaks damaging the interior and, more significantly, the steel frame of the building, and fundraising efforts continue.

Today the island has no police presence and a definite sense of isolation; it feels like it's probably full of wanted criminals, fleeing the authorities after a spate of Post Office hold-ups in the 1960s (or possibly a spree of sauce sachet theft). With no proper asphalt roads there is not much



use for a car, although people on the island do have them. However, they're mostly in a very bad state of repair and unlikely to pass an MOT test (I would guess that a rhododendron bush growing through the floor is probably an MOT fail).

## Walking

On Saturday morning we awoke to perfect weather, and enjoyed really fantastic walking and scrambling around the ridge, with amazing views towards the outer Hebrides, the Skye Cuillin and over to Eigg. Unlike the rest of the party, Terry and I generally opted for the avoidable scrambling, which was very enjoyable on good solid rock. However, we struggled a little with route finding on the ascent of Askival so decided to down-climb and skirt around, despite being taunted by a goat triumphantly peering

down on us. At over 20km distance and 2000m of ascent, the traverse of the Rum Cuillin is a long day, though well worth the effort. At the end of the traverse we descended to the picturesque Dibidil bothy, where we faced the 8km walk back along the pretty coastal path, which though occasionally boggy was nowhere near as bad as some reports.

Without the need to wait for the shower queues to die down, Terry and I had a quick shower then headed to the Castle for our pre-booked dinner and, more importantly, a nice cold beer. However, just as we sat down for dinner word came round that the final member of the party hadn't returned, and nobody knew where he was. My first, very depressing, thought was that as one of the more experienced members of the group I would have to go and help look for him; an anguished look at Terry confirmed he was thinking

the same thing. After the best part of 10 hours walking we really weren't relishing the prospect of undertaking the 8km walk back to the other side of the island. Deciding that we would be no use to anyone without a decent meal in us, we sat down to eat. Mercifully, just before we'd finished eating the missing person returned; he'd fallen behind the group he was with and walked off the final summit in the wrong direction. I was (slightly selfishly) very relieved to see him.

After we finished dinner most of us retired to the small cosy pub, nestling in a corner of the grand courtyard within the castle. At one point in the evening there was a sudden commotion, as everyone rushed outside to see a Search and Rescue helicopter landing in the gardens of the castle (the downdraft from which gave brief respite from the evil midge). One of the group of Aberdonians had

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*The birdlife is especially good; even in the vicinity of Kinloch there are dozens of songbirds, tits and other falcon-fodder*



been out walking, had an argument with her partner and then stormed off without map, compass or any knowledge of where she was. A number of words to describe her spring to mind, none of which are suitable for publication in this article. After the excitement had died down, we all had a couple more drinks, then Terry and I retired to the camping area for a fire (using the complementary wood), and a couple of drams before bed.

### **The Beasts**

The wildlife is spectacular and the majority of the island is a Nature Reserve, Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Area, and Special Area of Conservation. The birdlife is especially good; even in the vicinity of Kinloch there are dozens of songbirds,

tits and other falcon-fodder, with numerous herons usually feeding in the shallow sea of Loch Scresort. However, the island is perhaps best known for its Manx Shearwater population (which strangely has the scientific name *Puffinus puffinus*), burrow-nesting sea birds with a raucous cackling call, which may have led to rumours of trolls and given the hill Trollaval its name.

White Tailed Sea Eagles are sometimes seen on the island, although unfortunately this year they hadn't been successful in breeding. However, two pairs of golden eagles had bred, and on Sunday on our way up Barkeval Terry and I were lucky enough to watch for ten minutes or so as one circled high above us. And after our long walk the previous day, this was also a great excuse to take a short break.

Larger mammals on the island include red deer, goats and otters. Most unique, however, are the famous Rum ponies, a specific breed of stocky and powerful but docile working animal still used to bring culled deer off the hill, which out of season are allowed to roam free across the island.

### **Climbing**

Unfortunately the weather wasn't quite as nice on the Sunday, but regardless Terry and I slowly got our stuff together and headed for the southern slopes of Barkeval. After the long previous day, it wasn't a bright and early start, and we certainly weren't bounding into the

hills. We had our eye on a few multipitch VDiff and Severe routes, some of which sounded really quite pleasant. Unfortunately, armed only with an ancient guidebook with no pictures of any of the routes, or even the crag, locating ourselves was not easy. After much umming and ahing, we finally decided that we must be at the base of the route we wanted, although as it transpires we had fallen badly into the trap of fitting the rock to the route description. After scrambling up loose rock and chossy vegetation we concluded we were probably not on route, and only when Terry reached the top of the second pitch could he see where we should have been. I don't think either of us has ever been so embarrassingly off route. We were the best part of 500m away from where we should have been! Tired from the previous day, we decided that we couldn't be bothered descending again to complete our intended route, so instead settled for a gentle walk to the summit of Barkeval, which nicely meant that we had seen the summit of all of the main hills of the Rum Cuillin.

We ate dinner and spent the evening in the pub, then awoke the following day and took the tour of the castle. On the way to the ferry we bumped into the island ranger and had a nice chat about the island wildlife, before paying him our modest but worthwhile camping fees. The journey back was long, but despite tiredness and a minor climbing catastrophe, we were happy after a fantastic weekend on a magical island.



## A Rum Royal Weekend

### Richard Weller

Distinguished members of the JMCS in these times of easy travel and (surely not true) an unpatriotic fear of rain and midges are frequently to be found disporting themselves in summer on Mediterranean sea cliffs, French crags or Alpine peaks. Scotland's real gem though is the combination of mountains and sea found together on the west coast. With the long weekend to celebrate the royal wedding we had four days in the best time of year for a tour of this magical country. A gloriously sunny Friday morning saw Jake, Iain and me setting sail from

Oban at midday on the tide flooding up the sound of Mull. Julie stayed behind watching the wedding on TV with Oban friends, as we ran up the sound. Later that evening we rendezvoused in Tobermory, courtesy of Mr Caledonian MacBraynes wife delivery service. As we ate our dinner in the evening light and waited for the tide to turn, we swithered over Rum or Knoydart. The decision was made for us by the amount of east in the wind and at 1am we slipped from the pontoon and sailed through the night for Rum.

A beautiful overnight sail round Ardnamurchan, between Eigg and Canna and then two long beats up the east coast of Rum, standing in to Dibidil and admiring the Rum Cuillin unrolling before us. At 9am we dropped anchor in Loch Scresort in perfect sunshine, blue waters and blue skies. The usual flurry of activity- dinghy launching, breakfast making, sandwiches, walking kit, checking the anchor again, and we puttered ashore. This was my first visit to Rum in sunshine, and I was desperate to get into those hills in such perfect conditions.



Rum is one of the most magnificent of Hebridean islands, with mountain scenery as dramatic as anywhere in Scotland, and with the remoteness and lack of roads of Knoydart. We missed the path past the castle onto the hill, and bushwacked through heather for a while before getting back on track. At the head of the burn coming down from Coire Dubh there are the remains of a small dam, part of Bullough's attempts to improve the fishing on the island. Sweating in the warm weather we climbed up over the Bealach Bairc-mheall to be met by a view as fine as any in Scotland, across to Bealach an Oir and the whole of the Rum Cuillin ridge. We scrambled round the boulders and scree on the western slopes of Halival and then paused for a 30 minute snooze at the col below the northern summit ridge

of Askival. The ascent from here is along a narrow and airy ridge. It steepens at the top, and Askival pinnacle is graded moderate, although we turned this to the east. Looking back with binoculars to Loch Scresort I could check that the anchor was not dragging- although if it had been, I am not sure what I could have done! Finally the summit, and all of the western seaboard laid out before you. To the west, across the Minch the hills of South Uist and Barra. Skye and its Cuillin dominating to the north, and the long line of hills on the mainland from Knoydart, through Moidart to Ardnamurchan. Nowhere is as beautiful.

Lunch on the summit and then retracing our steps to the boat. Canna, one of our favourite islands, only 7 miles from Rum

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*Looking back with binoculars to Loch Scresort I could check that the anchor was not dragging - although if it had been, I am not sure what I could have done!*

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and has an idyllic bay to anchor in, so we weighed anchor and had a beautiful sail close in along the north coast of Rum. The evening peace was too beautiful to disturb with an engine, so we dropped anchor under sail, the only boat to be seen. Canna has an utterly different feel to it from Rum. Sunday was spent strolling through beaches and bluebell filled woods, watching sea-eagles and painting. In the afternoon, we weighed, and cruised down the west side of Rum, and tracing out the previous days walk, and planning trips to come to Tralval and Ainshval. Round Ardnamurchan at dusk, a brief wait for the tides to change in Tobermory bay, and at 11am we were back on our mooring in Oban. A perfect Scottish weekend.



## Travels with Roo and the Mona Lisa

### David Small

Roo Finlayson and I met at Edinburgh Airport early one morning last August to get the Easy Jet flight to Geneva. If all went well we would come back eight days later having climbed the Matterhorn by the Italian Ridge. If some things went well we would come back having climbed something else. If a few things went well we could come back. If nothing went well .... who could tell?

It was the kind of early morning that induces a focus on the negative; a misty, damp, dreary Turnhouse full of queues of folk who had slept too little after too many drinks ending too few hours beforehand, and we knew that the European forecast for the coming week was unsettled.

Geneva was different; sun and warmth creating an optimistic aura around even the passport queue and the baggage

carousel. At the car hire desk we met two British guys who, like us, had just flown in; unlike us, they were headed straight for the Italian Ridge. We wondered whether we should not skip the acclimatization routine and go with them – the short term forecast was ok. But Roo had efficiently booked accommodation for several nights ahead and, as a lawyer, I am inclined to respect the sanctity of contract, be it with Italian hut guardians and hoteliers, or

whomsoever. So we wished them, and ourselves, good luck and stuck to our plan to drive to Alagna, on the Italian side of Monte Rosa, in order to spend some time high up before going on to Cervinia and the Matterhorn.

Somewhere on the drive from Geneva to Alagna I became aware of the Mona Lisa. Roo had brought her with him. She was on the cover of a study manual he was reading in preparation for an exam towards qualifying as a Chartered Financial Analyst. On the long motorway journeys, while I was driving, he would look through a chapter or two of this manual until he fell asleep, or we reached a pay station and he had to find his wallet in a hurry, or navigational input was required. When I refer to this person as the Mona Lisa you must understand that she was not the da Vinci painting. In fact she was the opposite of that image in many ways. She was blonde, contemporary, overtly smiling and the background to her photographic portrait was the interior of an office, not a mysteriously disjointed medieval landscape. But her picture had the Mona Lisa's qualities of being utterly enigmatic and inscrutable. As portrayed on the front of Roo's book, she gave away nothing about where she came from, what her circumstances were, what stage in her career she was at, where she was working, or indeed anything you might want to know. She could have been boss or intern, Irish or Swedish, living in Madrid or London, married with a teeming family or single with a cat. She seemed quite

young, but in a way that might cover virtually any age between 18 and 35. All that you could say was that here was a presentable smiling person who was happy in Financial Analysis. She made you want to be a Financial Analyst too.

Over the many kilometers of road that Roo and I drove that holiday, we tried and failed to pin down her background and circumstances in any more detail. Speculate as we might, the smile which enticed you to join her in the world of Financial Analysis was the only certainty. The journey from Geneva to Alagna is a long one; you have to go to the far end of the Aosta valley, where the mountains run out, then cross a tedious section of hot flat country full of maize fields until finally starting to wend your way into the mountains again. We made things worse for ourselves by going round by the Great St Bernard tunnel rather than the Mont Blanc tunnel, which the road signs said was busy. As we went, Roo read out to me some choice bits of information about the functioning of the financial system, while the Mona Lisa, face down on his lap, kept her counsel. After many hours of driving we finally got a dramatic view of Monte Rosa towering above the far end of the Alagna valley, and shortly after that we were enjoying the first beer and pizza of the holiday.

The next day we took the easy way up to the hut; 90% telepherique and 10% walking. The weather was perfect and the forecast remained good for that and the next day, which would be our first day of



*Next morning we set out under a clear starry sky to tick some summits. Monte Rosa is a 4000m peak-bagger's paradise*



mountaineering. We enjoyed the views and the sunshine, but an uneasy feeling persisted that we were having the weather now that we would want in a few days' time on the Matterhorn.

Next morning we set out under a clear starry sky to tick some summits. Monte Rosa is a 4000m peak-bagger's paradise. There are lots of "peaks" which can be done one after another in a single day if you just keep plodding. I say "peaks" because the height drop and re-ascent between some of them is not very big. In respect of the least significant summit the guidebook sternly remarks "4000 meters it may be, but peak it is not". But starting



up the Pyramide Vincent we didn't care; a scrambly ridge in the pre-dawn light leading to a summit tinted orange by the rising sun and the kind of view to the west, over innumerable hazy blue valleys and ridges, that for me typifies the Alps in the early morning. After the Pyramide the going was almost entirely on snow, with some beautifully sculpted arêtes of perfect neve. The views of neighbouring Lyskamm and the more distant giants around Zermatt were superb. We could clearly see the Matterhorn and it was obviously in good condition, having very little snow on it. We went on over the summits to the Parrotspitze where we decided we had done enough for our first day. Turning for home, we romped down the glacier before it got soft enough to be annoying underfoot in the heat of the day.

Down at the hut I asked the guardian about the weather forecast while Roo consulted various internet sites. The guardian said it was going to stay fine and so, although some of the internet sites disagreed, we began to believe that the unsettled spell which had originally been forecast to arrive in the middle of the week might not materialize after all. It was hard to argue with the fine weather over Monte Rosa that afternoon, or with the clear skies that greeted us the next morning as we drove down the Alagna valley headed for Cervinia. Roo told me all about bond yields as we sped through the maize fields in the lowlands but, as we got nearer Cervinia, he dumped the Mona Lisa on the back seat and the talk turned to final preparations for the Italian ridge.



A few miles short of the town there is a spot, with a convenient lochan for dramatic reflections, that gives the first good view of the Matterhorn. The thing was standing out boldly against a blue sky. We began to think we might do it. Roo phoned the hut at the foot of the Hornli Ridge to book places for the night after our successful traverse (up the Italian, down the Hornli).

The end of this inflated optimism came quickly. Well before dinner time we noticed that cloud was forming round the Matterhorn. For a while we chose to believe it was just afternoon cloud, signifying nothing in particular. Then the whole sky darkened and the rain began. Thunder and lightening opened up. The downpour persisted. It was more than a passing event. We occupied our hotel's

"internet room" (a converted phone booth – I stood while Roo sat at the keyboard) and searched all the weather websites we could find. We could not make them agree entirely but gradually a consensus emerged. This was the start of the unsettled weather that we'd been led to expect back in Edinburgh. It was going to last, at least around Cervinia. The Matterhorn was not on.

We accepted the situation fairly quickly and looked for alternatives. Eventually we decided to go west to the Ecrins. I knew the area so we wouldn't waste time faffing, there was a 4000m peak and there was bolted climbing in the valleys, and although a long drive it was the nearest place where it was realistic to expect that the weather might be better.

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*there were a fair number of climbers and guides in the hut; the presence of the latter led us to believe that the forecast couldn't be too bad*

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We left Cervinia the next morning. Fortunately the weather was still bad. It was obvious that we had to go. We cancelled our booking at the Hornli Hut. Not far down the road, Roo succumbed again to the Mona Lisa's smile and resumed his study of the calculation of yields. I enjoyed the drive down the Aosta Valley, then endured the flatlands until, beyond Turin, the hills began again to rise on either side. The sun was out and it looked as if heading west had been the right thing to do. We crossed the Col Genevre into France and Roo left the Mona Lisa to her own devices as the peaks of the Ecrins came into view. Stopping briefly to buy some guidebooks

and to have a picnic lunch, we drove up to the road end above Ailefroide.

From there we walked up to the Glacier Blanc hut. The path was steep and hot and well populated. Roo's big yellow Spantik boots attracted attention; until qualified in Financial Analysis, he can't afford to have one pair of boots suitable for the Himalayas and another for the Alps. Under examination prompted by his footwear, he had to confess to having climbed Everest. When noticed, I was asked if I was his father. On the whole, I was glad to reach the cool shade of the hut where boots are not worn and age difference is less likely to be remarked upon.

Next morning we headed up behind the hut to the foot of the Pointe Cineastes. This is a distinct ridge of rock peaks which, when you are on it, feels as separate from its surroundings as the Cuillin of Skye but which, seen from below, is lost in the greater mass of outcrops and peaklets leading up to the high summits of Des Agneaux. It is called Pointe Cineastes because it was used as the setting of a film many years ago. We set off up a Difficile route described in the guide as having one bolt per pitch. I failed to spot the single bolt at the end of the first pitch but made other arrangements for belaying below an overhang which offered Roo a 5c or a 6a variant. My stance was exposed to rockfall, a fact I realised too late when Roo pulled a brick sized lump out of the overhang and dropped it, and almost himself, past my left ear. To his

credit Roo abandoned his project of demolishing the overhang piece by piece and found a safer passage away off to the right. After that the rock got rather better and we followed our noses, occasionally coinciding with the single bolts, to the summit. Some abseils and scrambling took us back to the big yellow Spantiks which Roo had left as a landmark below the start of the route.

After a rest down at the hut we shouldered our packs again and tackled the way up to our next abode, the Ecrins Hut. The day got greyer as we went and we were just short of the hut when the rain began. The temperature fell and the guardian lit the wood burning stove in the salle a manger. Clouds hid the Barre des Ecrins, our objective for the next day. But there were a fair number of climbers and guides in the hut; the presence of the latter led us to believe that the forecast couldn't be too bad.

The guardian gave a speech after dinner. Neither Roo nor I has good French. However we both thought he said the forecast was good but that serac fall on the Barre was a serious problem and that on absolutely no account should we climb below the band of seracs which he indicated on a primitive diagram. Quite where he said we should go instead escaped both of us.

We both felt tired, ready for a good sleep, but there followed the worst night in a hut either of us has ever had. The snoring and other bodily noises, not all

associated with sleep, were awful. A sense of indignation at the conduct of other mountaineers can keep one awake more effectively than any black coffee. The 3 am reveille, when it came, was a blessed relief. We were the first away into a cloudy and windy dark, working off our anger at being kept awake and leaving the other trains of head torches far behind. Unfortunately we were forging mindlessly ahead and only realised where we were too late – exactly in the area of serac fall that the guardian had warned us about. A spell of tired irritability gripped us as we urged each other away from where we were but disputed where the safe path lay. Meanwhile the parties progressing at steady guide's pace caught us up and showed the way. The truth of the saying "the first shall be last" hit home as we took our place in the rear.

Hundreds of meters higher up we more or less repeated the lesson. The route up the Barre des Ecrins takes an exposed rock ridge. In good weather it is a delight but in mist and in the teeth of a big wind, after a disturbed night, I had to bring myself to say that I did not fancy it. Roo was inclined, I think, to go for it anyway but acquiesced in my judgment after a period when we stood around vacillating and getting cold. So we joined the tail end of the guided parties who were plodding up the easy neighbouring dome of the Dom des Ecrins. The carefree sunlit snows of Monte Rosa seemed a long way in the past as we turned, oppressed by a feeling that all this mountain travel was utterly futile, for the long toe bashing walk down past one hut, then the other, then

the interminable zig zags in the path back to the car. Eternally smiling, unmoved by the highs and lows of real life, indifferent to our success or failure, the Mona Lisa awaited us. Even Roo could not face picking her up until after we'd had a beer and a shower and a sleep in our gite.

For the last day of our trip we went to a bolted limestone crag in the Vallon de Fournel, a lovely wooded valley near Argentiere. The weather was brilliant, the scenery exquisite, the crag was quiet; it was a day to be relished. Most of the climbing on the three or four pitch routes there is quite steep and strenuous, but there are also some slabs where it is possible to adhere to the rock and be in balance (provided you don't then attempt to make a move upwards). Roo resolved that in future he would spend less time in Spantiks and more in 5.10's.

As we drove back to the gite we looked across the valley at the mountains basking in the late afternoon sun. We were feeling the benefit of a week of mountain activity and regretting that we were at the end of our holiday, not the beginning. The sun shone again all the next day too as we sped along the motorways back to Geneva. It was easy to suppose that the weather and the mountains had conspired against us to turn bad just when we came within reach of our main objectives. Rationally, of course, we all know the elements and the landscape don't care what we do; they are indifferent to us - like the Mona Lisa's photo. But when we think they are smiling at us, we are enticed back.

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