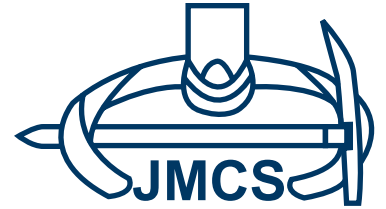


JMCS

Winter Newsletter 2022

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2022

JMCS 2022 Contents



Crossing the A9

Cycle through the Gaick Pass - a great Perthshire adventure

Thomas Beutenmuller

Middle age is a funny thing. Some men buy themselves a fast sports car, but I bought myself a mountain bike. I tried to fill the void that completing the Munros has left me with and started exploring the bits of the Highlands between the hills. OS maps gave me ideas for routes, and the other great source of inspiration were the series of pocket mountain books called Bike

Scotland by Fergal MacEarlean. One route in the blue book that always took my fancy was the "Passage through the Gaick". This route starts just north of the House of Bruar at Dalnacardoch, soon after the A 9 becomes a dual carriageway, opposite the turnoff for Trinafour.

I once cycled the first part to

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Middle age is a funny thing. Some men buy themselves a fast sports car, but I bought myself a mountain bike.

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With all logistics in place, I now had time to have some doubts: Was it wise to do this cycle on my own? What if I would have a flat tyre in the middle of nowhere?



Sronphadruig Lodge on my way to climb the Corbetts An Dun and A' Chaoirnich, but I never had been able to organise the necessary logistics for the through route to Badenoch. The book suggests to start at Blair Athol and then take the train back from Kinguisse, but I never fancied the cycle near the A 9. But then in June 2021 a window of opportunity opened up: My father-in-law and youngest daughter were planning to have a weekend at the Cabin to do some maintenance jobs. I asked my father-in-law whether he would mind dropping me off at Dalnacardoch and then pick me up at Ruthven Barracks later that day? He said he could do this and take my

daughter for lunch at Loch Morlich. The weather forecast also looked dry and cool for this Friday, the 4th June, so the cycle was on!

With all logistics in place, I now had time to have some doubts: Was it wise to do this cycle on my own? What if I would have a flat tyre in the middle of nowhere? Or fall off the bike and injure myself? Or the rivers were in spate and unpassable? I thought that I should approach this tour like a rock climb: Climb up as far as you can and once you get to the difficult bit decide whether it is more prudent to retreat, or to push through to the top. I thought to myself that once I would get to the

Gaick Lodge I definitely should carry on, come what may.

On the day we arrived at Dalnacardoch at midday. I was getting ready, said my Goodbyes and set off. The first crux of the day was to safely cross the dual carriageway of the A 9. On the other side I picked up a good landrover track that led me in the forest. I soon came to a junction that was not on the OS map. I took a left turn and soon was following the Edendon Water north. The next landmark I passed was an abandoned cottage along the way. I met the only other two cyclists of the day: They had started in Blair Athol and had their lunch there. We exchanged

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I am really scared of snakes, but as it was not rustling in high grass and I could clearly see it I actually enjoyed this encounter with my first Scottish serpent!

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A real snake in the grass!

some words and I carried on. The views were getting better all the time and the route was obvious. An Dun is such a prominent shapely hill and I would have to cross the pass on its southern slopes above Loch an Dun and the other Corbett Maol Creag an Loch. Just before Sronphadruig Lodge there is a concrete ford across a stream. Last time I was here this was covered in shallow water but today it was dry. The cycle to this point had taken me one hour.

Beyond the Lodge the good track gave way to a footpath, which was quite boggy in place. Soon I had to push my bike across the Edendon Water

and heave it up a steep slope on the far side. On top of this brae I saw an adder sunbathing in the heather....I am really scared of snakes, but as it was not rustling in high grass and I could clearly see it I actually enjoyed this encounter with my first Scottish serpent! I even took a photo, but I did make good use of the Zoom function on my camera....The adder soon crawled into the undergrowth and left me alone.

The path for the next 1.5 miles was narrow, muddy and rocky in places, and it also had a drop to my right down to the loch. I let the bike roll gently along this section and got off the bike

when I felt wobbly rather than taking the risk of tumbling down the hillside into a snake pit, and I made slow and steady progress. At the far end of the loch I had to cross another river. The water was very low, but I have heard that other cyclists had to turn back at this point, as they found the stream in spate and impassable. After this river crossing there was a good track again and despite having to ford another river near the Gaick Lodge I did not have to push my bike anymore for the remainder of the route.

The Gaick Lodge is in a very remote position. I had a quick stop there, but despite some horses grazing in the



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From there on the biggest objective danger was that I may swallow some flies, as I was smiling from ear to ear

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field, there were no humans there as far as I could see. I pushed on and cycled along the shores of Loch an t-Seillich. There was another hill to climb on its northern point but after this the road began to descend for the remaining five or six miles. I soon came on a tarmacked road and was able to zoom along in my highest gear and enjoyed the speed. From there on the biggest objective danger was that I may swallow some flies, as I was smiling from ear to ear: I felt elated as I knew that I had cracked the Passage through the Gaick!

I had a quick stop at Bhran Cottage, but as I could not get a phone signal to let the family know that I was nearing our rendezvous point I decided to carry on. I was freewheeling down the glen and was at Tromie Bridge in no time.



The journey's end at Ruthven Barracks

There I took a left turn and cycled the remaining couple of miles to the Ruthven Barracks. This cycle had taken me just under 4 hours and I was feeling elated.

Is there a better feeling than accomplishing an adventure of any kind you have dreamed of for years? And is there a better place than the comfy seats in front of the Cabin fireplace to rest your weary bones afterwards?

A word of warning

This is a tough mountain biking route through some very remote terrain, involving several river crossings. I only can recommend it in dry weather, out with the winter months. The distance I covered was approximately 40 km. A good level of fitness and a sense of adventure is required. You may have encounters with wild animals (see earlier photo).

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the best of the climbing is concentrated South West of the capital Heraklion in Central Crete, so if only going for a week, go there.

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There is no mobile phone reception, so carry OS maps 35+42 and compass.

Take spare clothing and waterproofs, food and drink and bike repair tools and inner tubes.

And have a plan in place how you will get back to your car/train station/etc.



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It was high summer and I was wearing cheap baseball boots from Woolworth's.

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The Saddle Revisited

John Fowler

It was I think 1967. Mike Geddes and I were still at school and had commenced a mountaineering life. We weren't very good at the hill-walking game at this stage and would stupidly do single Munros on opposite sides of a glen on the same day rather than walking the ridges. We had just walked out from the hostel in Glen Affric and were

so ravenous that we bought a loaf and some jam and consumed them at the roadside beside Loch Duich. But now we were walking towards the Ratagan Youth Hostel with its legendary warden, Dom Capaldi, intent on doing the Saddle the following day.

We set off early on foot towards the

hill. I can't remember our exact route but I fancy it was a direct approach up through Coire Uaine to the summit thus avoiding the Forcan Ridge. It was high summer and I was wearing cheap baseball boots from Woolworth's.

I do remember a tumbling fall as I descended to the col from the summit en route to Sgurr na Sgine and the



The Five Sisters from the Forcan Ridge

sore feet on the interminable walk back to the hostel along the glen.

Anyway here I am more than 50 years later with the idea of a second Munro round. Camping at Cluanie was noisy with incessant interruption from the white maggots but I rose at 6.00am and headed down to the start in Glen Shiel. I thought I had spotted a weather window but no - the cloud was down and it didn't

look promising. I set off up the long diagonal track towards Biod an Fhithich going passably well, paused at the top then traversed round to the foot of the Forcan.

I started up the slippery slabs. Better be careful here. It's an easy enough scramble but I was slowing, the mist was thick and it was now raining heavily. I stopped at a pronounced steepening. Things look much worse

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I started up the slippery slabs. Better be careful here. It's an easy enough scramble but I was slowing, the mist was thick and it was now raining heavily.

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in the mist. I was on my own. Nobody knows I'm here. Perhaps this isn't such a good idea. I turned. Driving such a distance home exacerbated the disappointment.

But I don't like failure and loose ends. So a few weeks later, with a shiny new car to spur me on, I was back. Same plan and I got up to the foot of the Ridge in good time. I could see others coming up below

me – athletically dressed and moving fast.

I used to walk like that. I plodded on again into the mist but at least the rock was dry. No problems this time but there is a very tricky little down-climb from Sgurr na Forcan which might challenge a few. I paused near the summit as I could hear voices behind me and there emerged a fit looking couple going at a real pace. I managed to track them to the cairn.

They were from Hawick and had taken to hill-walking only eighteen months ago. Their Munro tally to date was 240! We found the descent to the col – now a well-worn path in the vegetation and I stopped at the lochan for another rest. They did not and charged on up to the shoulder of Sgurr na Sgine. I eventually followed – getting tired now and recalling saying to Geddes on this slope all these years ago – ‘I feel really fit’. I wish.

The mist cleared on this hill but disappointingly not on the Saddle. I plodded round to the summit and

could see my recent companions away in the distance approaching Faochag. I knew what was to come.

I followed along the splendid spine of the Faochag ridge for the dreaded descent to the glen. From the summit you descend from 909m to 37m in a single unrelieved slope and you can see your car in the lay-by far below for all of the way. Yes there is a stony path but for one with a dicky right knee it wisnae much fun. I poled my way down with many rests. Near the foot I met another couple who had just completed the entire South Cluanie Ridge – they looked as though they could do it all over again. It’s a different breed out there these days.

On the way back I stopped for a small refreshment in the Cluanie Inn, now sadly a sort of Indian restaurant where they placed a service charge on a bowl of soup and a glass of beer insisting that I had had a meal. But back home it was tick and tick. 29 left to do. Now I must just go and phone the physio.

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I followed along the splendid spine of the Faochag ridge for the dreaded descent to the glen. From the summit you descend from 909m to 37m in a single unrelieved slope and you can see your car in the lay-by far below for all of the way.

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Andy skinning up the ascent gully

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To get us onto the mountain we decided to get the cable car up to the station near Punta Rocca (3309m).

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Ski Touring the Marmolada

Andy Bladon

In March 2022 my wife Freya and I went on a week-long skiing trip to Cortina d’Ampezzo in the Italian Dolomites. We had hoped to do both piste skiing and touring. However, due to our trip being late in the season ski-touring options were limited. We decided that our best chance would be an ascent of the highest mountain in the Dolomites – the Marmolada (3343m). With

variable snow conditions our ascent was more exciting than expected.

The plan:

We planned a route that started and finished at the village of Malga Ciapela, which is situated to the east of the Marmolada. To get us onto the mountain we decided to get the cable car up to the station near Punta Rocca (3309m). Although

Punta Rocca is very close to the summit (<1 km horizontal distance), the ridge between Punta Rocca and Punta Penia is exposed and technical, and we had no information about how it could be crossed.

Because of this, we decided we would ski to the Capanna (Italian for hut) al Ghiacciaio (2700m) and start our ascent to the summit from there. We would then skin up a steepening,



With skins on skis we started the ascent, initially across the open slopes leading to the entrance of the gully, and then into the gully's narrowing confines.



narrowing gully until a rocky step, which we would scramble up and continue on to a shoulder above. From the shoulder we would follow the Vernel Glacier to the summit. The descent would be the reverse of the ascent.

The day:

An early start from Cortina in our hired Fiat 500 saw us arrive at Malga Ciapela in time to catch the first lift. Our descent from Punta Rocca to the

Capanna al Ghiacciaio started down the freshly pisted snow of the Punta Rocca run, which was still crisp due to the chill of the morning. However, we quickly switched into off-piste mode and continued down hard packed, uneven snow towards the Capanna al Ghiacciaio. We made it to the hut without incident and enjoyed a great view of our ascent route. A pair were already half way up the gully and gave us a sense of scale – it looked further than we expected!

With skins on skis we started the ascent, initially across the open slopes leading to the entrance of the gully, and then into the gully's narrowing confines. As on our descent from Punta Rocca, the snow was hard and irregular and we were thankful for the existing track. In the gully itself small (<5cm) rocks littered the snow's surface - clearly the head wall wasn't too stable. We kick-turned our way up the steepening slope until we arrived at the rocky step.



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After the final plod to the summit, we sat and enjoyed amazing views. We had expected to meet others, but were alone – where had the team in front of us gone?

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This wasn't as intimidating as it had appeared from below. It was time for crampons on boots and skis on rucksacks.

The rocky step itself was pleasant scrambling for about 20m which had the feel of easy Scottish mixed climbing. However, things got more thought-provoking above the step. Still on steep snow, we took a direct line to the shoulder and were surprised to encounter soft snow that was sometimes thigh-deep. Wading through deep snow on an

avalanche-prone slope immediately above a rocky step made us a little uneasy. However, while ensuring we kept a good distance apart to distribute our load and trying not to be directly above/below each other, we eventually reached the shoulder.

After a quick break, we continued up the steepening Vernel Glacier, which was surprisingly dry for the time of year. Although the lack of snow meant easy identification of some small crevasses, we struggled to embed our crampon points into the

hard ice. Slowly we skittered up the glacier, meandering our way around the crevasses, and eventually reached the gentler summit slopes.

After the final plod to the summit, we sat and enjoyed amazing views. We had expected to meet others, but were alone – where had the team in front of us gone? As we sat, the void of the South Face was immense and the empty Capanna Punta Penia was eerie. Our happiness to be at the summit was tarnished by an anxiety – did

Freya abseiling a tricky section of the via ferrata

we want to return down the icy glacier, avalanche prone-slope, and gully that was exposed to rock fall as we had originally planned? There had been more objective dangers on the ascent than we had expected and we were both reluctant to return that way if we could avoid it. A review of the map showed there was an alternative descent to the Marmolada Glacier, which used a section of via ferrata. Thankfully, we had brought harnesses, slings, and a rope.

After finishing our rolls and chewy sweets, a quick descent down the summit slopes brought us to the top of the cliffs bounding the western end of the Marmolada Glacier. Footprints lead us to the top of the via ferrata. A quick assessment revealed an ~150m descent down to the glacier, protected by a cable. The easiest sections were easy to downclimb, however, at some sections the cable was buried beneath the snow - these were abseiled. Eventually we arrived on the glacier below, elated. After spending much more time on foot than expected, we were glad to take our crampons off our boots and our skis off our bags.



Skiing the initial section of glacier was steep and, as we found this morning, the snow was hard and uneven. The gradient soon shallowed and we were able to traverse eastwards. In an attempt to maintain height, we stayed as close to the cliffs below Punta Rocca as possible. From here, we continued our traverse, with the occasional section of skating, until we returned to the piste of the Punta Rocca run, slightly below where we had left the

piste that morning. As we were after the last lift, the piste was deserted.

The remainder of our descent followed the pisted runs. We had these to ourselves, except for one ski patroller who was adjusting some netting. After skiing on mostly hard, choppy snow the smooth piste allowed us to ski with some grace once again. We were back at the Panda within the hour enjoying a well-earned Aperol Spritz!



The summit of Knock Hill

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So, when we went off in our van in July on holiday in Scotland, we thought we should break ourselves back into hill walking fairly gradually

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In Scotland after the Bug David Small

Until June 2022 I had avoided getting Covid, but during that month I let down my guard to the extent of taking the bus into work several days in a row, rather than walking or cycling in the fresh air. On the Saturday at the end of that week I felt distinctly odd and was not surprised to see the dreaded two red lines show up strongly on the testing apparatus. Inevitably I then passed the Bug on to Linda. Although neither of us felt seriously unwell,

the Bug did make us feel weak and depressed for more than a week. I then got some kind of other virus which left me with a cough like a barking seal for about another 6 weeks – very annoying for anyone around me, especially first thing in the morning when the tranquillity of sleep would be dispelled by some initial gentle clearings of my throat which rapidly degenerated into what apparently sounded like intense efforts to get my

lungs out of my chest.

So, when we went off in our van in July on holiday in Scotland, we thought we should break ourselves back into hill walking fairly gradually. The weather was better towards the east of the country and we decided to head for Knock Hill, an isolated Hugh (Hill Under Graham Height) west of Aberchirder in Aberdeenshire. The car park for this hill is up a rough road off the A95 that



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There was a memorable freshness to this sunny day which contributed to a feeling of being cleansed of the after-effects of the Bug.

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is not very easy to find, but it is worth seeking out on a clear day, such as we had, because from the summit at 430m one has a superb view of the whole distant Cairngorm range, from Lochnagar northwards, as well as the nearer Ben Rinnes, Tap o'Noth and Bennachie. There was a memorable freshness to this sunny day which contributed to a feeling of being cleansed of the after-effects of the Bug. A particular delight was seeing a profusion in the heather of small white, yellow and black moths, which we later identified as Magpie Moths. They must be very common, but I cannot remember seeing them anywhere

before, at least not in those numbers. Aberdeenshire has a lot to offer.

Over the next few days we saw dolphins and visited Pictish standing stones, walked on huge beaches under wide open skies and along sea cliffs noisy with birds. (Unfortunately, this was also the summer of avian flu and there were many sad corpses all along the coast). We also came across recumbent stone circles.

These, almost unique to the north-east of Scotland, are stone circles dating from 2000 – 3000 BC which include a particularly big stone (which may

weigh 20 tons or more) on its side – recumbent - flanked by a couple of upright stones. This arrangement of stones seems to have acted as a frame for viewing the rising or setting of a major standstill moon (a moon which dips unusually low in the sky), an event which occurs only once every 18.6 years. Apart from trying to imagine how the population of prehistoric Aberdeenshire dug out and moved rocks weighing 20 + tons with a view to lunar observation, I find it amazing to think that they were able to keep records of the phases of the moon over decades to get their stones aligned as they wanted them to be.



We walked up the hill on a fine morning, again surrounded by hundreds of Magpie moths, and enjoyed superb 360 degree views from the summit



What sort of diaries did they have, and how did they write in them?

Our historical and hill walking interests next merged in a walk up Bennachie, another Hugh but one prominent and popular enough to have been included in the old SMC guides to “the Corbetts and Other Scottish Hills”. The true summit of this very popular hill is Oxen Craig at 528m, but the most spectacular and most visited top is Mither Tap 518m. One side of fine little top has natural defences in the form of steep granite tors; the other is

defended by a large and well preserved fort, perhaps begun as earlier as 1000 BC. It is made of hundreds of thousands of boulders, with neat dry stane dyking forming walls and an entrance passage. The determined organisation and prolonged effort that must have been required to build it is breathtaking when one thinks about it. We walked up the hill on a fine morning, again surrounded by hundreds of Magpie moths, and enjoyed superb 360 degree views from the summit. Isolated hills like Bennachie don't have to be very high to enable you to see a long way.

Our next centre of activity could not have been more different – Knoydart, on the other side of Scotland, where the mountains rise in close profusion straight from the sea. We got the boat from Mallaig to Inverie on a typical West coast July morning – cloud over the tops with periodic showers and a chill wind. We were staying in a pod belonging to Ian and Jackie Robertson.

Ian used to own and run the famous Old Forge pub in Inverie, which is now owned by the local community after an unhappy spell in the hands of a foreign

hotelier. The pub is not (yet) serving food, but if one wants to eat out there are at least two other excellent local restaurants; or one can get wood fired pizzas, or fish and chips, to eat either al fresco or back in the pub with a beer.

The hills in Knoydart are a rather different proposition to their minor relatives in Aberdeenshire; big, steep and often pathless. As I plodded up the Corbett Sgurr Coire Choinnichean 796m I realised that I was still feeling below my best after the viral infections of the previous weeks. The lower slopes of this hill are fairly tedious, but as one gets higher one can look down on an big gorge, hard to see from below, which cleaves one flank of the mountain. Higher still there is a short knife edge (well, maybe a food wide) section of ridge. Mist was coming and going on the summit so I did not linger, heading on along the ridge for a while before dropping down into Glen Dubh Lochain.

On the way back down the glen to Inverie one can make a diversion to see the Kilchoan Cross, an ancient and mysterious cross in the local graveyard. There is also a more



In the glen, it is not easy to find somewhere to cross the river, a point not mentioned in the Corbetts book



modern stone marking the grave of a stoker from HMS Curacoa. I was curious about this, so researched it on Google. The Curacoa was a British cruiser sunk in the North Atlantic in 1942 while escorting the liner/troop ship Queen Mary; the two ships got too close while zig zagging (a manoeuvre to minimise the risk of attack by submarines) and the Queen Mary ran over the smaller Curacoa. The Queen Mary was laden with troops and could not stop to rescue survivors lest it be torpedoed; more than 330 men from the Curacoa's crew were killed. I don't

know how one of them ended up at remote Kilchoan; it may be that his body was washed ashore somewhere nearby. The tragedy was hushed up at the time, but after the war there was litigation in which the Curacoa was found two thirds to blame for the collision.

The next day my target was another Corbett, Beinn na Caillich. At 785m it is slightly lower than Sgurr Coire Choinnichean, but the distance to the summit from Inverie is much longer and I was glad, up to a point, that I had

my bike with me. I say "up to a point" because the track begins steeply, then is festooned with puddles and potholes, so – particularly on the way out – there was a lot of dismounting and pushing. After leaving the bike one has about 4k to go up a level glen, then I took a steep rib towards the summit. In the glen, it is not easy to find somewhere to cross the river, a point not mentioned in the Corbetts book, and I felt post-virally annoyed and weary as I slogged onwards and upwards. The unfolding views were some compensation; south east to

Ladhar Bheinn, westwards to Skye and Rum and northwards to Loch Hourn, Beinn Sgritheal and the hills of the Glen Shiel forest, all looking steep, rocky and rather forbidding in the hazy light. By the time I got back to our pod I was more than ready for a bottle or two of the Knoydart Brewery's fine product. By the way, if you have a copy of Highland Scrambles North (an excellent book which I wish I'd bought years ago) you will see that there is a Grade 3 scramble up Beinn na Caillich. I think it would give a more interesting and somewhat shorter route to the summit than the one I took.

The weather we'd had in Knoydart tended to be grey and sometimes damp, but the forecast for the start of the following week was for nothing but sunshine. Having got some Hughs and Corbett into my legs I was keen to chip away at my list of unclimbed Munros. So we spent the night in the van in a layby near Strome Ferry, then drove round to Kilillan at the foot of Glen Elchaig to allow me to have a second attempt at An Socach, one of those hills that really is a long way from anywhere. I had aborted my first attempt earlier in the year when

I realised, a long way up the track, that in telling Linda I'd be comfortably back in 5 hours I had got my timing arithmetic badly wrong. This time I estimated 7 hours, which turned out to be more or less right.

This was one of the days on which temperatures reached over 40 degrees in the south of England. In Glen Elchaig it was probably about 27 degrees, certainly hot enough for me. The heat was reaching its peak as I left my bike near Iron Lodge and tackled the stony track that leads you past Loch Mhoicean to the point at which you have to grind away up a steep, pathless, escarpment which is covered in deep grass and heather. I had a handkerchief with me which I would soak with stream water every so often, squeezing some out over my hair then letting the rest chill the back of my neck. Above 700m or so there was a slight cooling breeze and the angle of the ground eased off to give some fine walking on nice springy short grass, although the distance to the top is – as usual – longer than you first assume.

My old OS map shows the corrie below the summit of An Socach to be quite

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I realised, a long way up the track, that in telling Linda I'd be comfortably back in 5 hours I had got my timing arithmetic badly wrong.

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lacking in rocks, so I got a surprise when I saw the real thing – there are cliffs all over the place! Looking at OS Maps Online I see they have now sketched in a few more rocks, but that part of the hill is still definitely in need of re-assessment.

Reversing my course up the mountain and then the glen, at long last I reached the van again and met up with Linda who had been to the Falls of Glomach; she had found the path quite worn and dangerous in places. We



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Linda was enjoying a cool dip in the crystal clear sea down at Lochcarron, I would certainly have abandoned the trek to make haste to join her.

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were both sorely in need of a shower and fortunately had booked into the Wee Campsite in Lochcarron, an excellent place with one caveat – the floor of the shower cabinet is lethally slippery; we survived uninjured, but only just.

With another hot day forecast for the morrow, I was keen or stupid enough to do it all again, this time taking my bike from near Achnashellach into the hills as far as Glenuaig Lodge in order to climb Maoile Lunndaigh. The track is steep from almost the start,

and I was soon pushing the bike and perspiring freely, to put it politely. Linda was more sensible, meeting friends in Lochcarron and having a relaxed, sociable time. My hydration and cooling strategy was made more difficult on this day by voracious clegs which would descend on me as soon as I stopped anywhere near a stream.

The initial slog up the north westerly spur of the hill through trackless heather felt worse than the equivalent ascent on the previous day. Had I known that, at about the same time,

Linda was enjoying a cool dip in the crystal clear sea down at Lochcarron, I would certainly have abandoned the trek to make haste to join her. But at length I could pick up the odd trace of a path here and there, and perseverance was rewarded with a fine walk heading east over the summit plateau, visiting all the cairns to ensure that I could justifiably tick this Munro in my book. Descending by the north easterly ridge, I was following quite a reasonable path and, if one could find said path from below, it would be the best route of ascent; but it

Rain stops play



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So that was how July 2022 ended – not with a tick of a climb but with a downpour.

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disappears in the bog and tussock of the glen and one would have to know it was there to choose to go up that way. The hot weather was now on the way out; it clouded over as I free wheeled carefully down the steep bit of the track and even began to rain as I waited at the road end for Linda to come and pick me up.

Our holiday was nearing its end and, in order to vary the diet of hillwalking we decided, a couple of days later, to climb an old favourite, Ardverikie Wall. The forecast posted the evening before did not suggest that any rain

was likely and it seemed a fine day, sunny but not too hot and with a breeze to keep the midges away, as we cycled then walked to the foot of the crag. As I led the second pitch to the belay just before the crux, however, I was aware of a darkening in the sky and, as Linda climbed up, I could see a heavy shower sweeping towards us over Geal Charn and Creag Pitridh.

When it reached our side of the valley it left no doubt that we had to go down – the rock was immediately soaked and little rivulets were soon running down the slabs. Leaving a couple of

old slings as anchors we abbed off, descending to wet rucksacks and the local midges thronging to add to our discomfort in the now still, cloudy conditions.

So that was how July 2022 ended – not with a tick of a climb but with a downpour. But that's life and, on the whole, Scotland had given us a lot to be thankful for.



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But there was definitely anxiety in the air as we stood in Loch Broom, posing for an awkward timer shot while puzzled fishermen looked on.

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A Northwest Passage

Danny Carden

The most vivid memories from my outdoor life are often linked by that belly-tickling feeling of facing something nervy, new and unnatural. Leaving an Alpine bunk before dawn. Matching a torqued axe. A night alone in a bothy. It's like your brain fires open new synapses to deal with unfamiliar challenges.

I hadn't expected those nerves about this trip: a long walk from Ullapool in

the Northwest Highlands to Evanton in the Cromarty Firth.

But there was definitely anxiety in the air as we stood in Loch Broom, posing for an awkward timer shot while puzzled fishermen looked on. My mind was focused on our lack of long-distance walking experience, on my gammy hip and on the un-springlike April forecast of days of heavy snow and sub-zero

temperatures. My shoulders could already feel the last-minute additions to our rucksacks: crampons, axes and down jackets.

Two friends and I began planning this trip back in 2019. We plotted an aesthetically-pleasing route that crossed almost no roads, topped three Munros and negotiated unavoidable high ground. Our coast-to-coast route was about 100km long, through

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Lightening our rucksacks was a good excuse to let whiskey fuel a good night's rest. My feet were toasty in 'fresh' woollen socks, found abandoned on a bothy peg..

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country that was entirely new to us. By splitting it over five days, it seemed an interesting but very achievable challenge.

New babies, injuries and Covid meant that it wasn't until April 2022 that we got under way. Rather than walking in a three, it was just my mate Doug and I stepping out of the sea on a driech day in Ullapool.

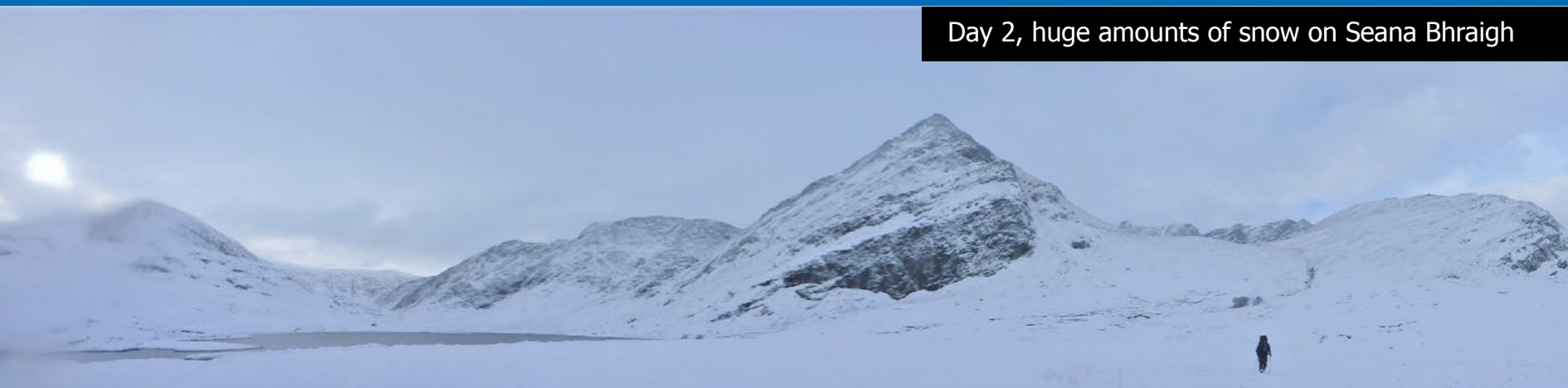
Day One: Ullapool to Coiremor bothy. We left the shore at 9am, bleary-eyed from the pre-dawn drive from Edinburgh. An industrial quarrying road led to Glen Achall, a pleasant spot that I'd not heard of before. We gently gained height, initially on tarmac, through remnants of native birch and pine woods. After five miles, I took off my rigid and heavy B3 climbing boots and strapped them outside my rucksack. On went light fell shoes and my achy feet

felt instantly blissful, but I did wish I owned some winter walking boots.

My mind began to wander to all the potential things that could go wrong. I even muttered something to Doug about how, on balance, we probably wouldn't complete the walk. What an uplifting walking partner! In contrast, Doug had declared that we'd 'practically done the thing' within an hour of leaving Ullapool.

We arrived at Loch an Daimh surprisingly quickly. An open fishing hut gave shelter from the thickening drizzle. Its glass windows looked out on a barren landscape. Only a lone honking swan provided some sign of life. Doug lifted our spirits by unwrapping a two-day-old margherita pizza. I treated him to the first of

Day 2, huge amounts of snow on Seana Bhraigh





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Thick clag soon enveloped the summit, meaning slow progress with compasses in hands and snow up to our knees.

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many stirring renditions of Stan Rogers' Northwest Passage: "Ah, for just one time I would take the Northwest Passage. To find the hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea..."

Perhaps to shut me up, Doug suggested a good plan; to ditch the scheduled night at Knockdamph Bothy and push on to Coiremor Bothy. This section was a real highlight, following single-track stalkers' paths then crossing a

sqelching bog. Negotiating the tanking Corriemulzie River was moderately buttock-clenching, but the cosy confines of the empty bothy felt a reward for the effort.

We were tired and keen to get eating. It was my first experience of modern dehydrated food, a 1,000-calorie curry. Verdict: surprisingly good. I passed on Doug's 'starter' of mushroom pâté, which he coiled out on to the back of his hand, then licked with delight.

Lightening our rucksacks was a good excuse to let whiskey fuel a good night's rest. My feet were toasty in 'fresh' woollen socks, found abandoned on a bothy peg. We banged the door shut on a dramatic view of Seana Bhràigh's pointy side. A colourful riot of cliffs, bog and oozing water. We slept well. Day two: Coiremor bothy to Glenbeg bothy All that colour had gone by morning. Overnight, the hill had donned a puffy winter coat and the drumbeat of gushing water had stopped.



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The old bothy book offered a wild read. We learned how the original bothy burned down in mysterious circumstances.

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Everything felt still. An April winter wonderland.

The summit remained in view, 600 metres above the bothy. The mountain seemed much bigger, bloated under all that fresh snow.

The conditions made it an easy decision to discount the steep scramble up Creag an Duine's dramatic north ridge. We instead followed the broad ridge of Creag nan Gobhar, which in hindsight was the right call regardless of the weather. It felt plenty hard enough with our big rucksacks.

Thick clag soon enveloped the summit, meaning slow progress with compasses in hands and snow up to our knees. Spotting Seana Bhràigh's cairn emerge from the mist was joyful. We'd completed one of the cruxes of the crossing. There is no easy alternative between Coiremor and Gleann Beag.

Axes came out for the steep drop towards Glenbeg Bothy. We linked slippery turf ribs that divided dozens of snow-filled gullies into a Zebra-like pattern across Sean Bhràigh's broad south side. The ground beneath the melting snow was at peak saturation

and sunballs whizzed past us. It was a delight to reach the river, remove layers and lozzack in a brief spell of late afternoon sun.

Glenbeg Bothy was less delightful. Rat poo was everywhere and snow was falling through its broken roof. I can see why it seems to have been written off as un-fixable.

The old bothy book offered a wild read. We learned how the original bothy burned down in mysterious circumstances. How a horse called Honey got stuck in a nearby bog only to be 'righted by a passing fighter

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We whiled away a lazy evening, reading, resting and watching dense snow plaster the hills that encircled our remote shelter.

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Day 2 in Glen Beg

jet'. And how a young Frenchman survived a ten-day solo stay, armed with only sandwiches.

We whiled away a lazy evening, reading, resting and watching dense snow plaster the hills that encircled our remote shelter. We lay down in one of the few snow- and dropping-free spots. Our heads hovered next to freshly-gnawed holes in the wall.

Day three: Glenbeg bothy to Loch nan Amhaichean We swithered over breakfast about whether to tackle our second planned Munro, Am

Faochagach. It would mean wading through the drifts on its remote northern flank. Alternatively, we could bypass via low-level tracks east through Gleann Beag and south along Loch Vaich. We took the easier option and had no regrets.

We enjoyed the sightseeing tour of Gleann Beag, which contains numerous eye-catching boulders and crags, including a remarkable half-domed cliff. Any climbers with e-bikes and a sense of adventure could fill many days there.

Eventually we turned south into Strath Vaich. We'd feared this would be an industrial-feeling glen, hence our reluctance to avoid Am Faochagach. In fact, the east bank of Loch Vaich is an uplifting place. We watched a golden eagle soar above the miles of regenerating pines that can hopefully one day be unshackled from their protective fences.

We snuck into a derelict farmstead at Lubachlaggan, getting there just in time to dodge the latest smashing of snow. It was a useful moment to make a brew and lay out the map

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Lots of wee birds darted about, with their chirping providing a pleasant soundtrack to our suffering.

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Day 4; sunrise at Loch nan Amhaichean

on its deer dung floor. Our plan was loose from here on, with no night stops in mind.

Perhaps it was the caffeine, but we began to feel confident that we could push on into the Easter Ross uplands before nightfall. The winds were dropping so we decided to aim for Loch nam Amhaichean, about a 12km walk from our lunch stop.

We made good time through Strathrannoch and into the upper reaches of Allt a' Choire-rainich, a

useful gateway to the high expanse of the Kildermorie Forest. Lots of wee birds darted about, with their chirping providing a pleasant soundtrack to our suffering. I belted out some more Stan Rogers: "Tracing one warm line through a land so wild and savage. And make a Northwest Passage to the sea."

We left the burn and trudged up the final 150 metres of deep snow-covered heather to a shallow col. We were glad to again have strong

north-westerlies on our backs and pleased that we had flipped our start point to the west, rather than finish in Ullapool as originally planned. At the windy col we got our first view of distant Ben Wyvis, its summit looming between horizontal bands of fast-moving clouds.

In the foreground lay Loch nam Amhaichean. The scene was stunning, with ribbons of ice clinging to granite craglets and ravens cawking above the sheltered

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Via a combination of tracks and heather bashing, we reached a beautiful old stalkers' path at Loch nan Druidean.

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Day 4 Ben Wyvis

teardrop-shaped loch. A sandy beach gave just enough room to pitch our tent, one inch above loch-level. We knew the loch wouldn't rise overnight given the remarkably cold spring conditions. It was one of the finest spots that either of us had camped. Day four: Loch nam Amhaichean to Allt Coire Misirich We woke early to a rich gold glow reflecting upwards through the tent. I unzipped the door in time to catch the sun rise over a remote Graham, Beinn nan Eun. It was a blissful start. Forcing our mashed feet into frozen boots ruined the vibe a bit. But we

were soon warmed up by the knee-wrecking descent of Abhainn Beinn nan Eun to Loch Glass.

I cursed myself for having only brought one walking pole and wondered what the doctor who had injected my knackered hip full of steroids a week before have would make of this escapade. It was a testing start to the hardest day of the trip.

I've heard people say that Ben Wyvis is an uninteresting, easy Munro. But as we approached its less-frequented northern flank on our

fourth day, it looked an intimidating hulk.

Via a combination of tracks and heather bashing, we reached a beautiful old stalkers' path at Loch nan Druidean. We were immensely grateful for the path's narrow zigzags, which led efficiently through the snow-covered boulder field to Carn Gorm (742 metres). The path wound upwards a further 200 metres to Tom a' Choinich, where we paused briefly to consult the map.

We were pretty much on top of the hill, but feeling a bit spent. It was



The cloud lifted to give our first sight of our end point at Evanton. Beyond, the rusty oil rigs of the Cromarty Firth looking eerily magnificent.



disheartening to fully appraise the scale of the journey to reach Ben Wyvis, regain this spot, then follow the curving ridge of Leacann Bhreac south-east towards lower Glen Glass: a further 10km of walking and 350 metres of height gain before bed.

The weather had settled into a pattern of 20 minutes of sunshine quickly followed by 20 minutes of howling spindrift on repeat. It added to the mildly serious feel. It didn't help that we were yet to speak to anyone else since Ullapool.

Our long strides of Day One had reduced to a waddling plod on the final push up Ben Wyvis. Just as on Seana Bhràigh, the clag rolled in for the final stretch to the top. False summit after false summit. It was time to sing a bit more Stan Rogers: "Watching cities rise before me, then behind me sink again. This tardiest explorer, driving hard across the plain."

Finally we hit the trig point, took a quick photo then spun on our heels. The cloud lifted to give our first sight

of our end point at Evanton. Beyond, the rusty oil rigs of the Cromarty Firth looking eerily magnificent.

Moving into the ecological wasteland of Ben Wyvis' eastern reaches was a depressing end to an otherwise wonderful day. Head-height peat hags made progress hard. Numerous all-terrain vehicle tracks had left deep scars across the bog. We didn't see a single living animal on that descent. It was a stark contrast to the hopeful journey through Strath Vaich the day before. We smashed down our final 1,000-calorie 'meals' and went quickly to sleep.

Day Five: Allt Coire Misirich to The Sea! It was good to wake knowing that we simply had to get downstream to the sea.

After getting slightly lost on the forestry tracks above Glen Glass, we made it the glen. It felt sore on our achy feet to hit tarmac, so it was a relief to soon leave the road and gain a fun riverside path through Black Rock Gorge.

A few happy families nodded brief hellos, before a young woman and

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We marched down the sand bank, across the mudflats, over the bladderwrack and into the sea. Big hugs. We'd done it.

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Day 5 Sore Feet on reaching Glen Glass

her mother approached. “Those are big bags. Where have you been?” Finally, we could tell our tale. They did a great job of sounding suitably impressed and not mentioning how much we stunk.

We followed a series of wooded trails to the pretty back streets of Evanton, across the roaring A9 and along pleasant paths towards Kiltearn Castle.

We marched down the sand bank, across the mudflats, over the bladderwrack and into the sea. Big hugs. We'd done it.

Our crossing was extremely short by “through-hiker” standards. Many people walk three times this distance on the TGO Challenge each year and we only topped two Munros

in five days.

But to us, it felt a big adventure. I suspect that it will be imprinted on my memory for a long time.

A harder competition problem (orange)



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As well as being a great training for roped climbing it's a fun activity in its own right. It's so liberating and playful.

”

A little word about bouldering competitions

Denise Hesketh

I'm flying high above the clouds. I am so wondering what it is about Berlin. Tears were in my eyes. I hadn't wanted to leave. But the money was running out and I had a climbing competition to go to.

Tired from a recent cold plus the upheaval of a trip, I wasn't expecting to do really well. Plenty of time to train for the next one, it was a fun comp after

all, the atmosphere is always light and relaxed with everybody encouraging each other. But it was competitive. You wanted to challenge yourself because you wanted to do well; sending a harder problem than you would on a normal training session.

Why am so sad to be leaving Berlin? It can't be the climbing surely. 'What climbing'? you might be asking. There

are sport routes at a place called the Berlin bunker which I hear is a really atmospheric place. But maybe it is something to do with the numerous excellent bouldering walls. I have so far only been to one: Ostbloc with its excellent facilities and bouldering at all levels.

The aim of this article is to say a few words about bouldering competitions

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*It's very accessible.
It's a growing sport
with more and
more young people
becoming involved.*

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and to inspire people to have ago at bouldering as a fun activity in its own right.

Last year I won a cup as the best female super veteran at 50+. But that was because I was the only competitor in this category. So I would like to inspire others who are in my demographic who are thinking of giving it a go to do so. As well as being a great training for roped climbing it's a fun activity in its own right. It's so liberating and playful.

It's nice not to have to carry lots of equipment. You don't need a partner,

although training with a partner or in a group can be fun as well as training alone. It's very accessible. It's a growing sport with more and more young people becoming involved. There are walls or climbing gyms everywhere. There is no need for a car. Outdoor enthusiasts usually can find bouldering outdoors which is often more satisfying and less crowded.

I enjoyed my first competition last year. I entered 3 of the comps. My final points were 231. It was the best 3 comps they used to make the total. As I did 3 of the 4 comps I did quite well; I finished roughly 100th from the bottom of a field of roughly 99 competitors. My scores weren't high: I only got 42 points in my first comp. I managed to score 92 in my other comps. Quite a few people with a similar score to mine had only been to 2 comps, so I got my points from going to 3 comps basically. But I was pleased with my score because I had done my best and pushed myself hard. I also had a fun time in a friendly atmosphere. It was a really good experience and my bouldering has improved.

There were 3 categories: hard, intermediate and easy. I chose the easy category which started at V0 and finished at V4. The next category



Problem 5 (purple) in last year's competition

starts at V1 and finishes at V6. The hard category starts at V2 and goes on to V9ish.

The winner who was also 1st male topped out with a score of 877 having entered all 4 comps. The second male and 2nd overall was closely behind him with 845 having entered 3 comps. The 3rd male at 822. All 3 of these guys are excellent climbers at the hard category. Not far behind was the first male vet at 759 at age 40-50 who was 7th overall. The 2nd male vet scored 749.

The first female scored 673 and was 13th overall. The guy who we all know and love at alien was just behind her as the first male super vet at 669. The second female scored 642 with the 3rd at 630 with a harder set of problems. The 2nd male supervet at 589 above the 3rd male vet with 556. The 4th male supervet had a score of 541.

The first female vet topped out at 525 points. The 2nd at 493 with the 3rd at 444.

And then there was me. The first female supervet at 231 not far from the bottom of the pack, but as I was the only one in the category, I won the cup.

So the first female veteran at 40-50

had a much higher score than me at 525, but generally the scores were quite clustered, especially in the lower scores in the bottom 100. So it often came down to a couple of the problems: not getting them first time or having to have too many goes to get a send, often one would nearly top a problem only to come peeling off on the last move exhausted. It was nice if you could find some sort of a strategy getting the hard ones out of the way before you became too tired but while suitably warmed up.

A few days ago: at the time of writing I competed in my first comp of this years winter series at the Bloc. It was a new crazy orange set with various slopers at challenging angles. They have just purchased a new batch of orange holds especially for this very purpose. I didn't think I did very well.

Still recovering from my trip and my cold, I felt so weak. I was convinced I had come last with my 60 points. I hadn't, not quite, but not far from it at joint 3rd from the bottom. I have 3 more comps to do however, so I have plenty of time to train and the opportunity to do well in my other competitions. At the end, one's lowest score is dismissed and one's best 3 comps are what count.

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It was nice if you could find some sort of a strategy getting the hard ones out of the way before you became too tired but while suitably warmed up

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This year however I was only the 2nd female super vet. There is this amazing woman in the contest who I cannot hope to match unless she doesn't enter any more comps. She is awesome with 169 points. I would have to do exceptionally well to beat 2 x 169 or thereabouts. She is also 3rd female overall, so I'm wishing her much luck. The cup is surely hers and at the hard category too. How wonderful, my recent Instagram post must have worked and has inspired more older women to enter. It is good to have some competition and adds to the overall fun and challenge.



A typical boulder problem

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Competitions are a lot of fun. I would encourage anyone who loves bouldering to give them a go, it's a lovely vibe on the night.

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Again quite a lot of people have finished in the low hundreds and again the scores at the bottom are quite clustered. There is a good competitive spirit in the lower grades, many folk were trying the 3s over and over having not got a send for serious points, it was all good fun.

The spirit of trying and trying, working on a problem, maybe you'll get a point, maybe not, awesome either way, encouraging friends to go for it and try that little bit harder. And yes they'll still be there at alien bloc: all the problems for anyone who wants to try them. It gives you a good idea of the

sort of problems that would be in a competition and this would encourage you to try.

Competitions are a lot of fun. I would encourage anyone who loves bouldering to give them a go, it's a lovely vibe on the night. You see lots of people you are likely to know already from training at bloc, you get to compete with them in a fun friendly way encouraging them to push that bit harder and make the moves.

It's 10 points for the send first time. If you don't stick it, it's 7 points and 5 if you make it on the 3rd go. A send after

any subsequent or numerous attempts it's one point.

And it doesn't matter about coming last or near the bottom - it's all about having fun, I've found bouldering to be a most enjoyable form of climbing . It's so inclusive and spontaneous.

I won't get the cup this year but I might get a T-shirt, these go out to the first 80 people to book for 3 comps or more, so if that's not an incentive I don't know what is.

See you at a gym soon. Maybe even at a bouldering comp.



A gentle approach to the ridge - day 1

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The scenery is indeed tremendous, and the walking is pretty tough. Most days have a lot of ascent and descent on fairly rough terrain

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Walking the GR20 in Corsica

Bryan Rynne

After the success of my 'self-guided' Tour du Mont Blanc trip in 2019, organised by Cloud9 (see the 2019 newsletter), I decided to do another classic walking route: the GR20 in Corsica. This is, very roughly, a north to south route along the central Corsican mountains, and is about 120 miles long, with over 10,000 metres of ascent (this is slightly vague as there are alternative routes at various

points, depending on the weather, or just how hard you want to make it). It is renowned as a spectacularly scenic, but fairly tough walk - indeed, it gets billed as 'Europe's hardest long-distance trek' (or similar) on various websites, including in a 2009 Guardian article about it. The scenery is indeed tremendous, and the walking is pretty tough. Most days have a lot of ascent and descent on fairly rough terrain -

think of walking up and down a Munro on scree and rock most of the way.

The GR20 divides relatively naturally into a northern and a southern section, with the small town of Vizzavona at the midpoint. Apparently many people only do one half. The northern half of the route contains a lot of moderately technical scrambling, which also adds to the effort. The southern half has

considerably gentler walking, and in some ways is more scenic, although the scenery is less spectacular, with views entirely across the island from east to west, and even a distant view of Sardinia at the southern end. However, you do also spend more time on gentle forest tracks, with little scenery. Overall, it is worth doing the entire route, but if I had to choose I would say do the northern half, to anyone that does not mind the serious scrambling.



Most of the accommodation is up on the ridge, in National Park gites or privately-owned 'bergeries' (I think that these were old sheep or goat herding stations). These offer basic, dorm-style accommodation, but you need to bring your own sleeping bag (and pillow if you want one). Alternatively many of these have tents for hire (pre-erected), containing sleeping mats. As far as I could see these were invariably Quechua 3-man tents. Or you can carry your own tent - if you really want to. The route is quite hard anyway, without carrying a tent. However, we did pass many people who were doing so - mostly they looked young, fit and impoverished, and were walking very slowly and often looked worn out... I

think that wild-camping is not allowed, so you have to camp at the bergeries even if you have your own tent.

All the accommodation offers an evening meal and basic breakfast (sometimes very basic, not much more than coffee - bring some snacks.). The track, and the accommodation, is usually a long way from any road, so even if you have your own tent you will probably want to eat in the bergeries. And the bergeries are the main water sources - there are a tiny number of springs, with taps, along the way, but not enough to keep you going.

I had long wanted to do this walk, but the major obstacle that had

always put me off was not the distances or the technical scrambling ('piffling', I had assumed, perhaps somewhat optimistically). No, the main impediment putting me off the trip was the bed-bugs! I am not joking - the GR20 is renowned not only for its awe-inspiring scenery, and scary terrain, but also for the squalor of the accommodation along the way, including bed-bugs. You don't want to get them!

After the impressive way that Cloud9 managed the Tour du Mont Blanc for me in 2019 I had a look at their website to see what else they did. There I found that they offered a guided GR20 trip, which they called 'the GR20 for

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We avoid staying in overcrowded and “rustic” mountain huts, and instead we stay in hotels and privately-run gites

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The start of the queuing

softies’. Well, more precisely, they describe their trip as: The GR20: the hardest trek in Europe, the comfortable way, and their aim is: to ensure the trip is as luxurious as possible. We avoid staying in overcrowded and “rustic” mountain huts, and instead we stay in hotels and privately-run gites - and our luggage is delivered each day.

So, as I say ‘the GR20 for softies’, and no bed-bugs (I assume that Cloud9 are using the term “rustic” as code for “bed-bugs”, among other things). It was clear that this was the trip for me. I immediately booked up to go on the

trip in 2020. Well, we all know what happened next... So, the trip got rolled forward to 2021, and things were looking promising until just a few weeks before I was due to fly out. But then the UK locked down yet again. To really annoy me, the trip actually took place without me, with people from all over Europe and the US on it. Obviously, Boris was doing his best to deal with Covid, but for some reason the US and the rest of Europe seemed not to be locked down while the UK was. To annoy me even more, I had already signed up as a member of a whatsapp group for the trip, so I kept

on getting messages about how well it was all going and how everyone was enjoying their best holiday ever. So, the trip got rolled forward to 2022...

By then Boris had given up even pretending to try to deal with Covid (I don’t think that he had been trying very hard anyway), so things seemed to be improving markedly. Except then the travel chaos descended. The ideal route to Corsica from Edinburgh involved flying with Easyjet, via Stansted. Unfortunately, Easyjet was in complete turmoil at that time, and complete turmoil would be an



As it turned out the only thing that went wrong on the journey was caused by Edinburgh airport - their entire baggage system had collapsed



improvement on Stansted's usual performance at any time. So I decided to fly out a couple of days early on a high quality airline known for its reliability - Ryanair! They would get me to Marseille and then Air Corsica would get me to Corsica. I consoled myself with the thought that if this plan went all wrong I might still have time to get onto the Easyjet flight instead...

As it turned out the only thing that went wrong on the journey was caused by Edinburgh airport - their entire baggage system had collapsed due to not enough staff. As a result of this,

after about 2 hours at the checkin I finally got my bag onto a virtually stationary conveyor belt and then rushed off to get my flight. I had 20 minutes to get to the gate, and thanks to having paid for fast-track through security I made it. I was, of course, convinced that my bag would not make it. In fact, it seemed quite likely that it would have barely moved from where I had left it. Fortunately Ryanair decided to wait for the bags, which took another 1.5 hours. I doubt if this was due to them being kind hearted. More likely, hardly any of the bags were on the flight at the time we were

due to leave since there were a lot of people behind me at check in, and it would cause Ryanair an immense amount of hassle to fly out an entire flights worth of bags to Marseille. So, we finally got going about 1.5 hours late, with all the bags on board! This was fine by me since I had a 4 hour wait in Marseille scheduled.

Hard to understand why, but once I had left the UK everything worked like clockwork. Marseille airport exuded a general air of calm organisation, especially once I had left the shack allocated to the UK cheapskate airlines

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The first day was a gentle introduction. After a taxi ride to the start of the route at Calenzana we set off up a good path, rising gently through the woods aiming for the ridge to the south.

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and got to the swish and sophisticated terminal reserved for airlines from first world countries. Checkin was calm and pleasant - it felt like checking in to a luxury hotel. I wondered if someone was going to carry my bags for me. And the flight left bang on time. Interestingly, it turned out that of the 6 people on the trip, 3 still had bags missing in transit when they started the walk, and all of these 3 had flown via Heathrow.

Since I had arrived a couple of days early, this seemed to be a good opportunity to undertake a serious acclimatisation regime to get used to the Corsican heat and humidity. After some thought, and minimal research, the regime I adopted consisted mainly of wandering around the attractive, small port of Calvi on the north coast, where we were starting from, eating ice-cream and rehydrating with cold beer every few hours. During this I managed to take a few photos and read several books. Possibly a more rigorous training regime, involving ascending to bars and ice-cream parlours at altitudes of more than, roughly, 50 metres above sea level might have helped later on when I found myself up on the ridge of the 'hardest trek in Europe'. But my reasoning at that point was that if I wasn't fit enough by now then forgoing beer and ice-cream to run up and down the local hills wasn't going to make much difference. And being a doctor, I know what I am talking about.

Anyway, the whole group first met up for dinner on Sunday evening. This was all very sociable, although the chat

seemed to primarily revolve around airport baggage handling...

We then set off on the walk on Monday morning. We all had light rucksacks due to our main bags being transported by taxi for us, but some members of the group were carrying rather less than they had anticipated.

The first day was a gentle introduction. After a taxi ride to the start of the route at Calenzana we set off up a good path, rising gently through the woods aiming for the ridge to the south. This was already very scenic, and a very pleasant start, except that it was very hot and humid. Given that it was July I was expecting this to be a problem (back in 2020 I had booked to do the trip in September). But Emma, who seems to run Cloud9 and does most of the organising, felt that July was the best time of year to do the trek, in order to avoid the bad weather that can occur at other times of the year - apparently when the weather gets bad it can get very bad. She said that she didn't like the heat either but she felt that it was possible to get used to it. However, I found the combination of

The group take a breather



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Due to the heat and high winds there was a high fire risk so the next section of the National Park was closed!

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heat and humidity very draining, even on a relatively easy day.

On day 2 we were up and ready to go much earlier (no taxi ride involved), which meant that we could get going in much cooler temperatures. Unfortunately, we could not get going. Due to the heat and high winds there was a high fire risk so the next section of the National Park was closed! It wasn't clear if this was to prevent us starting a fire, or to avoid us all dying horribly in a fire. Whatever the reason, we were stuck.

This was the moment when being on

a guided trip paid off. After consulting with Emma back at base, the guide rang up a taxi and got us all shifted to the next overnight stop. A taxi was going to transport our overnight bags anyway, but there wasn't enough room in that for us as well. Although the day's walk was only supposed to be about 10 miles, doing it by taxi was much longer since we had to drive down a long, windy, single-track road out to a main road, then another long, windy, single-track road back up to the GR20.

Once we got to the next overnight stop some of us actually walked back along

the track to the high point on the day's route, so we got most of the views that we would have had, and did possibly the best part of the day's walk anyway. We had no more problems with fire risks - presumably the wind dropped enough that it was no longer an issue. By day 3 everyone was feeling the heat, not just me, so we decided to start getting up as early as possible. In fact, we started getting up at 5.30am some days (dawn was about 5.50). This made a major difference, and we could gain much of the day's altitude in relatively cool conditions.

Today was also the first day on what



Looking north on the ascent to Monte Renoso

could be called 'serious' terrain. In fact, we would pass close to the famous, or infamous, Cirque de la Solitude which the route used to pass through, but which was closed following a huge landslide in 2015. Instead, the route now goes via a high col, the Pointe des Eboulis. According to Cloud9: 'this new route makes what used to be a long, tough day into a longer, tougher day'. So, anticipating a fun day out, we set off soon after the crack of dawn. Unfortunately, as soon as we hit the serious scrambling we found ourselves in a very long, very slow moving queue of people, many of whom were struggling desperately on terrain that was probably about as difficult as, say, Curved Ridge. And it had chains on

the trickiest bits. To be honest, apart from me and the guide, our party was struggling as much as anyone else, and I was delegated to come up at the back and keep an eye on people while the guide led the way. Not that leading the way was really necessary given the queue to follow. Still, the surroundings were spectacular, and I had plenty of opportunity to stand and look around, and take photos.

Finally we reached the Pointe des Eboulis, where we had a lunch stop. This is in fact the highest point on the route but at this point I realised that Monte Cinto (2706m), the highest point on the whole island, was only about 700m away, admittedly along

a scrambly ridge off the main route. I immediately decided that I could not just walk past this and had to nip over to it. None of the others wanted to accompany me which, to be honest, suited me. So I set off, expecting to catch everyone up in an hour or so, it was only 700m away. However, it soon became clear that this was not the pushover I had expected it to be from a brief glance at the gps app on my phone - shame it doesn't have contours... And the map was at the bottom of the rucksack, where all the useful bits of kit seem to congregate. In fact, it took me 2 hours, and a certain amount of possibly 'moderate' climbing to 'nip' across this 700m and back to the col - but

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On Saturday (day 6) we had a long gentle descent through the woods to Corte, a small, scenic town roughly in the middle of the island and the middle of the trek.

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worth it nevertheless. Very good views all round from the summit. And, of course, a bagging tick was attained.

This was probably the hardest day of the route, combining steep scrambling and simply a lot of ascent and distance. The next few days were similar - steep, very rough terrain, but just not quite so hard. However, the views were generally tremendous,

over very jagged terrain, and apart from the afternoon temperatures the weather was very good. Now that we were getting going at dawn (and many people know just how much I normally like crack of dawn starts) and I had recuperated from my initial 'heat stroke' I was now enjoying this. The walking was indeed rough, but I wasn't carrying much (thermals and waterproofs were not necessary.) and a 'Munro bagging' level of fitness was ample for this.

On Saturday (day 6) we had a long gentle descent through the woods to Corte, a small, scenic town roughly in the middle of the island and the middle of the trek. To be strictly accurate, as mentioned above, Vizzavona is roughly the mid-point of the trek, while Corte is slightly off the GR20. But it is considerably nicer than Vizzavona (which we did pass through), and we stayed in a very swish hotel (no Quechua 3-man tents here), and had a slap up meal in the town - so I didn't complain.

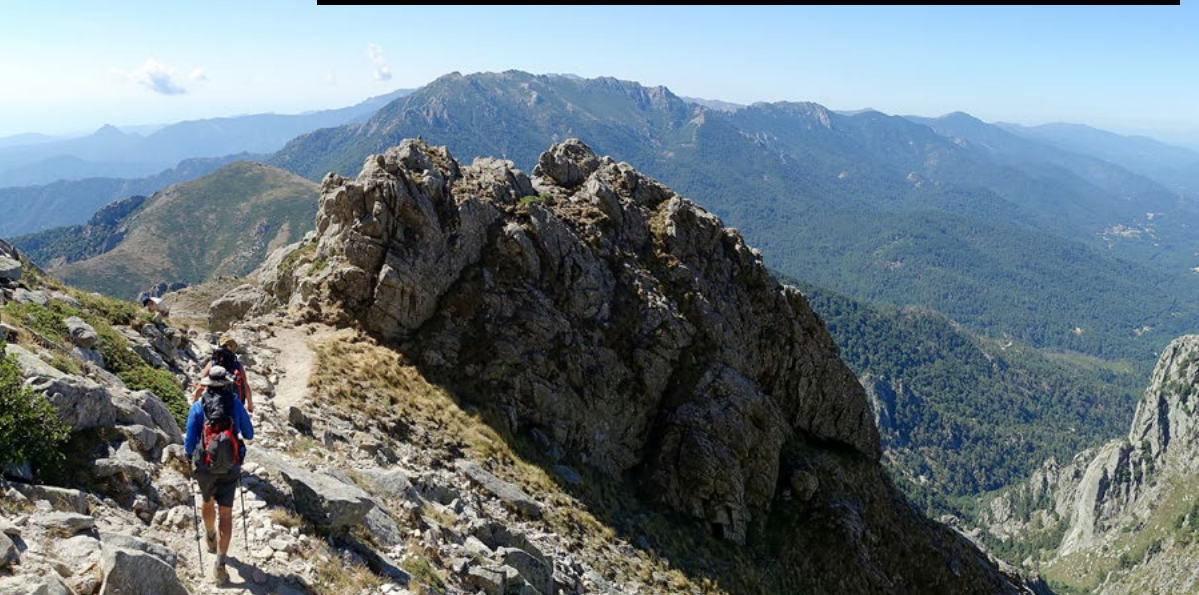
During the day we were accompanied by a large number of fell runners running the 'Restonica Trail race', which finished in Corte. As a result of this a

lot of the town was pedestrianised for the day, with the crowds cheering each runner as they limped over the finishing line, and there was thumping music blaring out everywhere - the general ambience of the Tour de France, on a smaller scale. UK fell-runners don't get that sort of treatment.

We had now done the technical, northern half of the route, and from now on things eased off considerably. The statistics of distance and ascent (about 10 miles and 1000-1500 metres of ascent daily) are not much different on the southern half, but the gradients tend to be gentler and the paths better, so it mostly feels a lot easier. It is still well worth doing, but by now I was glad to ease off the effort a bit. The views are rather more extensive than on the northern half, except that you find yourself passing through more woods. So, a slightly 'tamer' feel to it overall, but still very enjoyable.

We finished in Conca, on the Friday of the second week, so we had 12 days walking. Conca is at the southern end of the hills and the route, although not quite the southern end of the island. By then one person from the group

A typical view on the southern, easier half of the walk.



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I enjoyed it, but I would probably not do it again. If I did I would definitely do it at a cooler time of year.

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had departed at the half-way point (planned), one person had had to resort to getting taxis on several of the days, and two more looked pretty ground down and were clearly no longer enjoying it. They did seem to perk up and enjoy the celebratory beer that we had in the first bar we reached in Conca. We then got a taxi to Porto-Vecchio for our final night - in another very luxurious hotel.

Some overall thoughts

Overall, the GR20 was well worth doing. Whether it is the 'hardest trek in Europe' is a moot point. It is definitely very hard for a well-known,

waymarked walking trail. Even ignoring the scrambling, it feels much harder than the daily statistics of distance and ascent would appear to indicate. For instance, it is much harder than the Tour du Mont Blanc, which has similar amounts of distance and ascent.

I enjoyed it, but I would probably not do it again. If I did I would definitely do it at a cooler time of year. That might risk some bad weather, which apparently can be very bad, but the heat plus humidity in July was nearly too much for me. It was the humidity as much as the heat - the temperatures were probably about 28-30 degrees, which

I have coped with in other places, and at the time temperatures were nearing 40 in parts of the UK. However, I just found the combination almost unbearable. I definitely could not have done it if we hadn't started getting up at dawn. Which indeed most people were doing. Since we had very little interaction with the outside world, getting up at dawn and adjusting our body clocks to solar time made sense anyway.

Navigation is fairly straightforward. The trail is marked with the usual GR red and white paint markers and there are enough of them to make it easy

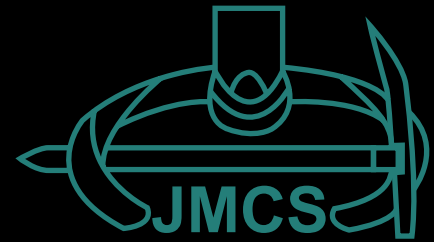
to follow, if you keep your eyes open. Emma had sent me a gpx file of her route, and I used a gps app called Osmand to follow it. This displays OSM maps (which are very good), and all the tracks we went along were marked on these maps. The GR20 itself is specifically labelled on OSM maps, but Emma's route deviated from this at various points, so it was useful to have her map. As far as I could tell, no one else apart from the guide had any navigational devices but they managed OK - the guide waited for people when there might be any difficulty (he stopped waiting for me once I assured him that I didn't mind blundering around on my own, visiting summits just off the track).

The accommodation quality is certainly variable. We stayed in several very nice hotels along the way, but also some places made me think: if this is "luxurious" I am glad we are not sampling "squalid". And one member of the party did get an infestation of bedbugs! Fortunately she either had an anti bedbug spray with her, or she managed to get to a shop and acquire some, which she shared with the rest

of us, so no one else got them.

The route is quite busy. For a high proportion of the time you can see someone else on it. It certainly isn't a wilderness experience. But obviously this demonstrates that it is regarded as being worth doing. However, it also means that you probably have to book all your accommodation in advance, unless you are carrying your own tent. And if you are you ought to make sure that you get to the next stop early enough to get a nice spot to pitch your tent.

Even on Cloud9's luxury version of the route I had several nights in bunks, and in the Quechua tents. The tents were much better than the bunks, and I opted for these when I could get them. The other nights were in hotels, some of which were very luxurious. Among the Cloud9 group the hotel nights were regarded with great relief - none of us would have wanted to do the whole trip staying in the bergeries, let alone carrying our own tents.



2022