

JMCS

Winter Newsletter **2023**

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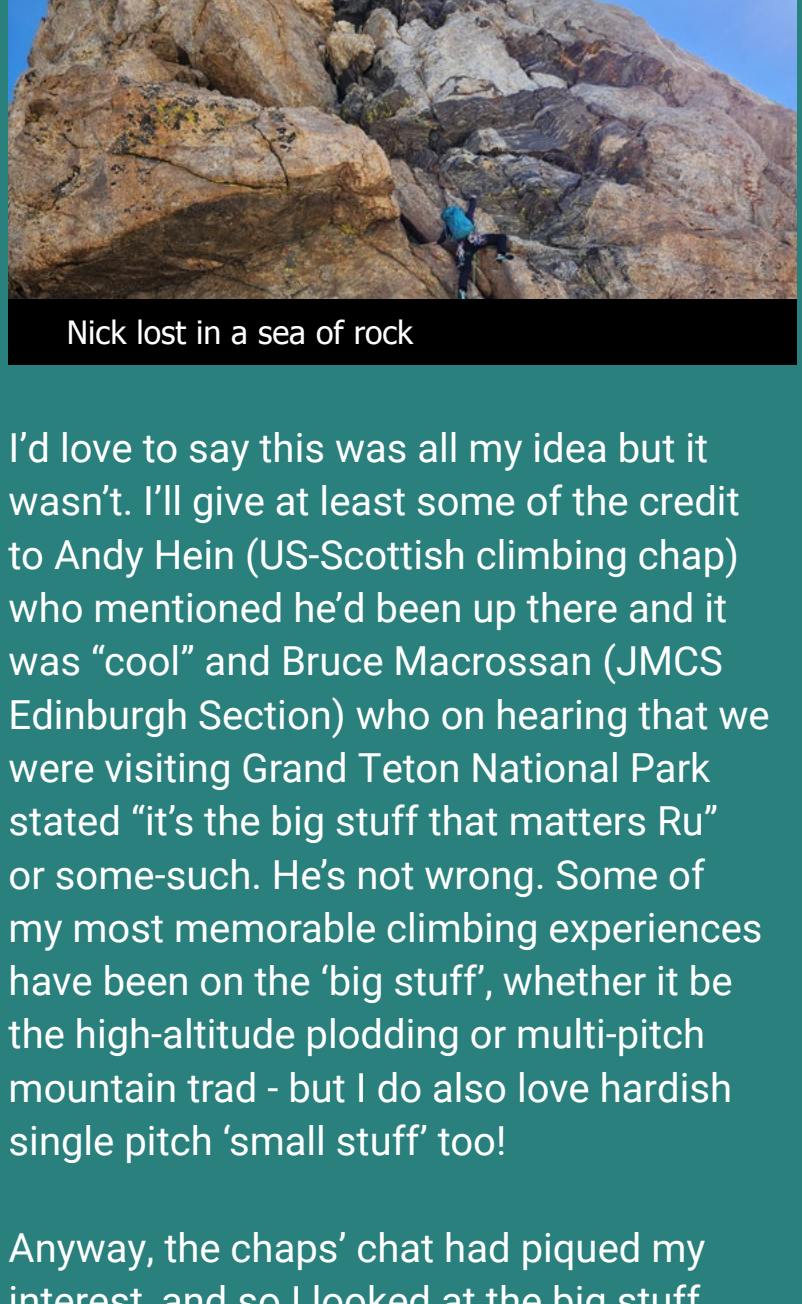
2023

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A Grand (Teton) Day Out

Roo Finlayson

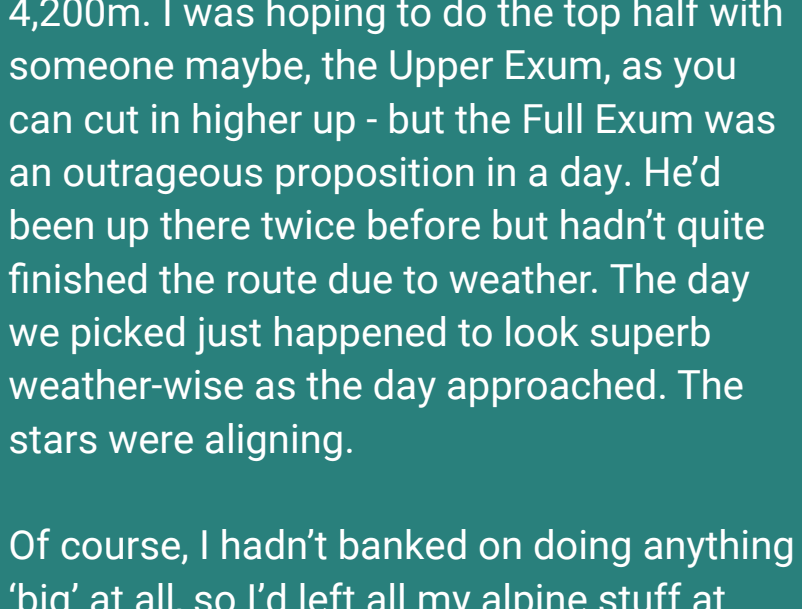


Nick lost in a sea of rock

I'd love to say this was all my idea but it wasn't. I'll give at least some of the credit to Andy Hein (US-Scottish climbing chap) who mentioned he'd been up there and it was "cool" and Bruce Macrossan (JMCS Edinburgh Section) who on hearing that we were visiting Grand Teton National Park stated "it's the big stuff that matters Ru" or some-such. He's not wrong. Some of my most memorable climbing experiences have been on the 'big stuff', whether it be the high-altitude plodding or multi-pitch mountain trad - but I do also love hardish single pitch 'small stuff' too!

Anyway, the chaps' chat had piqued my interest, and so I looked at the big stuff in Teton along with everything else, despite the low probability of achieving something. My wife Claire was and still is pregnant at the time of writing (due Xmas day...!) and the trip was booked with that possibility in mind. The idea was to fly into Portland, Oregon, go to Smith Rock for some top-roping/leading if we could find partners (which we did), visit the West Coast of Oregon, sightsee through Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming (v nice indeed but no climbing) then head to Teton.

Teton National Park (pronounced Tee-ton) basically looks like Chamonix, cut in half, with the big stuff on one side and rolling plains on the other. It's where Jackson Hole is, where Presidents and Prime Ministers meet and pat each other's backs. Here I would have one spare day to match with a partner, get very lucky with weather and be ready to get something done if the stars aligned. So I put out some posts on Mountain Project (America's answer to UKC) saying that I'd be keen for anything at all (Sport, single pitch trad, alpine) on the basis that there would be someone, somewhere, keen for something.



Grand Teton from the plains to the East

Then Nick Battaglia got in touch. Nick wanted to do some alpine stuff - interesting. He mentioned the Full Exum Ridge on Grand Teton as a possibility - interest maximised. This is a mega-classic, circa 12 pitch combo of the Lower and Upper Exum Routes to the top of the highest mountain in the Teton's at about 4,200m. I was hoping to do the top half with someone maybe, the Upper Exum, as you can cut in higher up - but the Full Exum was an outrageous proposition in a day. He'd been up there twice before but hadn't quite finished the route due to weather. The day we picked just happened to look superb weather-wise as the day approached. The stars were aligning.

Of course, I hadn't banked on doing anything 'big' at all, so I'd left all my alpine stuff at home. I went and bought a hat, gloves and hand warmers (glad I did!) and took all Claire's warm clothes and her rucksack, which didn't fit, hoping it wouldn't be too full-on. I met Nick in the car park at 2am, at an altitude of about 1,000m, after a nod to a large porcupine at the entrance. He (Nick, not the porcupine) looked tired and fairly un-psyched, possibly due to having done another bigish route the day before - I was impressed by his keenness.

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We headed up through the woods, my bear spray at hand because there are grizzlies in the area

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We headed up through the woods, my bear spray at hand because there are grizzlies in the area, although Nick didn't have any which made me wonder how much of an issue they really are. Reports of a death a week later just outside West Yellowstone up the road from a grizzly attack, much nearer the town, suggests it is \$30 well spent - cheap insurance, even taking the low probability of attack into account.

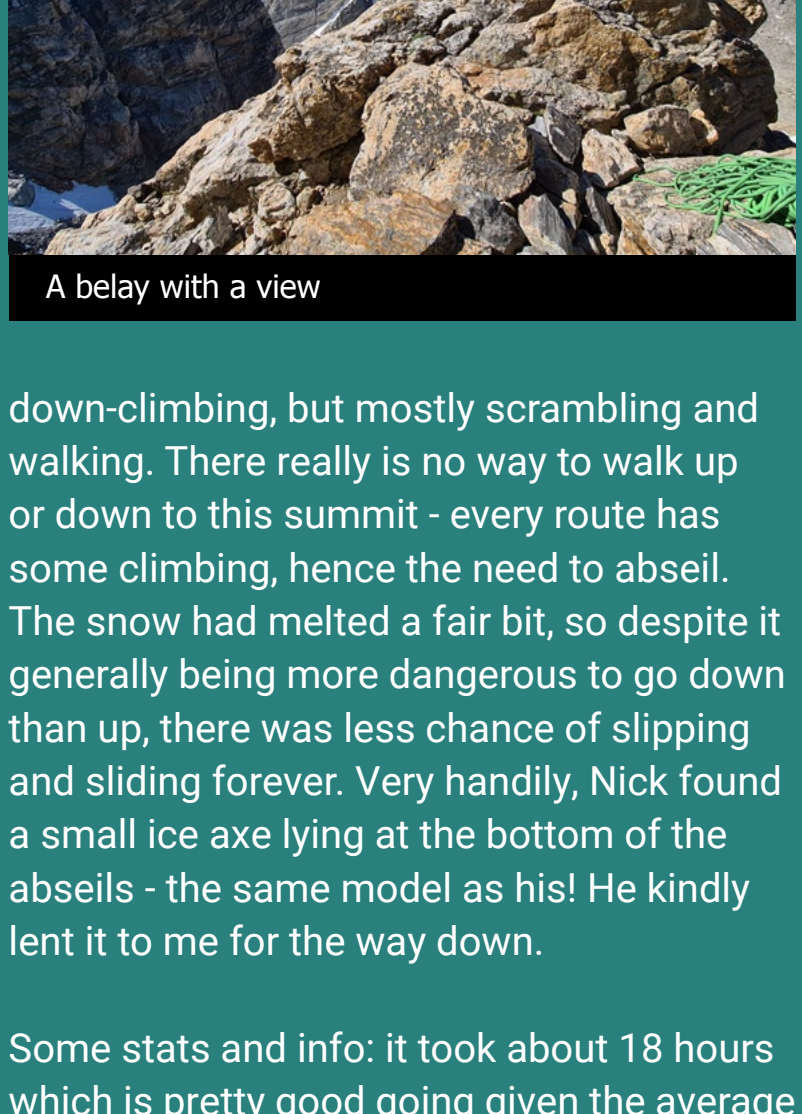
I think we walked for about 6 hours straight before we got to the glacier. I had thought that by July a deep trench would have been created - I was completely wrong. Nick had an ice axe at least. I did not. Nor crampons. Not even Yaktrax. But there was a thin path heading up the glacier to the saddle so we kicked steps up that, balanced with poles and ultimately it was OK. We headed past saddle camp (3,500m) where most people spend the night (often on the way up and down) and to the base of the ridge.

The start was tricky to find using the topos but Nick figured it out pretty quick due to his prior missions. The start involves scrambling up some 5.5 slabby ledges (Severe/Moderate) to get to the proper climbing. However, what we didn't expect was that these slabs would be covered in a thick coat of v hard verglas. I wandered up anyway, in my hiking boots, with no rope on, thinking 'it can't be that bad, it's only 5.5'. Jesus. Before I knew it I was standing statically, fully tense, trying to jam a gloved fist in an icy crack, whilst bridging my feet on each side of the open corner.

I scrambled up a bit, almost dying with every move (seriously) until I could flip my bag off, get out some slings (I didn't have the gear), place them on two icy pinnacles, weight them at the right angle and throw the rope down to Nick. He proceeded to follow me up shouting "dude you're f*ing hardcore" which of course I took as a complement but also in recognition of how stupid the feat was. I'm getting too old to making mistakes like that and there's only so many times you can luck it out.

He led through thankfully less-icy terrain to the bottom of the main climbing. It was still

Rough Full Exum Topo



early and we were still in the shade, so the 'feels like' temp from the forecast of -8C felt bang on. This made what came next a bit tricky. The first pitch was 50m of apparently 5.6 climbing (about VS at best) but hands were frozen from about half way up (felt HVS even without cold hands frankly). Luckily at the top of this pitch you end up in the sun at that time (7am maybe?) so the rest of the route was less painful.

Nick was smashed from the day before and had already led a bunch of the pitches before, so he kindly said I could do all the cruxes. What came next was some of the best climbing I've done anywhere. It's utterly varied in style, chimney to perfect face, and on such incredible rock, but hard to describe. Compact granite and gneiss, varying from beige and white to pink and black and the best of these rock types combined. Just awesome. Felt about HVS in total which roughly translates from the 5.7+ it's now assigned by most (the + in America generally means it's a classic that no one wants to upgrade - very British!)

I think my (and many others peoples') favourite was the Black Face pitch, which makes its way up the face to the right of the ridge. Long and wandering with just enough gear for it to feel reasonable. Stunning. After this came a number of alpine-natured pitches. Some scrambling, some steep sections, some walking, some snow to wade through to get to the next parts. All good fun. The summit ridge itself was surprisingly long and tricky in places, particularly at that altitude (the lack of acclimatisation made its presence felt at this point).

Nick was keen to bail left to the ab points rather than head to the top given he was pretty spanked by now (fair!) but I said "na, it's right there, let's do it" so we pushed on - we were both glad we did in the end, despite it not really being 'right there' - the summit ridge does seem to go on forever. What greeted us when we did get there was a superb panoramic view of one of the coolest, relatively compact mountain ranges anywhere on the planet, on an unusually perfect day. Very nice.



A belay with a view

down-climbing, but mostly scrambling and walking. There really is no way to walk up or down to this summit - every route has some climbing, hence the need to abseil. The snow had melted a fair bit, so despite it generally being more dangerous to go down than up, there was less chance of slipping and sliding forever. Very handily, Nick found a small ice axe lying at the bottom of the abseils - the same model as his! He kindly lent it to me for the way down.

Some stats and info: it took about 18 hours which is pretty good going given the average guided trip takes 3 days (!) and they often only do half the climbing. As said, there is no way to walk to the summit which adds to the grandeur of 'The Grand', although there are easier ways to climb it, e.g. the Owen Spalding at 5.4 (HVD) or the Upper Exum at 5.5 (Severe). We covered 29km of distance, 3,000m of ascent and about 12 big pitches. It was full-on and it was awesome. Nick deserves the majority of the credit for the suggestion and being willing to follow it through with a random Scottish bloke (at least he googled me first!)

The rest of the trip involved heading back up through Yellowstone for some last-minute bear watching (glad we did!) and on to Bozeman in Montana for the flight back to Seattle (nice) before heading on to Portland - great food but rough around the edges and

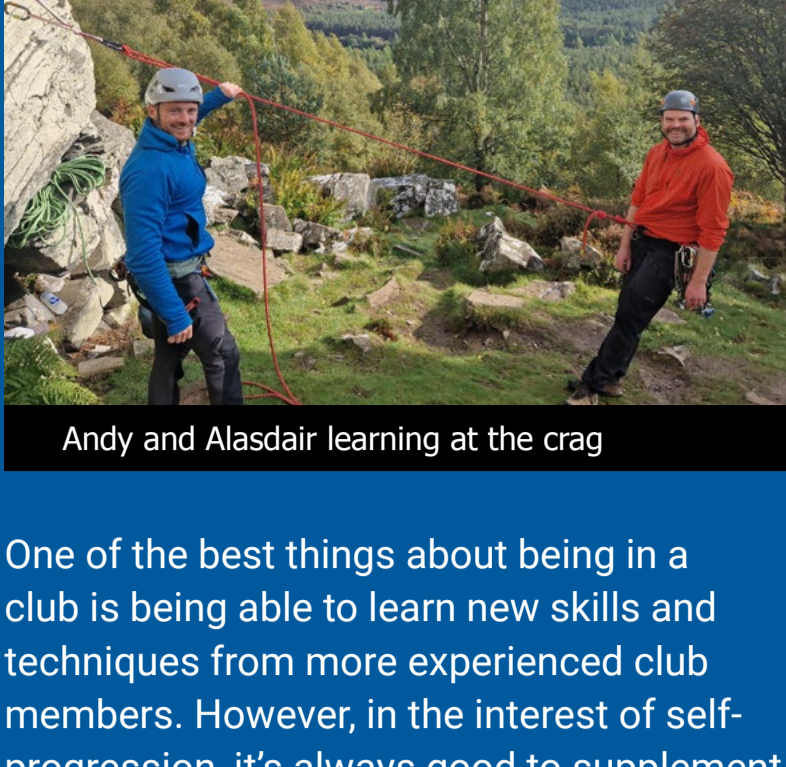
A skinny middle aged man on the summit of Grand Teton

in the middle to be honest.

So, would I recommend a trip out to the North West of the US? Absolutely. Enough to qualify as (this year's) trip of a lifetime? Sure. Even good for a spot of climbing too, but probably not for the faint-hearted. We found the famous sport climbing venue of Smith Rock relatively tough going, as most 'classic' venues in the US are, and the Tetons are pretty full-on too. So honestly, I would probably recommend a few other spots in the US first depending on what you're keen on. But if alpine climbing on excellent rock is your bag, it's probably time to pack your bag!

Self Rescue for Climbing Club Training

Paul Millar

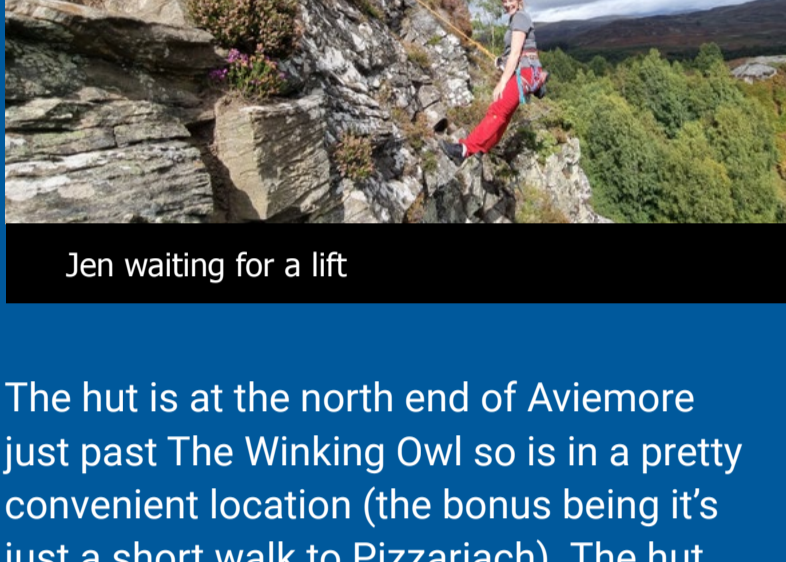


Andy and Alasdair learning at the crag

One of the best things about being in a club is being able to learn new skills and techniques from more experienced club members. However, in the interest of self-progression, it's always good to supplement this with organised training whenever the opportunity arises. I've always felt that one of the things that holds me back, particularly with regards to longer multi-pitch routes, is the fear of what to do when things take a turn for the worse. So when an email landed in my inbox that said there was an opportunity to do the self-rescue course at Glenmore Lodge through the club, I jumped at the chance.

With the instructor to student ratio for the course being 1:4, the club was able to organise two separate sessions, one in September and one in October. I was selected for the September session, along with club members Jen, Stewart, and David. In October it ended up being Birte, Andy, Alasdair and Catrin.

Since the course started early on the Sunday, the club also organised for us to stay at Karn House in Aviemore. Karn House is a club hut owned by the Fell and Rock Climbing Club (FRCC), who as a kindred club, have several huts available for Edinburgh JMCS members to use.



Jen waiting for a lift

The hut is at the north end of Aviemore just past The Winking Owl so is in a pretty convenient location (the bonus being it's just a short walk to Pizzariach). The hut used to be a guest house and is a well maintained and very comfortable building.

We arrived at Glenmore Lodge early, got signed in, then went through to the canteen to pick up lunch and have a coffee. We then headed through to the classroom to meet our instructor Andy. We had a conversation with Andy to let him know our various experience levels, and what we wanted to get out of the course, so he could adapt it accordingly. That meant we learnt slightly different things on the two courses. Afterwards we got kitted out at stores, then went out to the climbing wall to start learning the ropes (heavily cliched pun intended).

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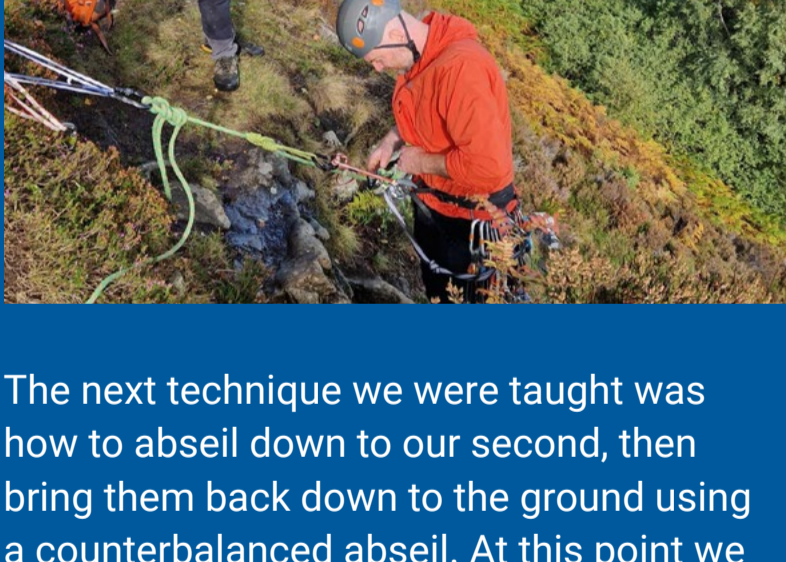
To put these skills into practice we then travelled round to Kingussie Crag, which given it was a dry and warm September day, was strangely quiet of people and midges

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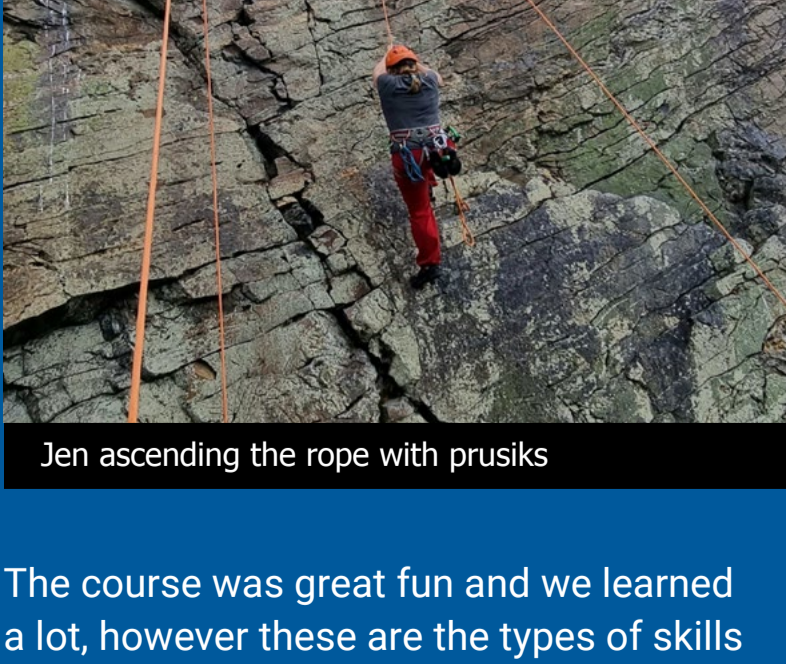
First things first, we were shown how to tie off the belay, then escape the system, both with the anchor in reach, then further away. This was the foundation action that would be the first step in most of the other techniques we learned. We were then shown how to set up a hoist, both assisted and unassisted, to pull our second up the route (or more realistically, past the crux of the route).

To put these skills into practice we then travelled round to Kingussie Crag, which given it was a dry and warm September day, was strangely quiet of people and midges. The October group also went to an empty Kingussie crag to practice. After setting up anchors at the top of the crag, we took turns lowering each other down a few meters, to then tie off and escape the system. We also practiced the hoisting skills we'd learned earlier, which was actually easier (though more tiring) once the rope was properly weighted.

Practicing abseiling past a knot



The next technique we were taught was how to abseil down to our second, then bring them back down to the ground using a counterbalanced abseil. At this point we abseiled down at the same time, with the instructor between us talking us through the technique and giving us pointers on why and when we would do this in reality. Once back down we were shown how to ascend the rope using prusiks, which we then practiced by climbing part way up Left-Hand Crack, then dropping off to set up the prusiks and start going up. This was way harder than it looked, however Jen seemed to make easier work of it and was flying up the rope.



Jen ascending the rope with prusiks

The course was great fun and we learned a lot, however these are the types of skills that we will need to practice regularly to be able to remember what to do when the time comes to use them for real. I would highly recommend the course to anyone that wants to learn, or refresh, self-rescue techniques.

In the Footsteps of Nan Shepherd (sort of)

Dave Buchanan



The track into Gleann Einich

In the second chapter, *The Recesses*, of her book *The Living Mountain*, Nan Shepherd describes a visit to Loch Coire an Lochan on the northern flank of Braeriach. Despite being visible from Speyside, and being situated on a popular mountain, the coire is rarely visited, since it is far from the usual paths to the summit.

Nan Shepherd ascended to the coire from Gleann Einich by a tributary of the Beanaidh Beag. I decided that this route would probably be quite boggy and would have to be reversed to return. Inspection of the BMC Cairngorm map showed a path that started high up on the east flank of Gleann Einich, level with the north end of Loch Einich and which led to Loch Coire an Lochan. If I could gain this path, it would give me an easy bog-free route to the coire. I could then ascend to Braeriach, cross the plateau, and descend Alt Coire Dhondail to Gleann Einich.

So early one morning I cycled from Aviemore, up Gleann Einich to where the path splits and the left hand branch leads to Alt Coire Dhondail. I then climbed up the steep, bouldery and heather clad rib to my path. It was hard work. The path itself is probably an old deer trail, not often used by humans. It is narrow, partly covered by heather and in some cases has been subject to landslide. It is not an easy route, although it is bog-free. Eventually, I gave up on my battle with the path and took a direct line through the heather, with similar effort, to the coire. By now I was very tired. However, I was rewarded by a little iceberg floating in the loch – my “distillation of loveliness”. This, at the end of April 2019, was what remained of the ice sheet that had probably covered the loch during the previous winter. Visiting the loch was a remarkable experience, and I would have liked to have stayed longer, but it was now 5pm so I had to get on.



The little iceberg

There was no way I was going to reverse my outward route, so I walked up the west rim of the coire and on to the plateau and so to the summit of Braeriach. It was a place to reminisce. I was first here with some school friends in the summer of 1964. Since then I have visited the mountain many times, once by a rock climb from Coire Brochain, when the summer cornice provided an interesting finish, and other times on foot and on ski.

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Once on my mountain bike, the descent and return to Aviemore on empty trails were great fun. I arrived in Aviemore as darkness fell. A fine day!

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Leaving Braeriach about 7pm, I walked across the plateau to Einich Cairn and on to the Wells of Dee, where I photographed the floating ice left over from the winter. Looking across the head of Gleann Einich and Am Moine Mhor (the Great Moss) I enjoyed a fine view over the Grampians in the evening light. As I approached the Alt Coire Dhondail and the route of my descent to my bike, I was a little concerned to find its upper reaches full of névé. Fortunately, this was avoidable, and I reached the floor of the glen and my transport. Once on my mountain bike, the descent and return to Aviemore on empty trails were great fun. I arrived in Aviemore as darkness fell. A fine day!



The view across upper Gleann Einich

(Notes: After leaving my bike in Gleann Einich, I encountered no-one until I reached Coylumbridge. The elusive path that I struggled with on my way to Loch Coire an Lochan is shown clearly on the current on-line version of the OS 1:25,000 map, and is marked with a heavier variant of the path symbol. It is not shown on the 1:50,000.)

Squamish Climbing

Stuart Murdoch



The Squamish Chief from central Squamish

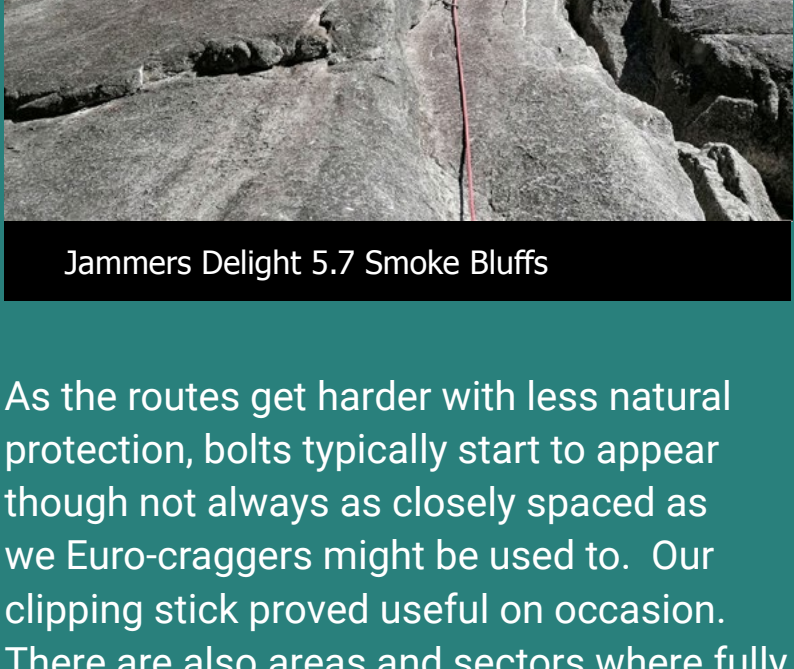
In September 2023, around a quarter of a century since their last visit to Canada, Jane and Stuart Murdoch fulfilled a longstanding ambition to climb at Squamish in British Columbia.

Situated around an hour's drive north of Vancouver, Squamish was once a traditional logging town with rail and water links to transport its timber. There are still plenty of trees but the town has now developed into a key outdoor activity hub supporting a wide range of activities, including climbing, hiking, mountain biking, sailing, and kayaking.

We found September to be an ideal time to visit for climbing as the weather was dry and sunny most of the time with temperatures typically mid-20s C.

The climbing is fantastic on clean rough grey granite and there is a huge range of styles, grades, and length of routes. For the more serious climber, the Squamish Chief is of near Yosemite proportions with some very long multi-pitch routes e.g. 16 pitches and a variety of grades but they were all too long, hard, and committing to tempt we pensioners!

However, Squamish has a range of other crags which are near perfect for those looking for moderate climbing with easy access and good protection. Both the Smoke Bluffs area immediately adjacent to Squamish and the Murrin Park area a few miles south have huge numbers of routes across a very wide range of grades with plenty to do in our target range of 5.6-5.8 (about S-VS in UK terms). The easier climbing typically follows cracks and the protection was generally excellent though a good selection and range of cams will prove worth including in your baggage allowance.



Jammers Delight 5.7 Smoke Bluffs

As the routes get harder with less natural protection, bolts typically start to appear though not always as closely spaced as we Euro-craggers might be used to. Our clipping stick proved useful on occasion. There are also areas and sectors where fully equipped sports climbs can be enjoyed. One of the most popular sports climbing areas is at Cheakamus (Chek) Canyon about halfway between Squamish and the ski resort of Whistler. It was excellent with a readily accessible and scenic sector of easier routes in the 5.6-5.9 range, bolted as closely as you would expect on Kalymnos.

Another feature of Squamish climbing is that top-roping coincides happily alongside trad leading and nearly all the routes we did had double bolts belays at the top with rings to abseil or lower off from. This means it is often possible to lead a route up a crack then top-rope something more difficult on the open slabs to left or right.

We can't recommend the quality and variety of the climbing enough and the local climbers are exceptionally sociable and friendly and happy to point you in the direct direction when getting your bearings and locating the different routes and sectors on the forested hillside though this facilitated by a well-maintained path network and discreet signs to the different sectors. About the only downside we encountered was that the area does get busy at weekends and the climbing and hiking carparks can fill up quite early in the morning so being an early riser is an advantage though not one of our characteristics, sadly.

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Logistics of a visit

It is a long way to British Columbia from Scotland but it doesn't take any longer than driving to the Alps. There are flights from Edinburgh connecting through Toronto or Calgary that will get you to Vancouver in one long tiring day. There is a wide variety of accommodation in Squamish and we booked a modest motel with private parking in the centre of town with some basic self-catering facilities and easy access on foot to the wide choice of cafes, bars and restaurants.

We bought the Squamish Select Climbing Guide (2020) by Marc Bourdon which proved to be an excellent guide to the climbing with clear photo-topos, route descriptions and easy to follow crag approach instructions.

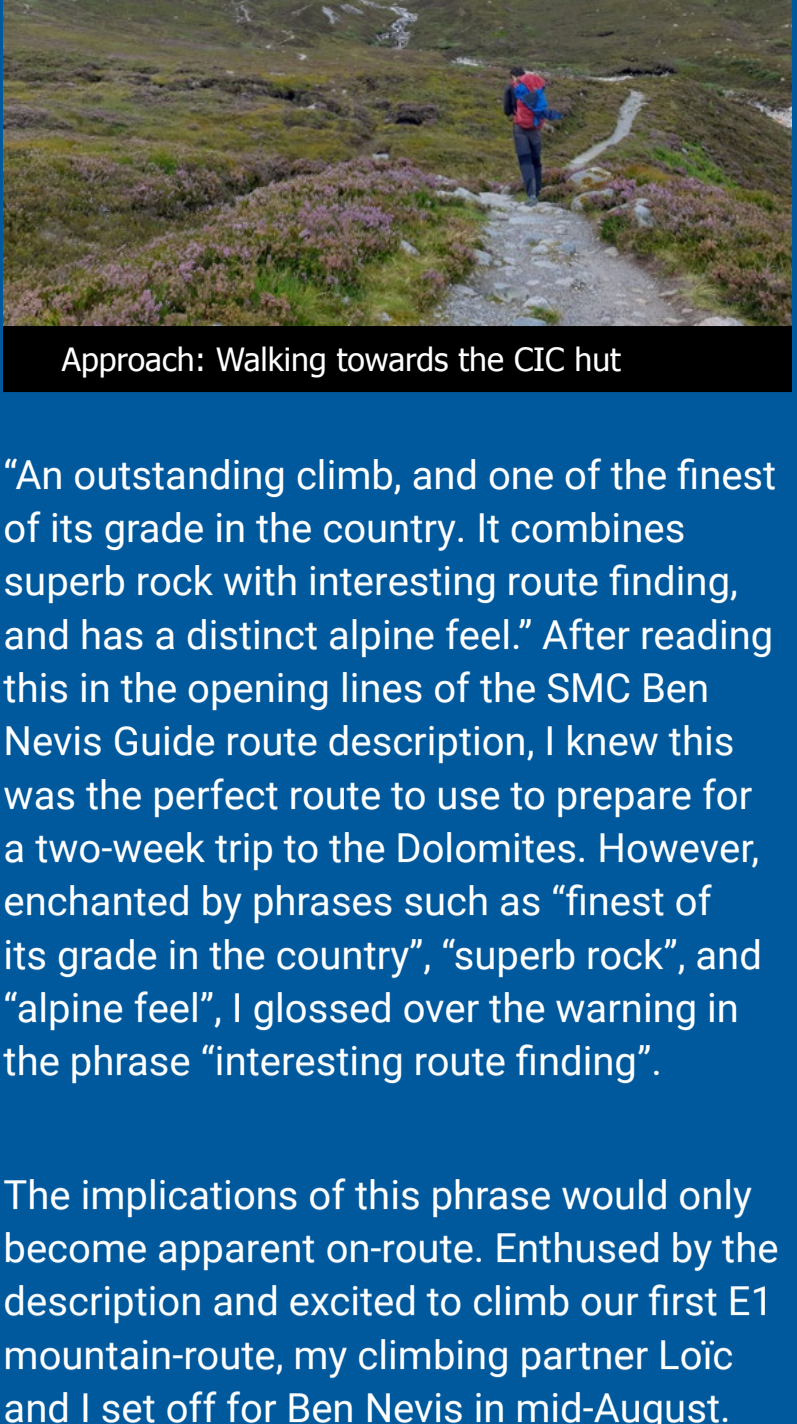
As an aside, we spent a few days recovering from the long journey by exploring Vancouver on the excellent public transport network and by bike as there is an excellent traffic-free cycle network and plenty of bike hire. If you are not pressed for time it is worth considering this as Vancouver is a beautiful city with lots going on and it provides a chance to ecover from the jetlag before starting on the climbing!



Atwell Peak - Mount Garibaldi

Minus One Direct

Andy Bladon

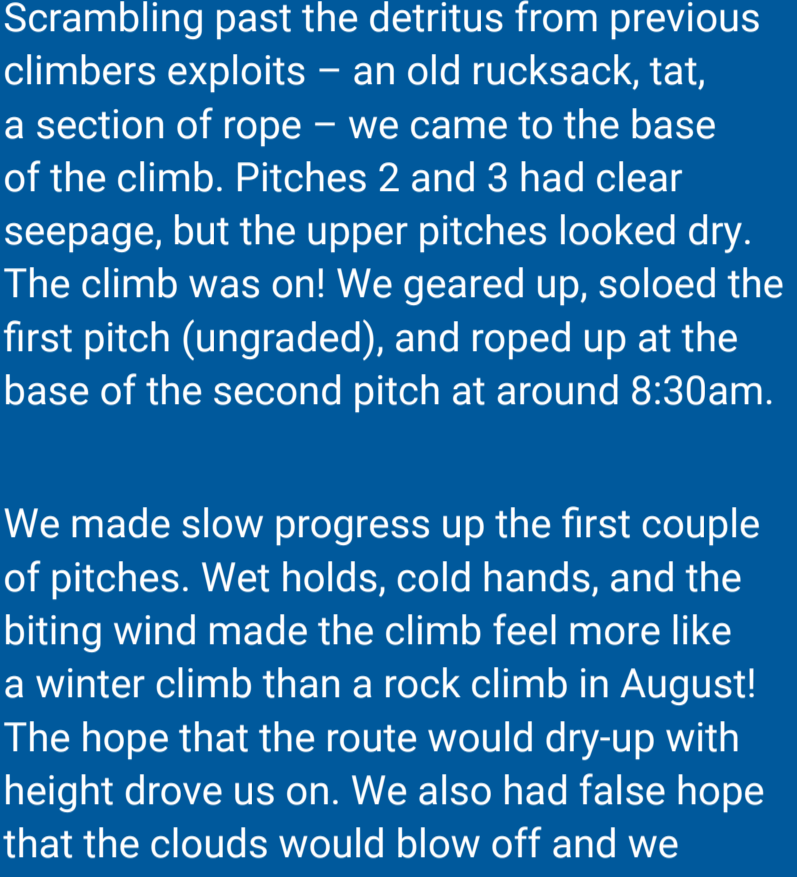


Approach: Walking towards the CIC hut

“An outstanding climb, and one of the finest of its grade in the country. It combines superb rock with interesting route finding, and has a distinct alpine feel.” After reading this in the opening lines of the SMC Ben Nevis Guide route description, I knew this was the perfect route to use to prepare for a two-week trip to the Dolomites. However, enchanted by phrases such as “finest of its grade in the country”, “superb rock”, and “alpine feel”, I glossed over the warning in the phrase “interesting route finding”.

The implications of this phrase would only become apparent on-route. Enthused by the description and excited to climb our first E1 mountain-route, my climbing partner Loïc and I set off for Ben Nevis in mid-August.

Knowing the route was long (315m, 10 pitches) and the days were getting shorter we started early, leaving the North Face Car Park at 6am. We were treated to beautiful mountain views on the approach to the CIC hut. From the path, the Minus Face was visible and loomed above the hut. We had good views of our route, with the details of the face slowly becoming clearer as we approached. A lot of time was spent discussing the cloud that shrouded the summit and upper pitches of the climb.



Pitch3: Leading a wet third pitch

The wind became more noticeable as we approached the CIC hut. We could see the clouds whipping over Northeast Buttress from Coire Leis. It was also chilly and being underneath the summit-capping cloud, we could sense the moisture it contained. We refilled our water bottles and sheltered behind the hut for a few minutes. The pause in activity resulted in the usual period of reflection – would the route be dry? Would the weather hold? Was I up to the climb?

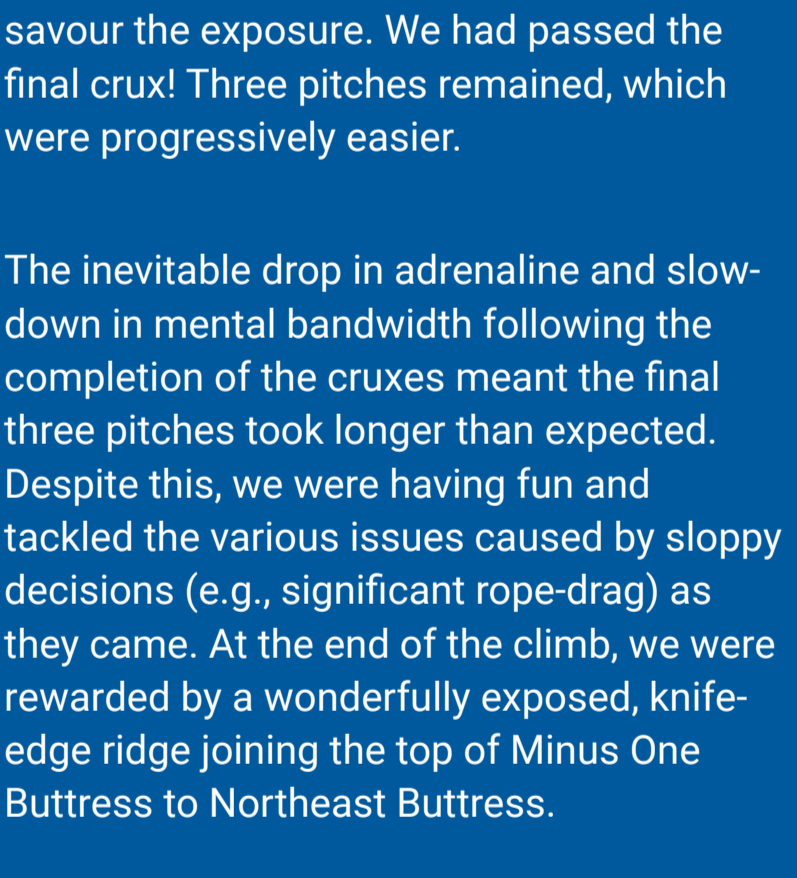
We were soon scrambling along the rocky outcrops at the base of the face. I was surprised how intricate the terrain was. The two times I had previously been to Ben Nevis’s North Face were in winter when these rocky outcrops were replaced by smooth snow slopes. It was a beautiful reminder of how the character of a mountain changes with the seasons. Scrambling past the detritus from previous climbers exploits – an old rucksack, tat, a section of rope – we came to the base of the climb. Pitches 2 and 3 had clear seepage, but the upper pitches looked dry. The climb was on! We geared up, soloed the first pitch (ungraded), and roped up at the base of the second pitch at around 8:30am.

We made slow progress up the first couple of pitches. Wet holds, cold hands, and the biting wind made the climb feel more like a winter climb than a rock climb in August! The hope that the route would dry-up with height drove us on. We also had false hope that the clouds would blow off and we would be bathed in warming sunshine – the “alpine feel” described in the guidebook. Eventually, we passed the soggy first few pitches and were rewarded with dry rock and amazing views over Tower Ridge, the CIC hut, and beyond.

“The next pitch was the first of the two crux’s and the first of the three grade 5 pitches. The “warm-up” was now over

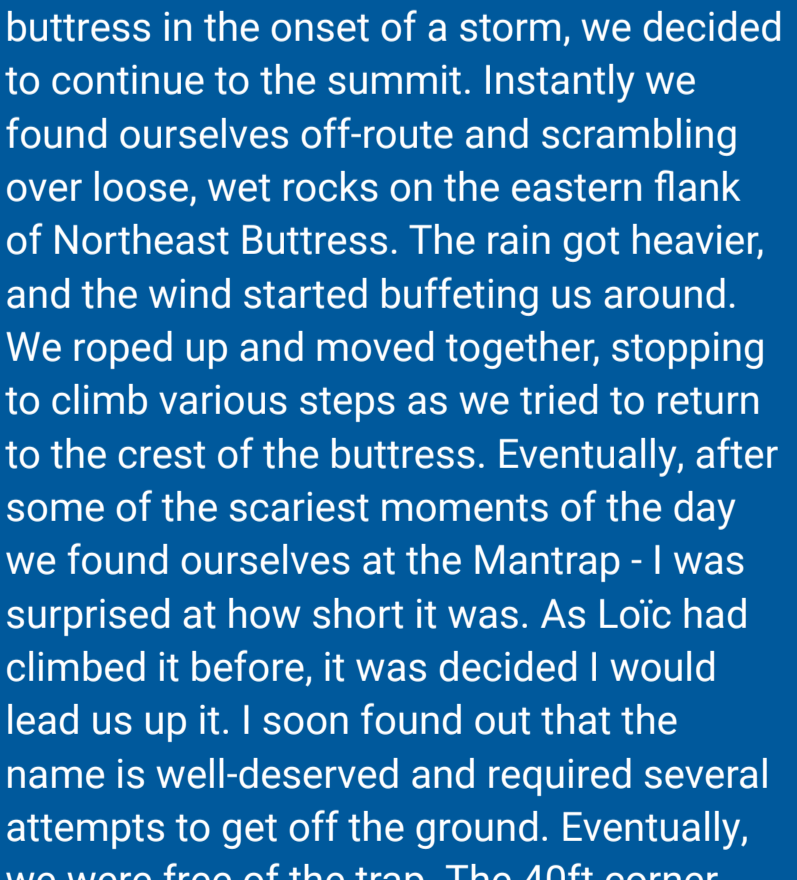
The next pitch was the first of the two crux’s and the first of the three grade 5 pitches. The “warm-up” was now over. Loïc lead off, elegantly making the step over the void and onto the hanging pinnacle. Easy climbing followed with sparse protection, but the crux (5b) groove was still-to-come. The groove was climbed via awkward moves on small feet, with a final tenuous move to reach the easier ramp above. Protection in the groove was difficult to find, so Loïc had to be inventive - I was grateful to be seconding.

The next of the grade 5 pitches followed – time for me to contribute to overcoming the day’s difficulties. A few awkward moves leftwards lead into a niche. We were about to find out the full meaning of the “interesting route finding” phrase in the description in the Ben Nevis guide.



Pitch5: Looking down pitch 5

The obvious line trended up and left. Following this, via several steps lead into a large corner strewn with tat – a false positive. With the confidence of seeing evidence of others passing, I continued. However, the way eventually became loose, scrappy, and the continuation leftwards was clearly off-route. Where was I? Where should I have gone? A quick review of the route description and topo revealed I’d moved into the upper section of Minus Two Gully. Confused, I reversed for 15m back to the niche with the protection of a sacrificial nut. Above and right was a featureless wall which could be reached via a steep rightwards move. In the absence of any other idea’s, I went for it. The face had sparse holds and little protection. Battling the fear generated by steep, poorly protected face climbing, I continued, stopping to place gear twice, until reaching a large ledge and belay ~7m later. We had found the “Serendipity Variation” which branched from the original line.



Pitch6: Loïc leading into the clouds on pitch 6

The route was equally unclear on the following pitch (pitch 6), but the grade was lower, so Loïc lead easily up the most plausible line. We were then at the base of pitch 7 - the second 5b crux – which comprised the classic leftwards traverse onto the crest of the buttress. The initial few moves took us up and leftwards on small holds with limited protection. Eventually, good holds were reached. After placing a couple of cams in the break, the traverse continued out to the arete via delicate moves. Traversing onto the crest of the buttress 200m above the base of the route felt brilliantly exposed. Plenty of gear in the break and cracks above were comforting. The end of the traverse was followed by a short corner that led to a small, airy ledge with two pitons for belaying. Loïc enjoyed seconding, taking his time to look down and savour the exposure. We had passed the final crux! Three pitches remained, which were progressively easier.

The inevitable drop in adrenaline and slow-down in mental bandwidth following the completion of the cruxes meant the final three pitches took longer than expected. Despite this, we were having fun and tackled the various issues caused by sloppy decisions (e.g., significant rope-drag) as they came. At the end of the climb, we were rewarded by a wonderfully exposed, knife-edge ridge joining the top of Minus One Buttress to Northeast Buttress.

“At the end of the climb, we were rewarded by a wonderfully exposed, knife-edge ridge joining the top of Minus One Buttress to Northeast Buttress

Happily, we un-roped on the second platform of Northeast Buttress at 6pm. We were now in the clouds and a drizzle had set-in, but we assumed the summit was a short scramble away so were not too worried. We didn’t know that the adventure was about to begin!

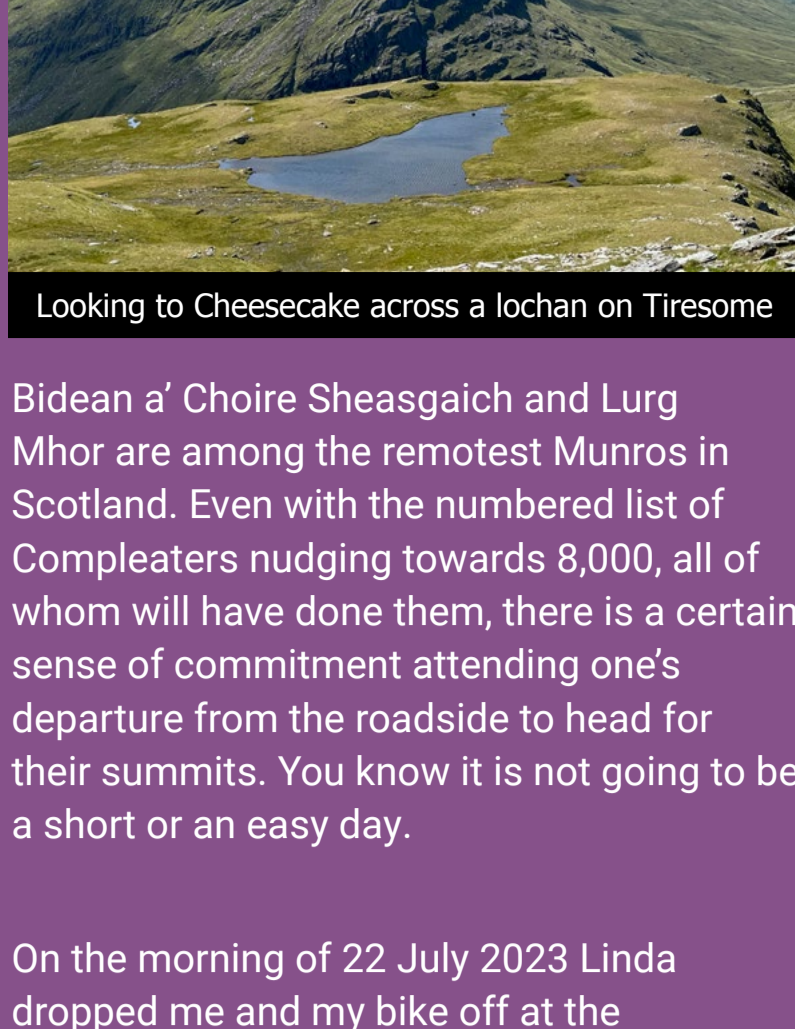
Rain was forecast for the evening, so we knew there was a possibility of getting wet. However, we had failed to realise the rain would be delivered by Storm Betty. Not knowing that we were high on Northeast buttress in the onset of a storm, we decided to continue to the summit. Instantly we found ourselves off-route and scrambling over loose, wet rocks on the eastern flank of Northeast Buttress. The rain got heavier, and the wind started buffeting us around. We roped up and moved together, stopping to climb various steps as we tried to return to the crest of the buttress. Eventually, after some of the scariest moments of the day we found ourselves at the Mantrap - I was surprised at how short it was. As Loïc had climbed it before, it was decided I would lead us up it. I soon found out that the name is well-deserved and required several attempts to get off the ground. Eventually, we were free of the trap. The 40ft corner followed, which was sheltered from the weather and a pleasant haven. At the top, we un-roped for the final time and wandered through the fog, reaching the summit at 8.30pm.

40ft_Corner: Looking down the 40ft corner at the top of Northeast Buttress.

With the howling wind, rain, and lack of a view, we didn’t stop. We continued over the summit and started down the tourist track. Considering the time, weather, and imminent darkness we were expecting to be walking into the darkness alone. However, between the summit and the half-way-lochan we passed at least 6 groups heading up to the summit, with one group carrying ironing boards. Seeing others made us feel less isolated. From the half-way-lochan, we left the tourist track and headed northwards, cutting across the heather to rejoin the path that we had walked along that morning. Thankfully, the water-level in the Allt a’Mhuilinn wasn’t too high, so we crossed it easily. Returning along the path, we arrived back at the North Face car park at 10:45pm, nearly 17 hours after leaving. The end of an exceptional day of Scottish mountaineering.

Cheesecake and Lurgy – the hard(?) way

David Small



Looking to Cheesecake across a lochan on Tiresome

Bidean a' Choire Sheasgaich and Lurg Mhor are among the remotest Munros in Scotland. Even with the numbered list of Compleaters nudging towards 8,000, all of whom will have done them, there is a certain sense of commitment attending one's departure from the roadside to head for their summits. You know it is not going to be a short or an easy day.

On the morning of 22 July 2023 Linda dropped me and my bike off at the recommended start point for these hills - according to the 1985 Munros guidebook, my "bible" in which I have for many years been ticking them off - at Craig, near Achnashellach. The forecast was good and I was travelling light, but the land rover track into the hills is steep and the bike was an encumbrance, to be pushed rather than ridden, for a lot of the uphill journey.

A particular difficulty arose at the first big, tall gate across the track. There was an unpadlocked side gate big enough to get the bike through, but for some reason, despite a lot of pushing and pulling, I could not open it – it just would not budge. So I tried lifting the bike, intact, over the big, tall main gate – no good, too much risk of the bike crashing backwards to earth with me entangled in its frame and cogwheels. Next, off with the saddle and the front wheel, heaving the rest of it up and over the gate and dropping it as gently I could down the other side – phew, done it - to be followed over the high gate by the saddle, the wheel and myself.

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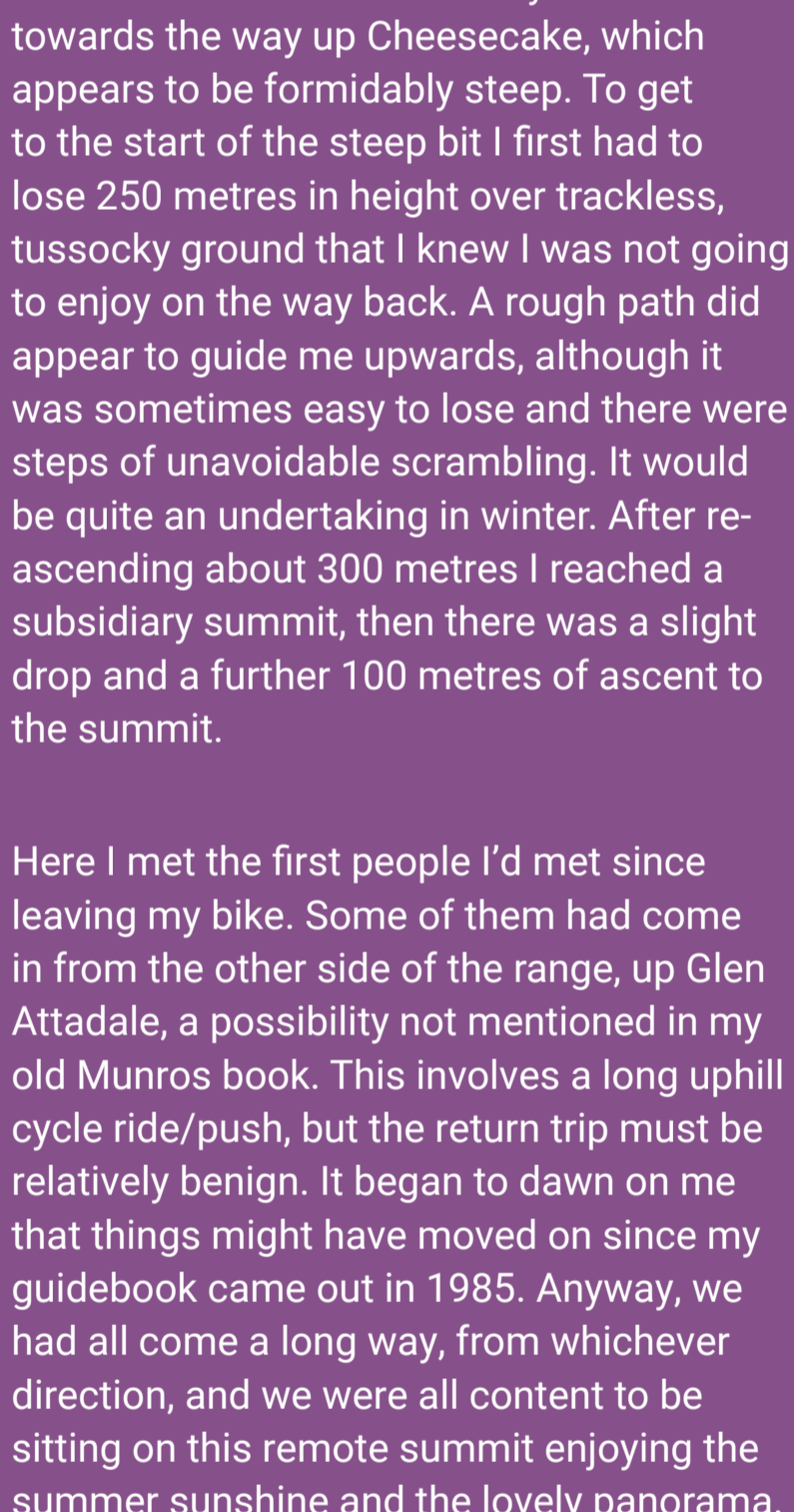
It seemed to me at the time that the compass had flipped, treating north as south, etc. I've heard of magnetic compasses doing that, but phone compasses (I think) work on satellite signals, so I don't understand what was going on.

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While I'd been doing all that, a pair of walkers had come up behind me and, as I was engaged (on the uphill side of the gate) in re-attaching the saddle and the wheel, they casually opened, and walked through, the side gate that I had tussled unsuccessfully with. Why it was like a knife through butter (easy) for them, and like chewing mahogany (impossible) for me, I have no idea. They politely walked on without commenting on the absurd antics which they had just witnessed.

Having regained my composure after that inglorious start. I cycled on to the start of the walk up towards the Bealach Bhearnais. The path here is good, if wet, the way is long and my mind – having little else to concentrate on - turned the Gaelic names for the hills which were my goal into “Cheesecake” and “Lurgy”. Not very original or respectful, but that is how I thought of them from that point onwards.

At the Bealach I got out my phone to check on the compass which ridge I should follow up to Beinn Tharsuinn, a Corbett one has to go up and over to get to Cheesecake. According to the compass, I needed to head east. But that would have taken me up Sgurr Choinnich rather than Beinn Tharsuinn, which lay to the south-west. It seemed to me at the time that the compass had flipped, treating north as south, etc. I've heard of magnetic compasses doing that, but phone compasses (I think) work on satellite signals, so I don't understand what was going on. It's possible that it was my brain that had flipped, not the compass, and that I was interpreting things wrongly – certainly, if I could not open a simple gate, what chance was there of me reading a compass correctly?



The Torridon hills from Cheesecake

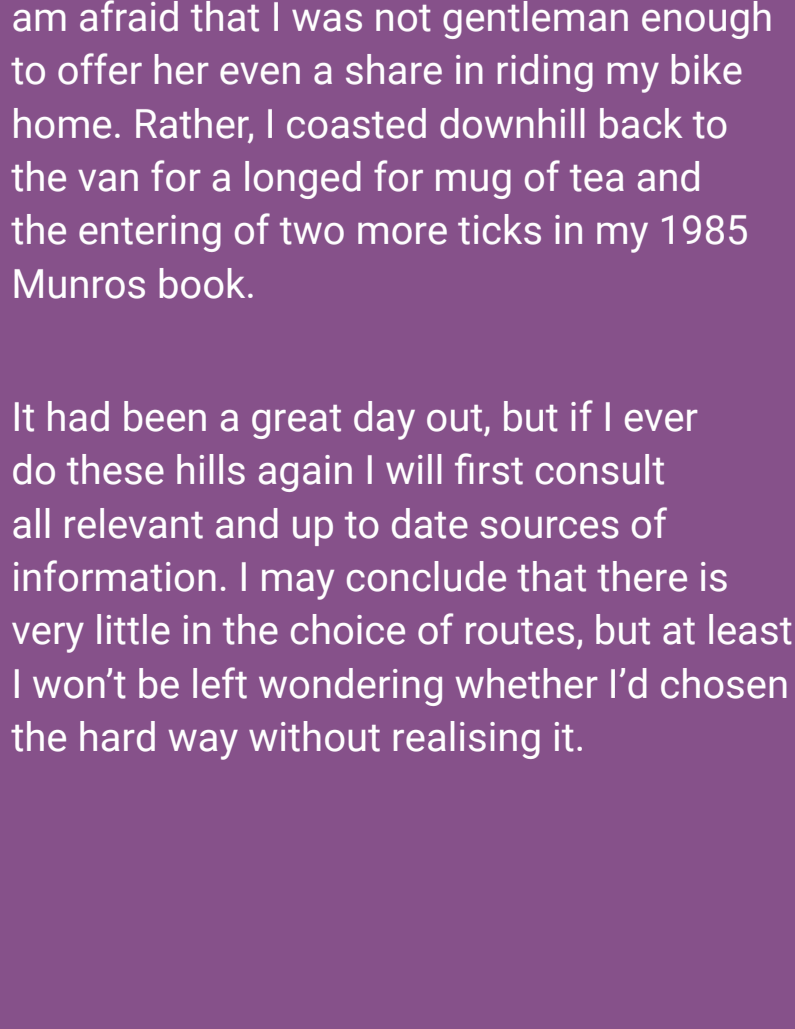
Having figured out which way to go, I plodded up the ridge of Beinn Tharsuinn and up and down the various tops over which one needs to go to reach the summit. There were rather more of those tops than I wanted – I was keen to get to the main Cheesecake course – so in my mind Tharsuinn became “Tiresome”. Again, not very respectful as it is a fine hill with superb views – countless Munros in all directions – but that was how I mentally referred to it for the rest of the day.

From the western end of the summit ridge of Tiresome one looks directly across towards the way up Cheesecake, which appears to be formidably steep. To get to the start of the steep bit I first had to lose 250 metres in height over trackless, tussocky ground that I knew I was not going to enjoy on the way back. A rough path did appear to guide me upwards, although it was sometimes easy to lose and there were steps of unavoidable scrambling. It would be quite an undertaking in winter. After re-ascending about 300 metres I reached a subsidiary summit, then there was a slight drop and a further 100 metres of ascent to the summit.

Here I met the first people I'd met since leaving my bike. Some of them had come in from the other side of the range, up Glen Attadale, a possibility not mentioned in my old Munros book. This involves a long uphill cycle ride/push, but the return trip must be relatively benign. It began to dawn on me that things might have moved on since my guidebook came out in 1985. Anyway, we had all come a long way, from whichever direction, and we were all content to be sitting on this remote summit enjoying the summer sunshine and the lovely panorama. There was a sense of “we happy few”.

A steep descent off Cheesecake leads to the broad ridge of Lurgy and what is probably the easiest walking of the day. I got to the summit of Lurgy about an hour ahead of guidebook time but was now definitely beginning to feel the effects of the 1,550 metres of ascent which it had taken to get there and I knew that, following the 1985 book's route, I had a further 550 metres of ascent to do on the return journey. Looking to the north east of the ridge that connects Lurgy with Cheesecake, I did wonder whether it might be easier to drop down in that direction, then take the valley of the Allt Bealach Cruhdhain to regain the Bealach Bhearnais from the south. I reckoned that that would save about 175 metres of ascent and less descent into the bargain. However, I did not know whether anyone ever went that way and I could see no path anywhere; just trackless, tussocky grass with (no doubt) boggy bits low down.

In fact, the most recent Munros book suggests this as the least worst of the ways home and, had I been up to date, I am pretty sure I would have taken that option.



Lurgy and Loch Monar from Tiresome

As it was, I walked up and down Cheesecake again then tackled the re-ascend of Tiresome. This hill seemed to me fully to live up to the name I had given it. It was just a case of grinding out the climb, telling myself that I'd done plenty of ascents like this before, that they all had ended and so would this one, that I wasn't taking so long over it as I seemed to be, nor was I so unfit as I felt, that I did not need a breather and water break every five minutes, and that before too long it would all be downhill from the summit back to my bike.

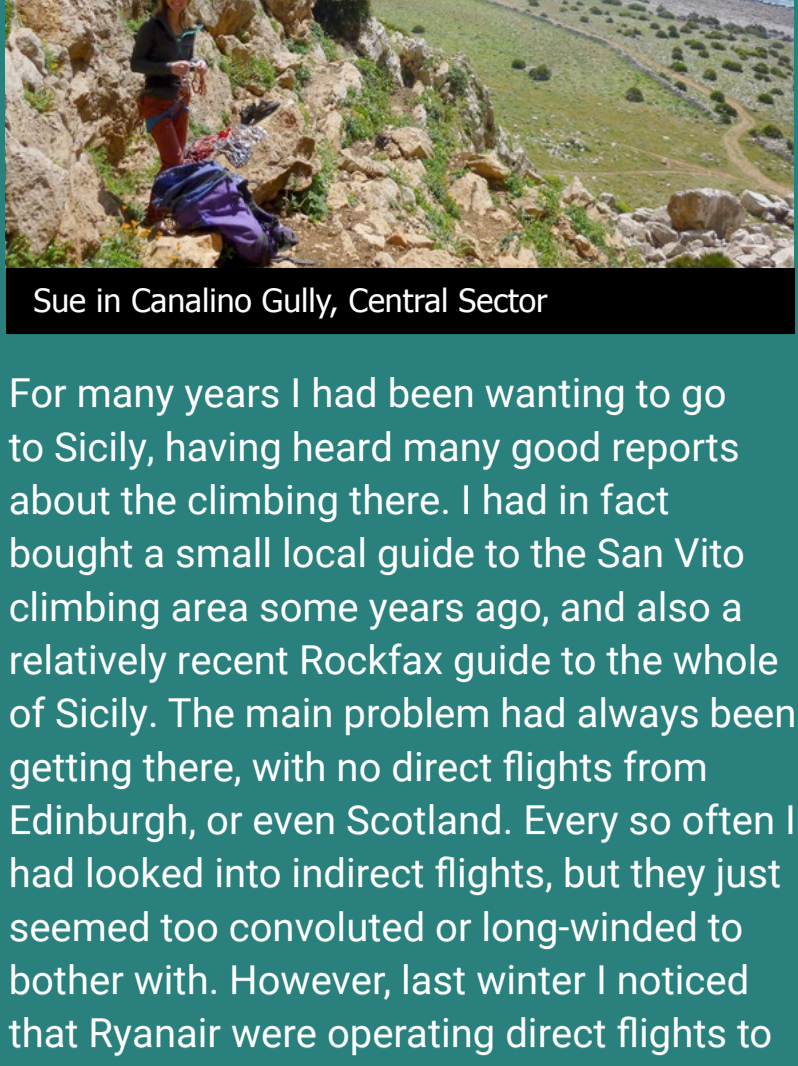
And so it proved. A short rest by the cairn was followed by a steep but easy walk back to the Bealach then a determined stomp – I allowed myself only one halt allowed for water and an Ibuprophen tablet to keep my sore left foot at bay (erosion of cartilage somewhere behind the toes - which I have been told will sort itself out as the joint fuses – well it hasn't yet) - back down the wet path to my bike. The cycle ride toward the Achnashellach road is mostly downhill, but on one of the uphill stretches I was overtaken first by a fitter, younger cyclist and then, a couple of minutes later, by his Jack Russell terrier, running in tireless pursuit of him as fast as its short legs would carry it.

I didn't even have to figure out how to open the troublesome gate. Linda opened it for me. She had been up Sgurr na Feartaig, the Corbett immediately north of Beinn Tharsuinn, and had just got back to the main track. She had not brought her bike – I had assured her it was not necessary for her hill - and was beginning to feel a bit weary, but I am afraid that I was not gentleman enough to offer her even a share in riding my bike home. Rather, I coasted downhill back to the van for a longed for mug of tea and the entering of two more ticks in my 1985 Munros book.

It had been a great day out, but if I ever do these hills again I will first consult all relevant and up to date sources of information. I may conclude that there is very little in the choice of routes, but at least I won't be left wondering whether I'd chosen the hard way without realising it.

Sports Climbing in Sicily

Bryan Rynne

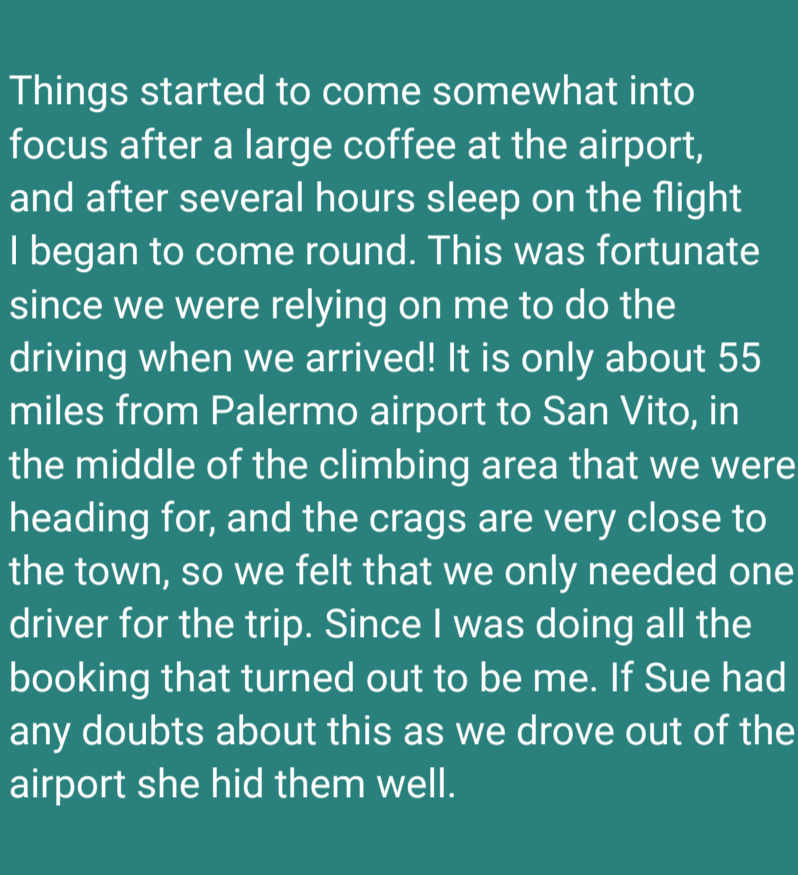


Sue in Canalino Gully, Central Sector

For many years I had been wanting to go to Sicily, having heard many good reports about the climbing there. I had in fact bought a small local guide to the San Vito climbing area some years ago, and also a relatively recent Rockfax guide to the whole of Sicily. The main problem had always been getting there, with no direct flights from Edinburgh, or even Scotland. Every so often I had looked into indirect flights, but they just seemed too convoluted or long-winded to bother with. However, last winter I noticed that Ryanair were operating direct flights to Palermo this year. So, in January I proposed to Sue that we go there while these flights were operating - they may not last!

Looking at the climate charts it is clear that Sicily can be extremely hot in the summer, so it seemed best to go fairly early in the year. I can't remember if we got the first flights out in the year, but we were probably close to that, flying out for basically the first week and a half of April. Ironically, when we got there it turned out that for about the first half of the trip the weather remained a lot cooler than expected, with lots of light showers and cool breezes being forecast. Fortunately, most of the showers did not actually happen. In fact, we only got one real shower and a few spots of very light drizzle.

The second half of the trip was a lot warmer, but it never got too hot. When it was at all breezy we were wearing fleeces while belaying, and we did not need much sun-tan cream.



The view south along the Scogliera Di Salinella cliffs from the base of the Canalino Gully

But of course it is a lot easier to keep warm when it is cool than to cool down when it is too hot, so the weather was basically good in early April, but would almost certainly have been too cold in March, and might well be better in early May.

Getting there was OK, except that we had a horribly early start - 6.20am flight. Sue picked me up just before 4am, so she had been up for well over an hour before getting to my house. I could barely function, but Sue seemed nauseatingly cheerful and efficient as she threw my rucksacks into the boot and helped me into the car. She might even have locked the house doors for me... If anyone had been around to see us they would probably have thought that she was taking her dad on holiday.

Things started to come somewhat into focus after a large coffee at the airport, and after several hours sleep on the flight I began to come round. This was fortunate since we were relying on me to do the driving when we arrived! It is only about 55 miles from Palermo airport to San Vito, in the middle of the climbing area that we were heading for, and the crags are very close to the town, so we felt that we only needed one driver for the trip. Since I was doing all the booking that turned out to be me. If Sue had any doubts about this as we drove out of the airport she hid them well.

The drive was no bother and fairly quick, although not much of it was motorway, so we got into the apartment fairly quickly and got some shopping done. So, we found ourselves with a few hours to go climbing!

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The cliffs are set back a couple of hundred yards from the Mediterranean, so are not quite sea cliffs but there are fairly spectacular sea views from the crags

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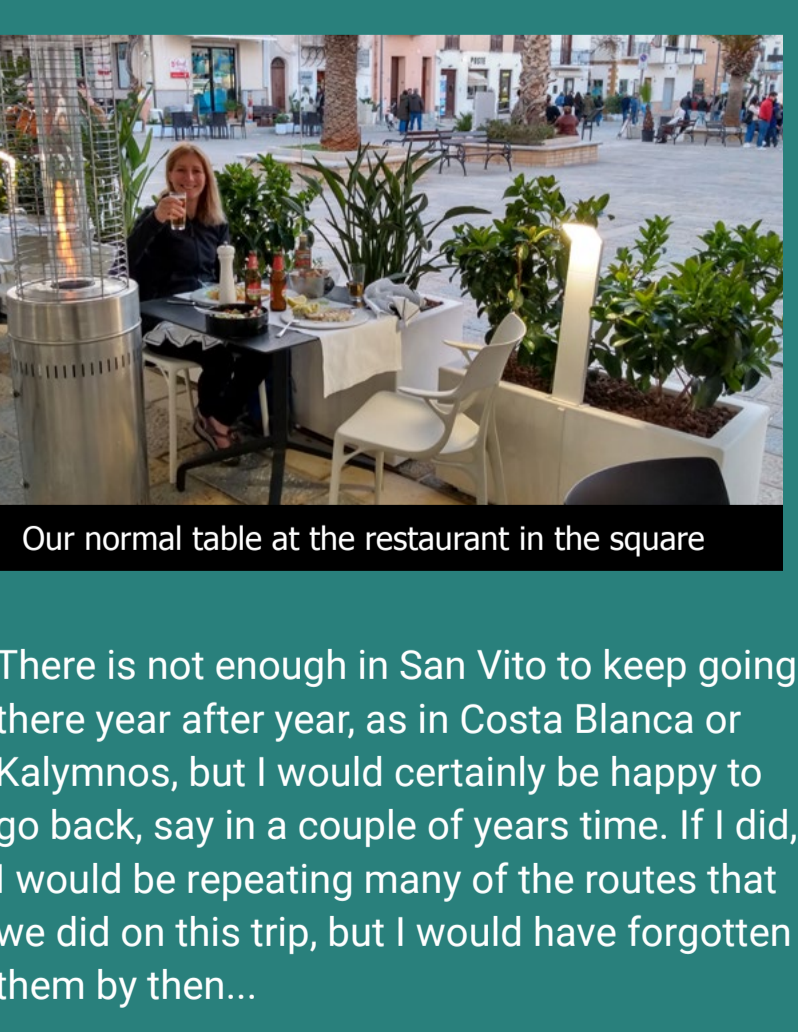
We were staying in San Vito Lo Capo, which is a smallish town on a northwards pointing, narrow peninsula on the north-west tip of Sicily. It is a small, slightly 'scruffy' feeling town, with a fairly laid back feel to it, and plenty of shops for basic items. It has some tourist facilities but is certainly not overrun with tourism - not in April anyway.

The climbing is on a 4km line of cliffs on the west side of the peninsula, called Scogliera Di Salinella, which faces slightly south of west, so they are sunny from mid-morning onwards. The cliffs are set back a couple of hundred yards from the Mediterranean, so are not quite sea cliffs but there are fairly spectacular sea views from the crags.

There are parking spots at the north and south ends of the cliffs, and one in the middle, and you can walk easily to all the crags from these parking spots. In fact, the walk in from the parking was never more than about 15 minutes for any of the crags, and often less than that. Furthermore, all of these parking spots were less than about 3 miles from our apartment, near the centre of San Vito, and we only went to one other crag, which was also less than 3 miles drive. Hence the need for only one driver.

So, young, fit and impecunious climbers could do without a car once they got to San Vito. Especially as such climbers could stay in the campsite immediately below the cliffs. However, since I am the opposite of that description I tend to organise holidays where we find ourselves residing in relatively luxurious apartments or villas, and proximity to restaurants offering fine dining usually takes priority over proximity to the crags. So, on this trip I managed to find a very nice, spacious apartment in a quiet area near the centre of San Vito, with nearby shops, and from which we could walk to several very nice restaurants each evening.

But that meant that we had to endure the 3 mile drive to the crags each day - there and back of course!



The view south along the Scogliera Di Salinella cliffs from the base of the Canalino Gully

After some experimentation we found two restaurants that we liked, one beside the main church square in the centre of town, and the other one slightly south of that. We switched between these at first, but gradually settled on the one on the square, both for the nice location on the square which was fairly quiet but had a pleasant communal feeling of town social life going on, and we also developed a bit of a rapport with the staff. They seemed to regard us with considerable amusement, but they did start bringing us pints of beer almost as soon as we sat down, without wasting time waiting to be asked, and left less urgent items like menus and cutlery until afterwards. They also seemed to notice when our glasses were running low and came running over to check that we were OK, and offer to replenish them - often accompanied by a loud burst of laughter and some Italian joke to the other waiters.

I think that they could tell that we were serious climbers...

So, what about the climbing? The Scogliera Di Salinella cliffs are limestone, and all the climbing is single pitch, mostly about 20-30 metres, and mostly well-bolted, as far as I remember. The climbing on the 5c and upwards routes was usually very good, and there was considerable variety in the styles of climbing. The lower grade routes were often on very sharp rock, and a bit ladder-like, so not as good. Overall, I enjoyed it.

There are some nearby multi-pitch routes, but we did not try any of these.

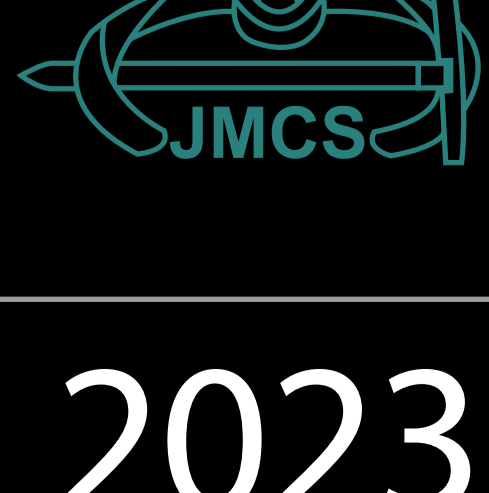
In 9 days of climbing, with the short drives and walk ins, we had done a high proportion of the routes in the grades that we wanted to do in Scogliera Di Salinella. So, there is certainly not the quantity of routes of, say, Costa Blanca or Kalymnos. There are other areas in the Rockfax guide, but these would have involved more driving so we did not bother with these while we still had stuff to do in San Vito.

So, this was a good holiday in a very scenic area. Clearly, no long walk ins were involved and little driving, so it was very relaxing in that sense. Obviously the climbing could be as hard or as easy as one wanted - Sue and I kept it fairly laid back.

Our normal table at the restaurant in the square

There is not enough in San Vito to keep going there year after year, as in Costa Blanca or Kalymnos, but I would certainly be happy to go back, say in a couple of years time. If I did, I would be repeating many of the routes that we did on this trip, but I would have forgotten them by then...

However, the general very pleasant ambience would mean that I would be happy to do so.



2023