

Fellwanderers

Up the Lost Valley and Other Adventures

Glen Coe, just over ten miles south of Fort William in the Highlands of Scotland, is a legendary place. It is a valley famous in history as the site of the massacre of the MacDonald clan, which began the highland clearances and the end of the way of life of the Highlanders. The scenery fits perfectly with its bloody past and its adventurous present, where walkers and climbers scale the surrounding mountains. To the north the ridge of Aonach Eagach is well known as one of the most narrow ridges in Scotland and takes in two Munros; opposite on the south side lie the Three Sisters, massive buttresses which overlook the Glen, whilst in the south east the two ridges of Buachaille Etive Beag and Buachaille Etive Mor run north to south, the most photographed area in Scotland. From the top of any of the Glen Coe peaks you can see west down Loch Linnhe to the Isle of Mull and the Atlantic Ocean. To the east beyond Buachaille Etive Mor the mountains drop to Rannoch Moor, a vast bog which stretches off into the distance even on the clearest day.

This was what lay at the end of our fourteen hour minibus journey 'into the frozen north'. Jim and Caroline were picked up at service stations and Jon managed to find the way to what seemed to me the biggest shopping complex in all Scotland, where we squashed four days worth of food for fifteen people into all the free space left in the minibus. The conversation to decide dinner pretty much went along the lines of 'what's good?' 'Stew' 'yeah lets get lots of vegetables' 'and lots of potatoes' 'yeah ... for four days?' 'Yeah why not?' It was at this point that Caroline and Jim, who can both cook, came to the rescue of me and Nathaniel, who would probably have caused a mutiny. Rice and pasta were quickly added.

We drove away in the dark and the rain. For further notice, Morrisons is better than Asda in their ale selection.

For some reason, it's always raining when we're using the roof rack. This means climbing on top of a slippery tarpaulin in the rain 3 meters above the ground and trying to undo the knots which for some reason back in London we had decided had to be the most complicated knots in existence. Eventually the bags, mostly dry, were inside our new home, the 'Alpine' bothy, owned by the Glencoe Independent Hostel. The beds were comfy, complete with duvets and pillows and the kitchen had an impressive selection of equipment. There were even showers! It soon dawned on us that the two heating lamps, both bright red and capable of lighting up the whole bothy made the place look like a brothel. Everyone immediately got perverse ideas. Or maybe that was just me.

The first day of a tour is normally a break-in day, getting everyone used to the strenuous mountains of Scotland. The Pap of Glen Coe, a cone shaped mountain where the valley meets the loch seemed like a brilliant start. It was overcast but the cloud was high, as it would stay for the rest of the week. The sun broke through for twenty minutes at the beginning of the day and soon we were high on the mountain looking back on a rainbow which ended in the stream we had just passed. Nathaniel was spending the day in the pub 'working' and most of the group were recovering from the Four Inns challenge a few days before but still we made good progress and soon we were on top of the Pap. And so was the cloud. And the wind. We didn't stay long but made our way down to the col for lunch before heading up to our first Munro of the trip, Sgorr nam Fiannaidh. The top was wrapped in cloud and the climb wasn't too steep but conditions soon deteriorated. In order to escape the wind lashing at my face we nearly completely missed the summit, until Florian helpfully pointed out that we were going downhill instead of up. The wind was now at our side, ripping everything including nearly Jim off the mountain, and we only had a short break at the summit before beginning the slippery descent back to the road. Once out from under the cloud the view opened up towards Kinlochleven but everyone was quite wet by this stage. The bog covered in heather; small waterfalls soaked even the rocks and the clumps of grass grouped together above the peaty soil. This was Scotland. Most of the group slipped and fell down the slope but everyone kept up good spirits despite the weather. Back at the

hut we were proud to have given everyone a classic Scotland experience – those who had injuries were worse and those who hadn't had injuries now did.

That night we went on a rescue mission to the Clachaig Inn, which apparently had some beer that needed drinking. Nathaniel finished and sent his final year coursework from the pub (a true student) and the conversation turned to philosophy - It was soon agreed that a chance encounter with the Taliban, although unlikely, would not be good for the trip. We were not ones to be complacent.

Overnight it snowed. Morning showed us the white icy peaks of the surrounding mountains. It had not descended to the valley but the peaks looked treacherous. The plan was to attempt Bidean nam Bian and Stob Coire Sgreamhach, the two Munros of which the Three Sisters are merely rocky tendrils breaking over Glen Coe. The plan was simple, sneak up a small valley to the G Buttress, summit the peaks and then make a slippery descent of the well-forested Lost Valley. Unfortunately things were going to get a bit hairy. We took a path most of the way up the steep valley in moderate weather until we hit the snow line. The snow, which had mostly fallen the night before was still powdery and perfectly shaped over the underlying rocks and vegetation. To make things interesting we took a bearing and trudged off over the snow to the west ridge of Stob coire nan Lochan, the peak before our main goal of Bidean nam Bian. During our ascent the sky was clearing and shafts of sunlight warmed us against the wind and knee deep snow. Florian ploughed on ahead and before long we were at the summit. About 10 minutes after everyone had reached the summit the weather decided that it was to be the end of our day and we were surrounded with biting hail. It was a white-out. Glimpses through the cloud at our planned route soon alerted us that much of the route was probably impossible, even for the Fellwanderers with their up-to-date ice climbing equipment *cough* such as extra biscuits and ... err ... jelly babies (okay this is a slight digression but who the hell thought that a good sweet design would be jelly *in the shape of babies*?!?! Seriously – a *BIT* creepy?!). Anyway, Nathaniel decided that we should get down into the Lost Valley as quickly as possible, and luckily the col below us looked like it offered the most gradual descent. Unfortunately, 'most gradual' in a Scottish ice storm means a snow cliff. We broke through the overhanging snow and descended, one by one, kicking steps into the snow cliff, until we reached a relatively flat area (about 45 degrees).

Once regrouped, our nerves shattered, the walk down through the Lost Valley was picturesque, and after we got out of the range of avalanches the mood was even jolly! The Lost Valley is a flat plain high above Glen Coe, its entrance screened by trees and boulders so that from the main valley it is impossible to see. Waterfalls from the surrounding cliffs join at the head of the plain before their final rush down into Glen Coe. A scramble around some boulders and a slight river crossing led us to a path, at the end of which was the minibus.

That night we checked the weather and saw that the next day was meant to be the worst all week before slowly getting better. Like true heroes of the mountains we decided to have a day off and go to visit Oban. This was great news for everyone with wet kit (everyone) as it meant another day for boots etc. in the hostels drying room. I must admit that when I first visited the drying room I was happy to spend some decent time inside making sure my kit was neatly spread out for drying to be most efficient. By the end of the week the room smelt like several wayward animals had died inside.

Oban however was a lovely place. Our tour of the whisky distillery was the most generous I can remember, with glasses and many drams of whisky thrown in. Everyone spread out in the afternoon to explore the town, and somehow managed to nearly all meet up in the Oban chocolate shop about an hour after leaving the distillery. Students know what to do on a bad-weather day! This day of luxury was culminated with another shopping trip to the town Tesco, which nearly sent Rafal mad with its hidden car park entrance. During this shopping trip Jim and I suggested that a good meal might be Spaghetti Carbonara. People heard us. No one thought to stop us. That night we had Spaghetti Carbonara. Jesus. No one has ever seen so much Carbonara. We could at least have helped everyone if the sauce had tasted good. It was cheese-cream that had the consistency of phlegm. Strange

thing was that the sauce was finished. Fate had not given the Spaghetti such luck. It was a night to remember.

Thankfully for everyone, the spaghetti would be burnt off the next day as we attempted a truly epic walk, the Aonach Eagach ridge, famous as a long days walk for those without a nervous disposition. We drove to one end of the ridge and the plan was to walk along part of it and then back to the minibus. The weather was good and the clouds were even above Ben Nevis which was visible for most of the day to the north, covered in snow and even, now and then, bathed in sunlight. Before the ridge even began we ascended the Devil's Staircase, part of the West Highland Way which was nothing more than a slightly steep path. There were a few startled looks when Nathaniel led us off-road into a bog but our route soon became clear as we found rock beneath our feet and the wide part of the ridge opened out before us, all the way up to our first peak Sron Gharbh. The snow on the ridge had all melted from the night before but on each side of us to the north and south the mountains rose higher and the snow was still visibly thick. Our route up to Meall Dearg, the first Munro of the day was via our first obstacle, a rock face we had to scramble down called The Chancellor (or Alistair Darling). Since our original plan was to leave the ridge at Meall Dearg, The Chancellor would have been the hardest bit on the route. It soon turned out to be the easiest as Rafal and Ollie had decided to return to the minibus, allowing us to attempt the whole ridge and finish back at the hostel.

The rest of the ridge can only be described as a Mecca of scrambling, comparable only to the north ridge of Tryfan in its majesty. The main difference between the Aonach Eagach and Tryfan is that on the Aonach Eagach there is no escape; you cannot go down either side; there is no gentle path if you get tired of the rocks; going back is far worse than going forwards. It soon dawned on us that this day was going to be a long one, and our decision to have lunch before the hard part meant our food supplies were quickly running out. The narrow rock scrambling of the ridge has awesome views all around mainly because the drops to both sides are so steep. To the south the wall drops away to Glen Coe, a few hundred feet below, and to the north to be honest I can't describe it. Low cloud began to creep in on us and now and then far below us we glimpsed a marsh and some streams. At one bit in particular the path appeared to have fallen away into the valley and the group found different ways around this 'hiccough'. Even Jim, hardened veteran of the hills, described this moment as the scariest thing ever. Our sometimes slow, sometimes cold and wet, sometimes violently icy scrambling took us late into the afternoon and it was past seven by the time we reached the second Munro and end of the route, Sgorr nam Fiannaidh. By then the weather had closed in and the summit was cloudy.

Our descent from the ridge followed a vague path straight down a cliff. The pub was visible in the distance and to the fading light those of us at the back gave everyone within hearing a classic rendition of 'I'm Dreaming of a White Easter'. We also gave serious thought to what would happen if we saw a T-rex in the valley. We concluded that it would get drunk at the pub and that danger was minimal.

Just as we were worried about night falling, the sun shone beautifully over the waters of Loch Linnhe and lit up the surrounding clouds and the face of our mountain in gold. Some things you miss by finishing too early. The sky became darker and we finished outside the pub at around ten, night finally upon us. That night was Scottish night which meant Haggis, Neeps and Tatties for dinner. Needless to say we were all quite hungry after our twelve hour day.

After the nail-biting muscle-ripping experience the day before our plan for the Saturday was an easier walk, with as little scrambling as possible and a relatively simple route. Sgorr Dhearg and Sgorr Dhonuill are a twin set of Munros to the west of Glen Coe which rise up from Loch Linnhe above the town of Ballachulish, the most horrible modern town with plastic-age houses and buggers all to look at I have ever seen. The weather was similar to the day before and after getting lost behind barbed wire fences in the town we began our gentle ascent up the first slope. Jiri set a good pace in and around the heather hillside and we were soon high above the Loch, past the tiny scrambling section and on the summit of Sgorr Dhearg. After the day before I think everyone was surprised at how easy it

seemed. The wind was light and we could see far into the distance, though Ben Nevis was covered in cloud. Following the col round its curved ridge we skirted the edge of the snow-turned-ice which had clung to the north face, protected and out of the wind. The summit of Sgorr Dhonuill was in a cloud when we reached it but somehow with the lack of wind it was warm, even though a little snow fell. The biscuits and whisky were out within seconds. In navigating our way off this second Munro back down to Ballachulish we ended up going south instead of north, something the compasses probably would have been useful in telling us but then again, we were in no hurry. Jon immediately offered to unleash his high-performance ultra-tech state-of-the-art GPS, which worked fine until about 3pm every day when the batteries died. Unluckily for his testosterone we found the way off the mountain before resorting to the technology. The trail led us for about a kilometer next to a stream through a plantation, the ground covered in moss and the whole setting very atmospheric. I don't even want to mention the thing that looked like a sheep carcass covered in blood. I'm sure it was just my imagination. Our last few miles were along a forestry road that made my feet feel like sandpaper and several injuries came back to haunt me. We had good views of a clear Pap of Glen Coe which we had climbed on day one and finally, as always happens at the end of a good day, the sun came out.

Sunday was our final day walking in Scotland. The week so far had been at times scary, at times funny, always exciting and frequently wet. There were plenty of injuries to go around and we were at that interesting place in being tired but also getting used to the strain. As it was the last day, only another epic ascent would suffice and so the ridge of Buachaille Etive Mor, marking the eastern end of Glen Coe and rising like a storm out of the plain was an obvious choice. The weather too was perfect. Driving up the road to the base of the mountain was like driving into the sky, so low was the cloud and so bright the light. The sky was blue and dotted with clouds. Our climb took us along the sides of a stream and slowly got steeper until we reached the top of the col and the view stretched away to the south with Creise still capped with snow filling our view. From the top of Stob Dearg we could see far to the east over Rannoch Moor to where the wet moorland blended into the sky. The day was so beautiful and, it being our last one, the group split. The majority of the group completed the whole of Buachaille Etive Mor including its two Munros, Stob Dearg and Stob na Broige. Four of us however extended the walk to include another set of mountains, a ridge called Buachaille Etive Beag which lies to the west of Buachaille Etive Mor. In this last day there was something for everyone, and by the end of our epic trek over four Munros the breakaway group of four, Gavin, Nathaniel, Jim and I only just got back to the minibus after the others. So much so in fact that we saw it drive past on the way back to the hut about 100 meters from where we were standing on the hill. After trying unsuccessfully to hitch-hike in a refrigerated van we finally made contact and Rafal returned to collect us. The sun was still out and only in a brief moment on top of Buachaille Etive Beag did we need waterproofs. I may or may not have nearly caused a landslide which may or may not have nearly taken out Jim, but sometimes you have to learn the scary way whether walking up a sixty degree scree slope is a good idea or not.

The Scotland trip of '09 was a great success. The high cloud made for a great set of views for the week and with the huge choice of walks we were spoilt. We got to know the pub well, especially when the ale selection quadrupled on the last day, and all our cooking adventures turned out mostly successful. We played Werewolf at some point but the day escapes me; I had no idea most of the time which day of the week it was, which was a relief after coming from London. Everyone was sad to leave on Monday, especially since the weather was getting better, but we certainly made the most of the time we had. I'm proud to say that the drying room, and its specific smell made from the blend of many different types of wet clothes, will never be the same again, thanks to a little group of us called the Fellwanderers.