

A Walk on the Wild Side

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Introduction

For the past 15 years a group of us have gone back-packing in Scotland during the early May Bank Holiday. The usual format is to travel by sleeper train from Euston to Inverness or Aviemore or, as on this occasion, Fort William. We then spend 2 nights under canvas and 3 days walking. Previous expeditions have led to some challenging situations such as being lost in the Cairngorms for over five hours in blizzard conditions just south of the summit of Braeriach, the third highest mountain in Britain.

On another occasion nearly losing an eminent orthopaedic surgeon over a cliff somewhere high above Loch Mullardoch. He developed cramp in his right leg and overbalanced due to the weight of his rucksack, just as he was crossing a very narrow ridge close to a precipitous drop – luckily he grabbed some heather about 15 feet down and was able to crawl back up to safety (he had the only mobile phone in the party!). Not surprisingly he has never joined our group again. Over the years the memories and the stories have engendered a unique kinship.

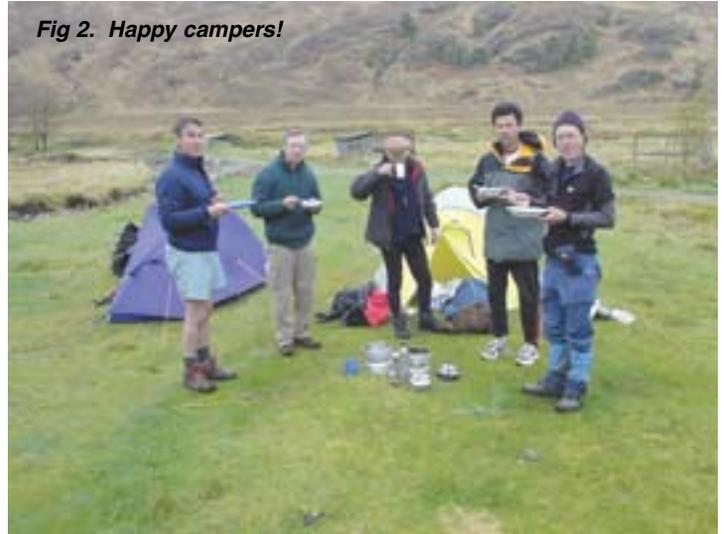
May Bank Holiday 2004

This year we went to the remote and beautiful Knoydart Peninsula [1] (in Gaelic '*na Garbh Chrìochan*' meaning '*Rough Bounds*') situated 1.5 hours north-west of Fort William by taxi and then nine miles of tough back-packing along an undulating mountain track on the south side of Loch Hourn (fig 1). The area has been described as the last wilderness in Britain, certainly not much sign of mobile phone masts! The most numerous inhabitants were deer and sheep.



Fig 1. Looking west down Loch Hourn.

Fig 2. Happy campers!



After arriving at the 50p per night campsite (fig 2) at Barrasdale at 1600hrs, we erected the Quasar tents, an expensive purchase of 10 years ago but still in immaculate condition. We then set off up the nearest steep slope, following on the heels of Martyn, John and Geoff, the fittest members of the group, to conquer the nearest Corbett (between 2500 and 3000 feet high) before supper. The weather was fantastic with a cloudless sky, no midges and a great view of the distant Bens and further west to Skye.

John cooked an excellent smoked salmon and pasta meal on the meths-filled Trangia stoves, he added critical extras including garlic and various spices. This was all washed down by a spectacular 16-year-old Lagavulin provided by Martyn. The group is wide ranging in both skills and interests and includes an ENT surgeon/vice-dean, a nephrologist/post-graduate tutor, a chest physician/osteopath, an anaesthetist/charity worker in Africa, a paediatrician/journal editor, and a 'business angel' who in 1999 ran 2000 miles from John O'Groats to Lands End and back in 96 days at a rate of a three and a half hour marathon per day!

Day 2

Unhappy about the proposed 'exposed' ridge walk and further plans to conquer a hairy looking series of Munros I persuaded my tent mate Nick that it was absolutely the right time of year to sample the locally caught langoustine in the village of Inverie situated 10 miles to the south of the campsite. The excuse to the others was that I needed to know whether my daughter's horse had survived 4 hours of anaesthesia and surgery the previous day in Newmarket.

All six of us set off for the 1.5 mile trek to the water shed where the four serious walkers we thought had then turned right towards a cloud capped peak. Nick and I kept straight on for a further 2 hours past a beautiful loch and arrived eventually in Inverie. On the way we passed a group of lady walkers, one used to be a nurse in Nick's department in the Royal Berks.

After a pint at the Old Forge, the remotest pub in mainland Britain, we moved on to the Pier Restaurant [2] run by Gwen a charming lass from Durham. In spite of being the only customers we were served an excellent three course lunch consisting of parsnip and ginger soup, a double portion of delicious fresh langoustines (fig 3) and sticky toffee pudding all washed down by several or more glasses of excellent dry chardonnay.



Fig 3. Luscious langoustines

This was a memorable meal, definitely worth the out-bound trek and the impending ten mile return journey. Incidentally my daughter's horse had survived its operation which subsequently proved disastrous for my bank balance! But how can you even think such things about an animal which has been a trusted friend of the family for the past nine years.

After drinking a few toasts to the lads, noting that the weather was obviously beginning to deteriorate on the higher peaks, we started back towards our campsite on the North side of the peninsula. The walk took 3½ hours, 15 minutes faster than the outbound journey. Visibility was distinctly poor for a mile either side of the water shed which was shrouded by mist and rain. Three hours after returning to our tent we began to worry because there was still no sign of the others, a lady walker said she had seen them but they were not on the mountain they told us they were going to climb.

We were debating what to do if they didn't turn up as mobiles were ineffective and the nearest phone box was back in Inverie 10 miles away! But all was resolved when first Martyn and Geoff appeared followed 30 minutes later by Tony and a rather hypothermic and confused John.

After conquering two Munros (> 3000 feet) they became lost in mist and decided the safest plan was to return the first one again after taking appropriate compass bearings. Nick, and I were berated for not having their supper ready! But soon rice and bean feast curry with added chutney and coriander were bubbling away merrily on the stove. We cooked in an unoccupied sleeping area in the nearby 'bothy' which was probably against the rules but the weather outside was extremely unpleasant.

Day 3

The following day after our tents had withstood a long night buffeted by wind and rain we struck camp and walked the nine miles to Kinloch Hourn. We waited only about 10 minutes for our two taxis to appear but we had ensured they would arrive by not paying them on the way out! Back at Fort William we had a mediocre supper and boarded the London bound sleeper train which had a delightful first class lounge where we sipped Bruichladdich and told stories as the beautiful West Highland countryside slid past. Martyn commented that in days gone by we would probably all have been lairds!

Arrived back at Euston station at 7 am the next morning just in time to return for a day's work with memories of a unique experience fading fast as they always seem to do when one returns to 'normality' but new plans are already taking seed for the next adventure.

References

1. www.knoydart-foundation.com
2. www.thepierhouserestaurant.co.uk