

The Great Scottish Alternative Tick

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For nearly thirty years now, "Hard Rock" has been the British rock-climber's Bible. Many climbers, myself included, have been drawn initially towards routes featured purely because they were in that book. Nothing can be more enjoyable than swinging up a pitch you have previously viewed, read, and dreamt about. The prose is classic adventure writing. The photographs, especially the older ones, stir the imagination and provide a sense of history. Pocket guide-books give practically none of this. However, even here in Scotland (where most of the climbs featured are mountain routes), the book has severely increased the popularity of its climbs. These days, it is not uncommon to slog up to the foot of *Centurion* just to find a team of three gearing up, and another on the first pitch. "Classic Rock", a similar book featuring easier climbs (and inspired by "Hard Rock"), identified this problem and gives lists of alternative routes - many equally good, but definitely quieter due to their lack of publicity. In "Hard Rock" no such list is given, and although the book is now becoming a little dated, the climbs it features do remain very popular. The following alternatives to standing in that queue may therefore come in handy!

On Arran, *South Ridge Direct* is of course an utter classic, but unsustainable in difficulty. It gets very busy with a bottleneck forming behind leaders hanging Christ-like from the Y-cracks. Three alternatives come to mind. The hardest is *West Flank Route* - a fine HVS which starts rather awkwardly with the left side of your body doing slab moves and the right thrutching up a groove. It becomes more delicate with height as it rises across the open west face, crossing routes such as *Sou'wester Slabs*. *Hammer* takes a good clean delicate line up the slab to the right of *West Flank Route* to reach *South Ridge Direct* below its layback pitch. It is VS too, but easier than the *Ridge*. The guidebook recommends *South Ridge Original* if the *Direct* is busy. It's good too, but easier. It does feel a little frustrating being so close to the S-cracks (which must be one of Scotland's greatest pitches) but not being allowed to climb them.

Moving to Glen Etive, the good routes on the Etive Slabs tend to be equally busy. The guidebook no longer suggests that *Swastika* (E2 nowadays) can be ideal for HVS or E1 climbers if they employ aid techniques on the last one or two pitches. It therefore gets less traffic than it would otherwise. Swinging up that final corner from wire to wire on slings is brilliant therapy in this "everything must go free" age. The previous pitch, the wee corner below, is easier to free climb, but actually harder to aid!

To pick something instead of *Swastika*, I'd offer the following suggestions. *The Pause* is very good, but the traverse under the lower overhang to the crevasse is very thin balance traversing (although you can get gear in) - a cool second is needed. Higher up the slab, climbing is both more balancy and harder to follow than the famous quartz band pitch on *Swastika*. I remember a leader below me on this pitch getting caught in the rain - he stopped in the middle of a blank slab with no gear anywhere near him. Within three minutes we were dropping him a rope. The top vertical corner on *The Pause* is only 5a and reasonable (and even avoidable). *Hammer* too is good with a great line (probably the easiest to follow at Etive), with some short and fairly safe sections of blank slab padding - a good introduction. It used to employ a tension traverse on the upper crux - this technique can still be used if required (or even just for the hell of it). A final route I'd recommend to reasonably strong E1 leaders is *Jaywalk* - no tips given - just go and do it!

Up in the 'Coe, you'd be unlucky to find a queue for *Raven's Gully* these days - that sort of thing is out of vogue. If it is busy, however, *Raven's Edge* (VS) is the one to go for. It starts just to the right and gives a real mountain feel. It offers great views of the gully and folk on *Slime Wall*. It's quite strenuous and very exposed. I saw a party on it when I was doing *Raven's* - it looked about E2. It would also be easy to abseil from it, back into the gully, above the slow party!

Shibboleth of course is the Great Route. Having not done any of the other extreme routes on the wall, I can't give a similarly graded alternative. Friends of mine have retreated from *Apparition*, however, saying it was desperate - I would welcome any other information about it. *Bludger's Revelation* would be my best suggestion - quite tricky I thought for HVS, and a little scantily protected on the Link Pitch. The *Revelation Flake* however is a complete dream - it just has to be climbed.

Carnivore is the one Scottish route in "Hard Rock" I've yet to do, so I can't say much about it. There are no real alternatives at a similar grade on the same crag, but you can see if it's busy from the road and go anywhere else you want.

Yo-Yo is another route with few immediate alternatives - I've not climbed any other routes on that face (apart from *Ossian's Ladder* which gives near vertical grass climbing with a sting in the tail - descending the same way). However, the E1s like *The Cough* are very rarely done and look tricky. The VSs like *Tobar* and *Fingal's* don't look much better. The first time I tried *Yo-Yo* it was dripping wet, although the day was dry and sunny. We continued to the summit of Aonach Dubh (a pleasant scramble) and traversed into Coire an Lochan. There we found *Unicorn* to be bone-dry and a great, well-protected climb. What a line - I'd never had two consecutive hanging belays before (each one at exactly the same lat. / long.). The blocky andersite of this cliff dries quickly and if *Unicorn* is

busy too (it's in "Extreme Rock" after all), then *Central Grooves* - a similar but easier line on the buttress to the right - gives a good option.

Round on the west face of Aonach Dubh, *Trapeze* has two very obvious alternatives - *The Big Top* and *Hee Haw*. These days, it's common for climbers to head up intent on *The Big Top* and then, because it's busy, have to do *Trapeze* instead. All three are reasonably well protected, steep and exposed. On a busy day, *Hee Haw* is probably the one you'll get free. Although it's the least popular of the three, it's still very worth doing. It gets its crux over with very near the bottom. After that, the climbing is easier than the other two, even though it's higher in the graded list.

Up on the Ben, *The Bat* and *Centurion* can get stowed out, especially as they share a common first pitch (also shared with *King Kong*). The obvious alternative to *Centurion* is *Bullroar*. This is famous for its delicate rising traverses. Its first pitch can give a shock, however, as it's steep and tricky to find good holds when needed (try underclinging the hole!). After the meat of the route is over, you can abseil down *Titan's Wall*, making it a far shorter outing than *Centurion*.

If you do opt to abseil down *Titan's*, keep veering left on the first abseil (facing in) and watch out for the next abseil point. A team in front of us recently went straight down to a little ledge in the middle of the wall. They pulled their ropes and set up the next abseil (using their own gear). They found, however, that from that point, their rope ends didn't reach the ground and were dangling way out from the wall. Then they started to think their ledge was loose. We had to pendulum across to help out.

The Bat provides good alternatives while you are actually on it. If other climbers are stuck in the *Corner* or the *Hoodie Groove*, then you can continue traversing to the right and ascend the *Sassenach* chimneys. These shouldn't be classed as an escape route - the first chimney pitch gave the hardest, most awkward chimneying I've ever done. *Sassenach* can always be done in its entirety. Its true second pitch gives interesting aid climbing which is rarely done these days, and even less frequently done free (unless you can climb perpetually damp 6b). I did it using a pair of eight-foot and four-foot slings made up as two, two-step etriers. One got abandoned on the pitch through necessity but was later put to good use by my second. Another alternative sprouting from *The Bat* is the aforementioned *King Kong*. I've not done it, but it's supposed to be technically reasonable, with "adequate" gear but tricky route finding. *Torro* is another great route. Its crux, on pitch four, over an overhang above the *Bullroar* traverse is very hard and tends to be damp. It's been wet twice now when I've been up there and I've lowered back off on a good nut. Still, pitches one to three are brilliant and you can always traverse off as we did on *Bullroar* then head up *Centurion* for a bit before taking to the final pitches of *Torro* again.

Over in the Cairngorms, not much can be better than *The Needle* - not even its neighbour *Steeple*. The slugging *The Needle* gets in "Extreme Rock" is totally out of order - it is the classic of the Shelter Stone. However I did feel that it wasn't "bottom of the grade E1". It's long, committing, with four separate cruxes. If *The Needle* is busy, you've some recent E1s under your belt and the weather looks like it'll hold, why not try *Steeple*? The majority of its pitches are no harder than *The Needle's* cruxes. Of its two hard pitches, both can be well protected. The upper crux - the Great Corner - starts as smooth as the corner of a room but with one small crack. This pitch eases with height and is just brilliant. It contains *Steeple's* hidden crack - a crack within a crack which allows positive progress up otherwise desperate-looking rock.

The two Dubh Loch routes contrast a lot. *Goliath* is the one more likely to have a queue. There are not many other good HVSs immediately nearby. I would suggest a return back down Central Gully and an ascent of *The Mousetrap*. This is a good bit longer and quite tricky for VS. It follows a reasonably constant, sensible line and is as much a classic as *Goliath*. If it's busy too, go for *Dinosaur / Pink Elephant* for an even longer (although more escapable) climb. It's given HVS these days although it's similar in difficulty to *The Mousetrap*.

King Rat is famous really just for its overhang on the second pitch. Guidebooks say the rest of the climbing is VS - I thought it was a bit harder. I would not recommend it for VS leaders even if they plan to aid the overhang. I only saw one useable peg when I last climbed the overhang. As an alternative route for true E1 leaders, go for *Dubh Loch Monster* - a well sustained route with one noticeably harder crux (which has good gear). Once, I dropped a full crab of wires from about half way up the *Monster* and caught it between my foot and the rock - retrieving it was a nightmare.

Up at Carnmore, you would again be unlucky to get climbers in front of you. You should definitely try to do the two book routes, having walked in so far. *Fionn Buttress* is a great alternative, but it might not leave you time to do the others. I would recommend a short HVS to allow the folk on your planned route time to get up - either *Penny Lane* or *Trampoline* would fit the bill nicely. Alternatively, you could go for one of the routes on the lower tier to lead you up, for example *Black Mischief* at VS or *Baltron* at E1. This route had a good line and I didn't think it was any harder than *Dragon*! Then go for the classics, *Gob* first - its all in balance (even the bit through the overhang!) and it's not really as hard as HVS. Like *The Bat*, it's a Smith/Haston route. Then comes *Dragon* - a different bucket of worms. The route increases in difficulty with height. The exposure as you pull up onto the drooping flake is awesome and the traverse under the roofs which follows is mind-blowing. This route is top-stuff HVS (it may appear as E1 some day).

So to complete our alternative "Hard Rock" tour of Scotland, we have the northern and western islands. Up on Hoy, there is no real alternative if your aim is the *Original Route* on the Old Man. When I did it, there was a party of five in front of us and we were a group of six. My team of three went off for a coastal walk and didn't start till after 6 p.m. Summer days are long on Hoy - we saw the sunset after re-gaining the main cliff-top. The route and situations are really great and not to be missed just because someone else is on it. There is also an advantage of being behind people - the fulmars have used up all their ammo and just dry-retch at you.

It's a long slog up to the *Great Prow* on Blaven. Compared to some of the VS to E1 classics in Coire Lagan, the quality of this route is a little lacking, it's even got some loose rock. Its neighbouring route *Jib* is pretty good, and good value at HVS. It is said that taking the first pitch on *Stairway to Heaven* (E4) is an easier option than the first pitch of *Jib* - and it's really the correct line. Alternatively, you could climb in Coire Lagan and do *Trophy Cracks* and *Vulcan Wall*. Both of these are around the same difficulty (harder than average HVS), well protected and a finer pair you'll hardly find. As an approach to *Trophy Cracks*, if you've time, I suggest either *Crembo Cracks* or *Cioch Grooves*, which are either side of *Cioch Direct*. *Crembo's* the easier.

Over on Harris, if you've gone to do *The Scoop* as an aid route, you'd be amazed to see other people. They'd probably be coming in to do some "normal" climbing. If they were on *The Scoop*, you could suggest teaming up - that could save everyone a lot of work (unless they were doing a free ascent, of course). If you are determined to do an aid route that you're on alone, you could go for one of Doug Scott's other biggies. These are *The Nose* and *Sidewinder* - you'd probably get the second ascent. In reality, however, no one will be on *The Scoop* in front of you. We saw no one for four days when we were there. The climbing itself is difficult, scary and time-consuming. Even the most comfortable harness cuts in eventually. The situations are fantastic however - "an exercise in fear and fascination".

We took the best part of two days to climb the route. We had a team of four: a climbing pair; a man to safeguard our retreat by keeping a rope hanging to the ground from the second belay ledge until we were over the upper crux; and a groundsman whose job it was to go for help if required! The route is so steep that a standard abseil would never touch rock again before the rope ran out so fixed ropes need to be left in place in case retreat is necessary. We had more than three full summer climbing racks plus around 20 assorted pegs, and a total of six and a half climbing ropes. The leader climbed used etriers while the second followed by jumaring up one of the lead ropes, with the other protecting him. A third rope to the leader was used as a communication rope to send up more gear when

required. The day after we climbed it, the three of us hardly left our beds due to the mental stress and physical exertion from the previous days - it was pouring with rain too.

"Unpublished Rock" was my initial title for this article; however, that would have been self-defeating as soon as it appeared in print. Hopefully this has given some new ideas which may prove useful as our sport grows in popularity. I look forward to seeing you some day, round that quiet corner from "*The Great Classic*" - I may even have to queue behind you!

The Cairngorm Club