

ADVENTURES ON THE BLACK CUILLIN OF SKYE

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'All is sheer rock, black, wrinkled, chaotic, torn and shattered into every conceivable shape. You seem to stand in nature's primeval workshop; here are the very bones of the old earth' - so wrote J.A. McCulloch of the Cuillin in 1905.

Having read many compelling writings of Skye's mountains over the years (the above is an extract from Simon Ridge's excellent book - *The Black Ridge*), I have always wanted to climb in the footsteps and footholds of Mackenzie and Collie and their peers and experience these unique mountains for myself. Moving back home to Scotland in 2021 allowed me to do just that. These are the tales of my adventures on the Cuillin over 2022 and 2023.

The Dubh Slabs and Sgurr Dubh Mhor

One of the first things I did when moving to Aberdeenshire was to join a climbing club, and what better than Scotland's oldest - The Cairngorm Club - right on my doorstep. And when the opportunity to head to Skye with the Club for a weekend in May 2022 and stay in the legendary JMCS hut at Loch Coruisk arose, I grabbed it with both hands.

Taking the boat from Elgol over Loch Scavaig to Loch Coruisk on the Saturday morning, provided my first real view of the Cuillin which was everything I expected it to be - dark, grey, and cloud covered with the broken teeth of the Ridge showing through in only a few places.

Saturday was Scotland at its dreichest best, so when the various Club members headed off in small parties in different directions, it was always unlikely that we would get up to the ridge line itself. A few of us headed along the shoreline of Loch Coruisk and as we approached the iconic and massive Dubh Slabs of gabbro rock, we could see fellow Club member Kolbjorn in his red hill jacket away high up on the slopes of Coir Uisg at the end of the loch. Given the famous grippiness of gabbro, our small group briefly considered ascending the steep wet rock, but wisdom won over valor, and we postponed the Slabs until the next day. Instead, we headed up the nearby flanks of An Garbh-choire, contoured around to the south and then back down to the loch, getting back to the hut for tea - and chats on ideas and plans for the day to come.

Come Sunday, club colleagues Vicky, Forbes and I gathered to depart for the Slabs with a rope and a few nuts and slings for the abseil off Sgurr Dubh Beag. The Slabs were all they promised to be - a kilometre of 45–50-degree incline,

amazing grip, and a lovely long ascent with Loch Coruisk way below us. Although the Slabs are generally rated 'Moderate', careful balanced movement was required on a few sections to safely make it to the top. Then it was the abseil off Sgurr Dubh Beag - Vicky leading the way, followed by me then Forbes. The 2 overhangs on the way down made it an (h)airy and lively descent down onto the ridge line. Then it was a straightforward scramble to gain my first Skye Munro - Sgurr Dubh Mor, (see photo below) the black shattered rocks typifying the ancient Cuillin Ridge.

What seemed like a long route back via one of the many rotten gullies (loose scree and boulders, with little help from the sides of the gully) we eventually returned to An Garbh-choire and then back to the hut along the lochside, to review a brilliant day over dinner and a dram or two with the rest of our Club colleagues.



Photo credit Mark Norris

Sgurr Nan Eag to the Inaccessible Pinnacle, Banachdaich, and Pinnacle Ridge

The 2022 trip got the Cuillin under my skin, and I knew I had to return. And so May 2023 saw me back on the Ridge again - this time with a guide (Alex Kay, www.alexanderkay.co.uk) to climb the rest of the southern Munros of the Ridge.

An early start on Day 1 was made and we were on our way to Sgurr Nan Eag from Glenbrittle campsite at 6am. There is no single description which can capture the Cuillin, much of this being down to the weather on the day. And on this day, the conditions could not have been better, with clear blue skies, a light breeze, no midge and warm spring sunshine providing stunningly clear views over Soay and beyond to Skye's sister Cuillin peaks on Rhum.

The morning saw us heading up Coir' a' Ghrunnda to reach the summit of Sgurr Nan Eag (see photograph below), and then on to Skye's highest Munro Sgurr Alasdair, via the Thearlich Dubh (TD) Gap. The famous TD Gap requires an abseil down to the bottom followed by a climb up the crack on the other side.



Photo credit
Alex Kay

If you read the climbing guides, the Gap is a wee bit challenging and knowing or seeing (or guessing!) where to put a foot or a hand at key points is the key to a successful ascent. After an ungainly wrestle to the top, (see following page) roped up to Alex, he mentioned it was at least a grade above its general reference of 'Severe' because of its 'polished' condition after seeing so much traffic over the years. I didn't feel quite so embarrassed after that!

Then it was onto and along Collie's famous ledge. The route to the ledge is not easily found and it must have been a wonderful discovery in the day (1832) when Hart first came across it, only for it to be then made famous by Norman Collie. The ledge gives an exhilarating walk and scramble along the flank of Sgurr Mhic Choinnich with the corrie a long way below, and then we were onwards and up to gain the peak. (continued on next page).



Our last Munro of the day was to be the Inaccessible Pinnacle - probably the most famous of the Cuillin mountains. The weather was still perfect and starting from the base of An Stac, the scramble up the 'shark's fin' of the pinnacle offered fantastic exposure and views along the Ridge, across the island and beyond. An abseil off the top down to the ridge below (see following page), and it was then back down the scree path from Sgurr Dearg and back to Glenbrittle

Photo credit Alex Kay

Day 2 on the trip was supposed to be a rest day, but feeling pretty energised come lunchtime I headed off solo and up Banachdaich (one of the Cuillin's easier Munros) from the Glenbrittle Youth Hostel start point. Unlike the day before the weather was somewhat 'inclement' with the sky a gunmetal grey and low-level cloud scudding across the Ridge, and the castellated ramparts of the Banachdaich looked all the more imposing for it. Sitting in cloud on my own on the summit, knowing and feeling that there was a rather large drop to Coireachan Ruadha just yards to the east, was a strange, discomfoting and unforgettable experience. A glimpse of the steely Loch Coruisk below, then it was a quick turnaround to get off the hill in worsening visibility.



Photo credit Alex Kay



Day 3 and I was back with Alex, this time for a scramble up and down and along Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr Nan Gillean (see photo on the left) and to the summit itself. Walking in from the Sligachan Hotel we arrived at the base of the

Pinnacle Ridge

Photo credit Mark Norris

first pinnacle on another slightly damp and overcast day. A few hours, four pinnacles and a couple of abseils later we were on our way up to the summit via the famous 'keyhole' (see photo on the right) in the rocky outcrop of the top ridge. At the summit, passing low cloud meant only fleeting glimpses of Am Basteir next door and once again I had that feeling that this place could become inhospitable at short notice. Off we went heading for Corrie a' Bhashtier and to shortcut the downclimb we abseiled down to the corrie floor via one of the many chimneys on Sgurr nan Gillean. A long walk back to the hotel for a welcome beer and fish supper at the hotel, and a look back on another great day, and the end of my second visit to the Cuillin.



The Keyhole

Photo credit Mark Norris

Sgurr a Mhadaidh, Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh and Am Basteir

As I have said, the Cuillin gets to you, so it was somewhat inevitable that I would return for a third visit - this time in September 2023 to climb with my daughter Christie - and the increased responsibility that goes with that!

Christie was on the Island for a friend's (owner of Cafe Cuil, Carbost - see <https://www.cafecuil.com>) wedding at the weekend - but not before we were to ascend Sgurr a' Mhadaidh, Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh and Am Basteir on the Thursday and Friday.

We parked up in the campervan at Glenbrittle in the late summer evening, with a beer and campfire on the beach - perfect preparation for the day to follow. In the morning we met up with Christie's friend, Iseabel who was joining us for the day (as an aside, Iseabel makes handcrafted leather goods on the shores of Loch Torridon (<https://www.iseabalhendry.com>) - it's great to see young Scots doing well in their own business - in Scotland!). Leaving from the Youth Hostel we headed up the path through Coire An Dorus and then on to An Dorus itself - a distinctive cleft in the ridge between Sgurr a Mhadaidh and Sgurr a Ghreadaidh. As we scrambled up the scree path our anticipation increased the closer, we got to the ridge line. The girls were ahead and got to the cleft first and I could hear their shouts of delight. When I got there, I could see why it is called 'The Door' - we were greeted by a wonderful vista across to Blabheinn and southwest down Coire Uisg with Loch Coruisk looking absolutely stunning. We were then quickly up on to Sgurr a' Mhadaidh, back to An Dorus and then up onto Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh bypassing the appropriately named outcrop of 'the Wart' on the way. The grit floors and shallow boulder walls of the Ridge's most popular overnight bivvy points were there to see too. A cup of coffee and energy bar and we were off back down to the corrie via a different but not particularly enjoyable route - the basalt staircase of Eag Dubh ('Black Cleft'). All that they say about wet basalt is true! Back at the Youth Hostel and yet another memorable day was done.

On our way to the Youth Hostel start that morning Christie and I had bumped into one of Skye's best known guides Adrian Trendall (who lives in Glenbrittle and is author of 'Skye's Cuillin Ridge Traverse' published by Cicerone). When I called in to share a dram that evening with Adrian, he helpfully provided a few tips for our next day's adventure, and we were all set for Am Basteir.

After the walk in from Sligachan and up to Corrie a' Bhashtier, it was up the scree path to the bealach between Am Basteir and Sgurr nan Gillean - to be met by the watchful gaze of a couple of the (in)famous Basteir ravens perched

on the crags. They are my favourite mountain birds, with their distinctive 'croaking' calls, a high degree of intelligence, and plumage 'as black as the deil's waistcoat'.

Am Basteir ranks behind only the Inaccessible Pinnacle in terms of the Skye Munros, mostly I think because of the short but nasty 'bad step' which has to be navigated close to the summit. Off we went on the final ascent, from the bealach, looking and waiting for the bad step to appear. And when we got to it, we could see why - it is only maybe 15 feet of a drop, but the drops on each side to Lota Corrie and Coire a' Bhasteir are somewhat greater! For downclimbing, the footholds are also 'blind' given the slight overhang at the top, so a short abseil took us down safely. We were on the summit only 10



Bruach na Frithe

Photo credit Christie Norris

minutes later to be greeted by wonderful views of all the Cuillin peaks to the south and Bruach na Frithe directly opposite. It looked almost alpine. (see photo on the left) As we enjoyed some refreshment and food, a couple of climbers and their guide (who we had encountered the day before on Ghreadaidh) crested the summit, one lady being fairly senior - with the biggest grin as she made the summit. We flirted briefly with the thought of seeking out the hidden tunnel to the King's cave chimney at the western edge of Am Basteir for a 50m abseil down but felt the safer route

of re-tracing our path to the bealach and down to the corrie was the better option. Arriving back at Sligachan I dropped Christie off at her wedding accommodation to meet up with the rest of her friends, and I headed back to the campsite for my last night on Skye - until next time.

And I shall return. Not just to finish the Skye Munros but more so to experience again what the Cuillin offers the climber - challenging navigation

and route finding, exposure, and stunning views all round - a wonderful combination of the 'macro' and the 'micro'.

The great thing after days like these is that long after, you can close your eyes, and still see and remember each highlight vividly. This is what's best about being in the mountains of Scotland.



Looking South Back Along the Ridge

Photo credit Alex Kay