

## MULTI- DAY EXPEDITIONS: AMBITION, PRAGMATISM AND REALITY

GUY BROMBY

Heather: *“Screeching with fear, ripping the zip and hurling out the reptile. Tents are claustrophobic but a lizard inside is unbearable: thank goodness it wasn’t an adder which had crept inside my rucksack. Contrast with joyful ptarmigan hens, and their chicks, and deer swimming across Cranstackie’s corrie lochan.”*

These trips may be unpleasant, but what makes them type two fun is that in retrospect, they do seem kind of fun....stay with us for the ride and photographs.

## WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

Nearly 100 person days; a dozen expeditions of three to six days long in the three years to August 2023. Most were with a dozen other Cairngorm Club members. Four were alone, four in Winter and one sleeping in bothies. And all were low-cost staycations.

I wanted to be distinctive and occasionally controversial. My experience of Arctic and Scandinavian expeditions, mostly on ski, created ambitions for Scottish multi-day expeditions. We sought well fed adventures in stunning mountain camps, preferably in a windy, midge free place. “Carrying less, and roaming further”, seeking fresh routes between mountain ranges including low grade, ropeless, winter routes where the gradation from steep walk to low grade climb should be seamless but sometimes isn’t.

## EXTRACTS/NOTES FROM EXPEDITION LOGS

1. PART OF THE RAMSAY ROUND, two of us, December. Staying together close to the mountains the night before allows earlier starts, time to thin out duplicated equipment and share expectations. Steven and I were brutal in challenging everything the other carried, but it reduced our weight by several kilogrammes each and, critically, increased mobility and speed in days with less than eight hours light.

Monday 27<sup>th</sup> December: The Ben and the Carn Mor Dearg arete finished with another, delightful, easterly ridge descent to the 831 m elevation bealach camp, collected drinking water half a kilometre South, to the West of the Aonach plateau.



*From the West face of the Aonachs looking back at The Ben and the line of various aretes from yesterday, radiating from Carn Mhor Dearg. Pleasantly technical. December 2021. Photo credit Steven Pollock*

Tuesday: West face of the Aonachs: Missing contours and Steven peering at, and route scouting the easier ground in the nautical dawn, whilst striking the tent. As a climber, Steven usually seeks the harder ground. Started on neve over turf then friable and slabby rock. Feeling and then gradually enjoying the steeper exposure.

Then a descent of the ridge on the East Side of Aonach Beag and drop into Coire na Bhuic's southmost gully and some unexpected consequential ground 400 m NW of the gully. Both descended facing in.

The second night on the bealach at 900m elevation between Beag and Mor of Sgurr Choinich, first collecting water from the streams near the lochan around 720 metres height.

Wednesday: This expedition was supposed to continue anti clockwise along the Grey Corries and then West along the Mamores. The challenge is getting an updated weather forecast after several days with no mobile data, we received an "over the 'phone" met office forecast for our mountain at 5.30 am, thank you Lesley, confirming that the rising Easterly gale against our Black Label Hilleberg tent, now 40 mph, would double, making the ridge-like Grey Corries over-challenging. Bail! We packed everything inside, memorised the route until dawn and pre-set stopwatch and compass bearings. Donning balaclavas, hood, buff, helmet, torch and goggles. Crampons on in the porch, emerging from the flapping tunnel into the gale, striking and packing the tent in just three minutes in the 7 am murk. (Remember the three minutes for later).

We read the compass twice, but mainly used the angle of the slope to navigate as we headed round the South side of Sgurr Choinnich Beag, checking the fall line for the third time, down towards the burn in Upper Glen Nevis. Crampons off at 600 metres, running out of snow at 500 metres, for the first time in 50 hours. Raining past Steall, to the car park and road head, and then a “tarmac slog” to a vehicle near Glen Nevis hostel.



Two was an efficient team size, especially with one tent between us, whilst polishing expedition and camping skills, revelling in a grade I arete, another grade I ascent and some consequential facing in descents. The cache at the East end of Glen Nevis is buried and unused, in the peat, inside Rizza’s six litre tubs.

*“Rain girl and bow” on a Loch Ossian promontory after placing food 15km to the West, for a Ramsey round two months later. October 2021 Photo credit Guy Bromby*

It includes three 100 cl bottles of vintage port to celebrate a jubilee birthday. We can complete the Ramsey round, in the 2023/4 Winter though we suspect that the tortilla wraps will be past their best. However, port freezes at minus 10 degrees Celsius, and even if it has partly frozen, perhaps the alcohol will separate and improve the slushy treat.

Lesley, with grit and stamina, and I carried in the 10 kilogrammes of food for four people, in October 21, the day after Heather’s last Munro on Beinn na Lap. We hitched a lift in Rob’s swanky all-terrain vehicle to the South end of Loch Treig, just East of a hermit’s dwelling. (Not mine). Then a ten-hour return walk, with spade, arriving at Corroul railway station for coffee and on to our tent pitched on one of the Loch Ossian promontories (see above).

2. BLAIR ATHOLL TO INVEREY, seven of us, August.

*Mark: 35 miles from Blair Atholl to Inverey, with some Munros thrown in for good measure during several days of mixed Scottish summer weather, dreich then sunny. A strong achievement. But it was the experience of freedom and peace from being in remote and wild places which will live longest in the memory - carrying all you need to walk, stop for a break, or set up camp in stunningly beautiful scenery .*



*Loch Loch, home of Arctic Char, North of Beinn a' Ghlo, and seldom visited except by mountain bikers. October 2020*  
*Photo credit Guy Bromby*

*Day one, the effort getting from Blair Atholl over Carn Liath ( see above) and on to Loch Loch was rewarded by the sight of a short eared owl on its silent night hunt as we set up camp in the dark, seeing the twinkling head torches of the other half of our group navigating off Beinn a' Ghlo down to the end of the loch in the far distance, and then waking in the morning to the quiet of the surrounds with light rain falling.*

*Day two, took us south of Carn an Rìgh (Hill of the King) to a beautiful camp spot on Gleann Mor where we enjoyed cooking our well-earned dinners including dahl and nan bread made from first principles, sharing a few drams and chatting by the river in the evening sun. In the morning the inevitable 'attack of the killer midges' meant we struck camp in record time and headed out for our last day up and over Beinn Iutharn Mhor with fine views of our favourite mountains all around us, then down into Glen Ey, past the ruins of Altanour Lodge, and finally onwards to the best cup of tea and hot shower ever at Muir Cottage. Hard work, but good for the soul.*



*Garron ponies emerge from the gloom: a Tolkienesque scene North of Beinn a' Ghlo. October 2020. Hours before, the stags had signed away their modelling rights. Photo credit Guy Bromby 3.CAIRNGORMS, solo, November.*

Diagonal Gully has a South East aspect, and compared with the other routes out of the West end of Loch Avon was more favourable that day for avoiding avalanches: too early in the season for an Scottish Avalanche Information Service (SAIS) forecast and cross loading apparent on the final 50 metres of the climb with drier, looser wind slab. The lower part was wet, heavy snow poorly bonded to the turf, wet moss and rock. I decided not to put on crampons wanting to protect the wet turf, regretted it, and changed my mind halfway up. Early foot stances involved sweeping away some of the snow before placing the foot on a slithery slope. Then the snow covered a burn and the story became soaking Dachstein mitts but dry feet under effective gaiters. In places, axe plants were through wet snow to unfrozen turf, with firm pick hold. Spare hand rammed onto and into and through whatever I could grip optimally. I wrung out Dachsteins, before the final 50 metres ascent on drier snow and the wind dispelling the moisture. As common on these top outs, feet pushed down compressing the snow, before biting firm.

In Corrie Domhain I met three who had ascended Coire Raibert to the East of Diagonal Gully. They had seen me from Loch Avon below and were unimpressed with my route choice. Agreed: Guilty as charged but getting these Grade I winter climbs, and more, under my belt, means seeking opportunities. To anyone who says this doesn't "count": I'll see you in court.

#### 4. CAIRNGORMS, three of us, December

Silver Chimney is three sided and 100 metres high. The lead-in, main route and top out is between 620 and 820 metres high, on the East spur of Carn a' Mhaim, with a spur to its left. Today there was half a metre of wind slab on a slightly denser lower layer. The slab slid, if "forced" but on the steeper approach was not sliding with our adjacent, fence-posted foot plunges and that, with a

moderate avalanche forecast, led to the finely balanced decision to continue. As the angle increased, snow was pushed onto the two lower, helmeted, others. As the third person reached the steepest sections much of the snow had fallen down the chimney leaving bare rock for crampons. Hands on snow-covered rock outside the chimney. Some jamming of back and rucksack against the left-hand wall. This route is like a high ladder but missing its foot rungs and



the spine of the back scratcher. At these cruxes it felt higher than grade I and we used a sling around a planted ice axe pick as some "aid". Tiring and a 2-hour 40-minute duration from crampons on. A great early Winter steal carrying overnight gear. Three people, weary at the top (see Left), re-fuelled and descended to Glen Luibeg along the SE ridge of the mountain.

5. QUOICH - AVON - BYNACK to DERRY, three of us, July. 6.5 km per hour, speed march, along upper Strath Avon at 8.30 pm: We'd covered 24 km in 12 hours and now, keeping

*Topping out Silver Chimney above Glen Luibeg. Dec 21*

*Photo credit Rikki Foulger*

up; map reading and eating hot food simultaneously. Arriving at the Loch Dagrum grid reference at 10.15 pm. It's dark. Where's Esperanza? Both parties rushing to meet in daylight and missed each other on opposite sides of this lochan. (Aide memoire: Be precise, and accurate, with meeting place grid references). 6.45 am: "Hi Guys". It was lovely to speak: 10 minutes later she's away as it's too hot to continue the planned route.

The trio headed across to the Cathedral like, Barns of Bynack and Craig Mhor. Already amongst the summits, without a glen start and finish each day, there may be time to dawdle, unwind, chat, and without the rush of making the last bus back to town. Rough and long days are rewarded by exploring fresh

and untravelled terrain with delightful flora uneaten by ungulates. Then it's down past Lochs Avon and Etchachan and the "Hutchy". A cool start to the third day, in the mists of Glen Derry and a feast of Quoich blaeberreries. Mike's hungry.



*Linn of Quoich on the fourth day before the ascent of the East Spur of Creag Bhalg, with its waist high heather. Mike made a camera tripod from walking poles, topped with an inverted boot. Patent applied for. July 2022.*

*Photo credit Mike Duguid*

## LESSONS LEARNT AND RELEARNT

### 1. TIME SCHEDULES

Some days don't go to plan. Such as an absence of taxis so a five-kilometre road hike from Blair Atholl, at the middle of long day, already after a five hour train journey from Aberdeen to the start point. Many of our multi-day plans have probably been too long in distance, given that much of the route is on rough and pathless ground.

Critically, these trips need a long weekend plus travel time and so pre-planned time off work. We sought an early commitment so that a myriad of tasks were shared out-with just one or two people. Joining the group a few days beforehand needs focussed integration.

### 2. BALANCING AMBITION AND REALITY IN ROUTE PLANNING (THE FAR NORTH TRIP).

Vay: *Route planning flows in stages: ambition, pragmatism, and reality. Guy had the first covered and outlined an enthusiastic route for us to give a thumbs up to: It's easy to say 'yes' when you won't be confronted with the reality for many months.*

*As the date grew closer, I wanted to understand the practical reality. After all, "the map is not the ground". It's inviting to draw a perpendicular line down steep-looking contours. 'That looks doable'. But it's worth challenging that assumption with what information is available. I referred to some old forum posts, photos from [geograph.org.uk](http://geograph.org.uk), area guidebooks and first-hand comments from people who had visited the area. Sometimes the biggest challenge is just parking!*

*From this I made a series of adjustments: a starting point with less walk-in and better parking; reduced daily distance to improve feasibility on tough ground; and likely camping spots pre-scouted (using FatMap's excellent 3D models). GPX files overlaid on various map layers can then be printed, so that everyone has something to look over. We finished with some impressive A2 and A3 waterproof maps, printed at 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 or 1:40,000 scales, with a possible route overlay in blue and potential camp sites.*

*In the process of pragmatizing the route - preserving as much of the original ambition as possible - you build a natural awareness of potential lines through the terrain. The result is a suite of alternative workarounds and/or escapes for the most ambitious elements of the plan. Useful to have when you are weary and may overlook a good option in the moment.*

*But of course, we also enjoyed the freedom of getting off the 'map': for example, a steep slope ascending away from our first night's camp; and I indulged in an easy undocumented scramble, which looked just right, and something you just can't spot on a map. We each have our own preference for spontaneity versus rigid preparations, but I enjoy the process of setting out on an ambitious target; pulling it in by challenging its assumptions; and then using all that was learned in the process as options to follow - or subvert (continued).*





West Face of Ben Hope in the June '23 heat

Photo credit Vay Mutch

The reality Guy: *Dehydrated frogs; vibram edges scrunching through arid sphagnum; scarce and acidic "water" pools and the optimism of two km per hour. Cooking on rocks, mid-stream, keeping flame away from vegetation. And George and Susan's vehicle and driving for drop off at the start and pick up at the finish. Thank you.*

### 3.WEIGHT REDUCTION

Food caches may reduce flexibility: however, it's sometimes better to cut weight in other areas by tent sharing, especially in Winter, and thinning out excess chattels everywhere. On a seven person trip we took six tents, stoves, gas cans and pans which was ridiculous from a weight perspective.

Typical food weights per person day range from 0.6 to 1 kg. Rucksack weights range, in Summer, from 8.5 kg (congratulations Vay) to 16kg (you know who you are), perhaps packing their fears. The strong carry a heavier rucksack easily. But when someone else is sick or injured, and you need to carry their rucksack also, that extra weight seems needless. Clearly, lower weights carried increase mobility.

#### 4. SLEEPING AND HIGH-LEVEL SHELTERS

Multi-nights “sleeping” in a bivvy bag works with clement weather and midge free months. Many of your lightest, “on paper” tents, endure neither storms nor insects. Yours should be strong, dependable, comfortable and durable. There may be lighter tents, but are these better?

Typical tent weights on these expeditions were for three season: solo: 1 Kg plus. For four seasons: duo: 3 kg. , trio, with extended vestibule: 4 kg. The larger tents encourage discussion and sharing of kit, expedition skills and teamwork. Accepting that their bigger, level ground, footprint needs more time to find. However, the seamless three-minute bail out in a freezing gale, described earlier, would take five times longer if striking multiple tents with individual occupants. Tent capacity concerns arising from a single person “bailing out” may be over-stated. If necessary, all bail out: “One for all and all for one”. Two-layer tents, with inner tent temporarily removed, create relaxed multi-person meeting spaces as mood and expectations change with the harder physical and, sometimes, mental reality of expeditions. Unrushed sharing of concerns and ideas and their respectful debate and plan revision are critical for team resilience.

Ear plugs and eye masks help: even the deniers snore and sleep talk.

It’s easy to buy cheap. Tents must withstand a buffeting 40 mph gust on top of a 40-mph baseline wind strength. That’s 80 mph! Who has had a tangled mess of broken poles and torn tent fabric, limiting options in darkness and foul weather? And a long way from anywhere? Ultimately, you depend on your shelter whatever the weather throws at you. Expedition tents have all those things a house has, keeping you dry and cosy and holding their second-hand value, because they are good. They are easy to pitch and strike, superbly made and adaptable. And little goes wrong. But you only can decide which tent is right for you and your companions. Choose wisely.

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