

An Italian/Scots Love Story

by Arianna Lombardi and Mauro Maraschi

We are Arianna and Mauro, and this is a short story about how two Italians raised in the Alps fell in love with Scotland.

Our first encounter with the Cairngorms happened almost by chance. It was 2018, and we had left home for a two-month road trip heading north.

We chose our first hike in Scotland after reading about the Am Fear Liath Mòr (the Big Grey Man) who haunts the country's second highest peak - Ben Macdui. Having got to the Cairngorms, as we started our hike up the mountain in the morning haze, a majestic stag was standing in front of us on the top of the hill - we could not have wished for better! When we reached the summit, all around us was nothing but wild land waiting to be explored - very different compared to the Alps. We dropped a pin on the map and said to ourselves: we will come back!

Years later, during our Skye Trail adventure, with crisps and beers in our hands at the Sligachan pub, we met Mark - the current editor of this Journal - who was there for one of his "Adventures on the Black Cuillin" that he wrote about in a previous issue. Chatting together he invited us to stay at his place, and the following year, he and his wife Fay hosted us at their home right on the borders of the Cairngorms National Park! It felt like the final piece of a puzzle. The Cairngorms were still in our minds, and we couldn't wait to come back!

We spent a few days exploring Aberdeenshire with Mark who led us hiking, climbing on a cliff by the sea, visiting an amazing cheese factory at Cambus o'May, spending amazing evenings all together at their place with music and whisky, and chatting and enjoying the fire!

Then we moved to Aviemore where Enrico, our dear friend, joined us and we finally had the chance to do the Cairngorms traverse we had been planning for a long time! The plan was to go up to Ben Macdui, but a very *blawie* day forced us to change our route. We started from Glenmore and walked through the Ryvoan Pass to the bothy where a golden eagle appeared as if it was showing us the way.

We kept going, following the Lairig an Laoigh, through a dramatic landscape that became wider and wilder at every step. The Fords of Avon shelter appeared and we turned right following the River Avon and found the perfect spot for our tents on its banks. The wind gave us a break at dusk, just in time to enjoy our dinner outside!

We were awake before the world began to dawn around us, and after a hearty breakfast we walked to Loch Avon where its astonishing vista opened before us.



The path then led us to Loch Etchachan, a perfect place for a lunch-break and for gazing at the summits, still dusted with the last of the winter snow, before going down beneath Coire Etchachan and reaching Glen Derry. It felt like stepping into a time machine: if a dinosaur had poked its head out of the Caledonian pine forest, it wouldn't have looked out of place!

At Bob Scott's we met one of the estate rangers. He checked if we were cooking properly — no campfires — and, seeing our Jetboil, tempted us with the promise of a huge breakfast in Braemar if we made it there before 12 pm. Needless to say, our goal in the morning became to arrive on time at The Bothy for our well deserved breakfast — and we did it!

We resumed our hike towards Loch Callater on a cold afternoon with low clouds, but the atmosphere was incredibly evocative. To add to the atmosphere, we were surrounded by the calls of black grouse and their whirring wings when they took flight as we walked. That evening, we witnessed a stunning sunset with the mountains reflected in the loch. As the sun sank below the horizon, the entire landscape gradually turned a deep blue.



Next day the start of the climb to Càrn an t-Sagairt Mòr felt like a treasure hunt. Mountain hares and ptarmigans stared at us curiously as we searched for another wing or an engine piece scattered over the top, from the plane crash of the late 1950s. We continued towards Càrn an t-Sagairt Beag and Càrn a' Choire Bhòidheach, then made a panoramic stop at The Stuic to admire Coire Lochan nan Eun still covered in snow. Then we had to rush to Cac Carn Mòr and Cac Carn Beag because big clouds were moving in our direction! We just had time for a quick lunch and a cup of coffee on the summit before rain and low visibility forced us to go down without even seeing Lochanagar.

We arrived at the Glas-allt-Shiel bothy, where the warmth of the fireplace was a fitting end to a cold and wet day.

Although the bothy looked like a tempting shelter, we pitched our tents facing Loch Muick and let the waterfall lull us to sleep into the night.

Only the final stretch to Ballater remained and just like years ago a large herd of red deer greeted us along the way. Our backpacks facing the mountains, as if to say goodbye — or maybe see you soon!



The day was cold, and upon our arrival in Ballater we treated ourselves to a large, sweet hot chocolate – with marshmallows and whipped cream, of course!

It's hard to describe, but when we're in Scotland we feel a strong sense of freedom and serenity, as if time slows down.

We feel at home among these wild and majestic mountains.

We had come full circle. But as you know, a circle has neither beginning nor end — and somehow we, two *figli delle Alpi*, keep getting called back into Scotland's slow, ancient rhythm.

Ariana's and Mauro's website can be found at alplanders.com.