

## The Greater Traverse - a Skye Epic

by Peter Henry

Back in 2021 I made the trip to Skye for an attempt at the Greater Traverse. For the uninitiated, the Greater Traverse takes in the standard Cuillin Traverse, a superb challenge in itself, before crossing Glen Sligachan and continuing the traverse along to Bla Bheinn. UKC informs that this is a 20 mile route with over 4000m of climbing, but the numbers don't do it justice. I've also found it described as being 'strictly for masochistic whippets', which feels closer to the mark!

With this being a one-day solo mission, logistics determined that a start and finish at the Bla Bheinn car park would be best, with an approach by sea... what adventure!



The day started with a cycle along the pretty, but surprisingly hilly, road to Elgol to catch the 9am Misty Isle boat out to Loch Coruisk. The trip is aimed at sightseers and dutifully

slowed down to circle what seemed to be every rock in the bay to give us a good look at various seals, gulls and what not. This was interesting at first but having seen one seal, I wasn't in the mood to hang around so we could view and photograph a few dozen more, I was impatient to get on the hill! Soon enough, however, we were ashore, and my restlessness eased as I began the long trudge up to the first peak on the ridge, Gars-bheinn, which afforded wonderful sunny views in all directions. It was all set to be a glorious blue Skye day! To the north my objective stretched out before me, an unending line of ridges and spires as far as the eye could see, a daunting prospect!

Good progress was made over Sgurr Nan Eag before picking up the devious wee shortcut out to the outlying Sgurr Dubh Mor. The diversion out to this rough peak is a bit of a time suck and, while not strictly on the main ridge, it is afforded Munro status and so its omission would feel odd. Next up was Sgurr Alasdair, another peak off to the side of the main ridge line, though less of a diversion this time. The summit marked the topographical high point of the route, it was all downhill from here!

The King's Chimney loomed large up ahead, an impressive sight taking a slightly intimidating looking line directly up the southern face of Sgurr Mhic Choinnich but, thankfully, it's much easier than it looks with generous holds, good feet, solid rock and big exposure. Soon enough I was over the summit and heading for the obligatory scramble of An Stac, another impressive looking line that is much easier tackled than it first appears.



The Inaccessible Pinnacle was reached in good time. However, my late start would come back to bite me as it was now rush hour, and it was particularly busy on this day. A spell of wet weather in the preceding days ensured that pretty much everyone on Skye seemed to be attempting to climb it at the same time. A mumbled greeting to those waiting patiently at the base for their turn and I pulled on. Thankfully, folk seemed happy for me to climb past/over them on their way up the east ridge... or at least nobody complained!

When I got to the top, however, there were teams on all routes that might be used to descend; there was even a party on the VS on the south face. I was trapped so took the opportunity to catch my breath, grab a snack and take in the views. During those Covid sensitive times, however, my presence added to an already growing problem on the Pinn: one guide was bringing two ladies up the east ridge, another was bringing a couple of old boys up the west face and there was another couple on top, just minding their own business. When the clients started arriving it all got rather crowded on our wee perch and the guides started having a "debate" about social distancing, remember those days?

I mused on the ethics of our situation; whose ascent took precedence? The punters who had paid a lot of money for the experience of a lifetime? The guides who were out here making a living? The average Joes who had patiently waited their turn in the queue? Who had the most right to be there? Clearly not me! Irrate-guide shot me a glare and I distinctly overheard 'and what's he doing here?!' Mellow-guide sparked up a conversation with me and offered to lower me off when a rope became

free. While not my preference, given the circumstances it seemed a pragmatic solution. Sometime later a rope became free, I wedged myself with a sling, stepped off the top and was soon down on terra firma, giving



a friendly wave and getting the hell outta there!! Steady progress resumed on the long gentle scree stomp over Sgurr na Banachdaich and Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh before a quick pitstop (an apple, the last proper food in my pack) prior to tackling what is probably my favourite part of the ridge: Sgurr a Mhadaidh to Sgurr na Bairnich. With no

Munro tops en-route, this is probably the least frequented section of the ridge, however there's intricate and sustained scrambling on this section and route finding can be quite tricky. Thankfully previous exploration allowed me to relax and enjoy it, and enjoy it I certainly did. There are basalt staircases, wonderfully subtle downclimbs, exposed slabs, knife edged ridges and some deep crevasses to be jumped.... in short, there's so much fun to be had here!

Next up was the long slog up Bruach na Frithe. This feels like the longest climb on the ridge and isn't all that interesting, however I took the scrambliest lines possible, ticked off the two tops and soon reached the foot of Am Bastier, with the imposing Bastier Tooth looming large above. The plan was to follow Naismith's Route up onto the tooth but there was a party already ensconced. I was secretly relieved. Although not technically difficult, with huge exposure and some rattly holds, soloing Naismith's is not something to be taken lightly... and I was feart! I slinked down onto the Lota Corrie Route instead. Whilst this is an easier option (sort of?), there is much loose scree to contend with. Two steps up, one-point-five steps down, thighs burning. Soon enough, however, I was up onto the tooth and looking forward to the West Ridge of Sgurr nan Gilleann, the finest peak on the ridge.

I summited 6 hours 15 minutes after leaving Gars-Bheinn, a smidge slower than planned, but feeling strong and ready to take on the next part

of the route: the 900m descent down into Glen Sligachan and re-ascent up the other side! On the summit were a couple of chaps who had just finished their ridge traverse. I accompanied them down the East Ridge before they headed off north to Sligachan for a well-earned pint. For me it was south over Sgurr Beag to the final peak of the main ridge, Sgurr na h-Uamha.

As the natural end point of the main ridge it is slightly curious that it receives less acclaim than its southern cousin Gars-Beinn. Positioned at the end of a long day however, with the pub in the opposite direction, I suppose this is to be expected.

It's a shame though as it's a great wee summit with some interesting scrambling and offers a unique, Tolkienesque view back towards Sgurr nan Gilleann.

At this point all was going swimmingly; however, things were about to take a turn for the worse...



While descending off Sgurr na h-Uamha I was lowering myself down onto a ledge when a large block came away in my hands, bounced at my feet and tumbled off down the hillside, "That was lucky"! I took a moment to compose myself then noticed a strange wet feeling in my right shoe. My foot started to throb. I stood up and weighted it, a sharp pain shot over my foot and up my leg. It hadn't missed after all. Bugger.

With hindsight, I had badly bruised the top of my foot and broken my wee toe. At the time, it was just sore. Thankfully it had been a glancing blow, if it had landed square-on I'm not sure I would've had much of a foot left!

I sat back down to consider my options.

1. Call for help. I was in a remote area, on my own, late in the day, in shorts, t-shirt and trainers, nothing in my bag but an ultra-light excuse for a jacket, an empty water bottle and a small handful of trail mix which I couldn't force down. I had gotten myself into a rather foolish predicament. I'd heard stories of other such

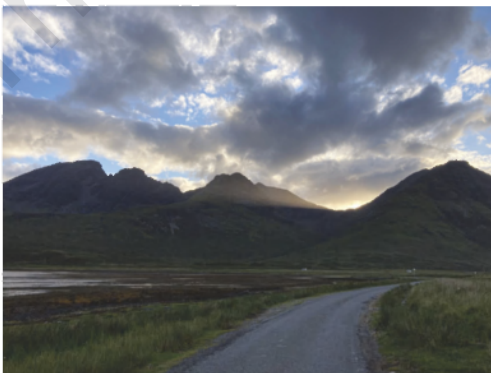
misadventure in the news and tutted, it was the kind of behaviour folk frown upon. Call for help? Not a chance!

2. Re-ascend the east ridge and walk out to Sligachan. Tempting, but then what? It's a long way out and it would leave me a very, very long way away from the car... late at night... and taxis are expensive. Not liking that idea either.
3. Suck it up and keep going. The only choice, surely!?

I cinched my laces up as tight as they would go and gingerly weighted the foot, ouch, but then noticed that if I stood the inside of my heel, toes up in the air, it wasn't too bad. I could work with that.

I'll admit the bum-slide descent down to the glen and hobble back up the other side was a little attritional and there may have been a teary tantrum when I fell into a bog in the middle, but slowly, progress was made. This should have been the fastest and most runnable part of the whole route but here I was limping along on my heel, crabbing up the hills, randomly falling over from time to time, cursing my luck all the way... masochistic whippet indeed!

Eventually the ridge line was reached and my mood improved. It was a fine evening, there were scraps of path to follow and the going was a little easier for a while as I speed-limped along toward the next obstacle: the Clach Glas - Bla Bheinn traverse. I had been concerned about how I would cope on more technical terrain, but found that scrambling was actually easier than walking. The slower pace and more precise nature of moving over rock helped and there was less clipping things with my foot and stumbling over.



The Clach Glas traverse really is something special and cannot be recommended highly enough. The scrambling is sustained and at times exposed but is never difficult. There are so many brilliant parts to this traverse: the summit slabs, the Imposter, the chimney onto Bla Bheinn... I didn't want it to

end! The quality of the scrambling, along with the distraction of Scotland giving England a 0-0 thrashing blaring out of my phone's wee speakers, ensured that I all but forgot about my foot for a while.

All too soon the summit of Bla Bheinn was reached in the gathering gloom, 11 hours 15 minutes after leaving Gars-bheinn, a bit later than anticipated and a little worse for wear but feeling chuffed to have overcome adversity and made it to the finish in good spirits.

All that was left was to descend the rough, steep, loose tourist path in the dark... quite the ordeal! It was the home straight, however, and back at the car awaited a pre-placed midnight feast and a cool beer. What. A. Day.