

Work, Rest and Play in the Cuillin

by Adrian Trendall



"Blue hour" view over Bidein to the Northern Cuillin with Bruach na Frithe in the clouds on left, Basteir Tooth and Am Basteir centre and Sgùrr nan Gilleann right

Those of a certain age may well remember the advert for Mars bars with the tag line, "A Mars a day helps you work, rest and play." Maybe it was a bit nonsensical, probably they wouldn't get away with such claims nowadays, but my relationship with the Cuillin is all-embracing, involving work, rest and play.

Living in Glen Brittle at the foot of the Black Cuillin, with my wife Bridgette, wild horses wouldn't drag us to any other location anywhere in the world.

For us, it's all about location. The Cuillin is just a stone's throw away, the beach and the sea are within easy reach, and we enjoy mountain views from the house.



Let's kick off with work which largely involves guiding people in the Black Cuillin. However, work and play are largely intertwined and work never really feels like work since it's pretty much what I'd be doing for play. I'm wholeheartedly in agreement with Mark Twain who once wrote, **"Find a job you enjoy doing and you will never have to work a day in your life."**

Living in Glen Brittle means that three quarters of my work is within walking distance, so no pesky commutes, no being stuck in traffic jams. My most popular client requests are traverses of the Cuillin Ridge and 'bagging' the Cuillin Munros. Throw in some photography guiding, some classic routes such as the Dubh Slabs/Ridge or Pinnacle Ridge and it makes for a nicely varied "workload".

If at all possible, I try to meet clients the day before for a chat, to issue any kit and make a plan. Typically, we'll meet up at the coffee shop on Glen Brittle campsite, check the forecast and arrange things over a mug of Cuillin coffee. In fact, the coffee shop is very much my office away from home. Clients and I will often meet there before an adventure and finish up there for celebratory drinks and cakes.



The conditions we hope for. Looking over clouds to the main Cuillin Ridge from Blà Bheinn after a traverse of Clach Glas.

Recent "summers" have been grim with seemingly month after month of rain, rivers in spate, high winds and unseasonably cold temperatures. Last year, April and May saw brilliant weather but thereafter the term summer was a total misnomer. Fortunately, the good weather coincided with some epic traverses, with inversions and stunning light shows courtesy of mother nature. The early season good times charged



up my mental batteries which was just as well given the lacklustre “summer” season. No drought conditions, no heat waves for us, just days dressed head to toe in Gore-Tex – “Full Metal Jacket” days, as I refer to them.



Perfect conditions for a traverse. View north from Sgùrr Dearg

Constantly working outdoors means it's a mixed bag, being out in all weathers. If you don't like bad weather then forget guiding as a career. In many ways, guiding is a lifestyle choice with very obvious pros and cons. Let's look at some highs and lows of the 2025 season. High up the list would be a one-day ridge traverse with a female American client. We started at early o'clock, a proper alpine start and enjoyed inversion conditions for much of the day. Scrambling and climbing high above the clouds, warm sunshine dappled our faces. Jagged peaks poked out of the glistening white clouds beneath us. Ascending through the clouds, all had been dark and dank, water everywhere, but above things were dry as a desert. Warm, dry rock, perfect conditions and we only saw a couple of people all day.

Such days make me pinch myself in disbelief. It was a long hard day and we were on the go for almost twenty hours but the rewards were commensurate with the effort. A delighted client, some fantastic memories, and a traverse completed in nigh on perfect conditions so

what's not to love? In my book, days at work don't get much better. Given the conditions, I'd happily have done a traverse for nothing.



The In Pinn at sunrise with Blà Bheinn in the distance to the right

Conversely, much of recent “summer” guiding seasons have been exercises in managing client expectations, of adopting ‘Plan B’, day after day, returning home soaked to the skin. This probably seems hard to believe but I still love going out in bad weather, and being paid to do so is the icing on the cake. One memorable day was a client wanting to go up Sgùrr Alasdair, the highest peak on Skye, in atrocious conditions. The forecast was for high winds and heavy rain.

I knew that we'd be sheltered from the prevailing wind if we ascended The Great Stone Chute and that the top ridge would be manageable even if we needed to rope things. Paths were like streams; in places the water was almost knee-deep. The burns were in spate and everywhere was a world of wetness as we splashed our way to Coire Lagan then up the Chute. The summit ridge was surprisingly quiet, the winds calmer than they had been lower down.

With the Munro bagged for the client, we raced down to the campsite coffee shop to warm up. It was one of those elemental experiences that will stick in my memory. We'd been out for under four hours but were on a real high as we sipped hot coffee and relived the adventure.

Having founded the Facebook group, All Things Cuillin, back in 2017, the members have proved loyal, the group ever friendly and helpful, a testament to the positive side of social media. I try to post daily and people love to follow not just my guiding activities but anything Cuillin-related. It has a real feel-good buzz about it which registers with the clients I guide. Many clients love just seeing things they have only heard about on Facebook, meeting the staff at the coffee shop, recounting tales I have written.



At the office in winter

Kit and gear are put through a tough torture test of daily use and probably get a lot more use and abuse than in most reviews.

Summer is a sociable season and a distinct contrast to winter when the glen becomes empty and guiding work is curtailed. Winter is given over to personal projects involving photography and writing. From April to November, I'll be out guiding five or six days a week. These will be long



hill days with one or two clients, meetings at coffee shops, cafes and pubs. By contrast, winter is a more solitary affair.

2020 saw Cicerone Press publish my guidebook to the Cuillin Ridge Traverse. I enjoyed writing it, but best of all is bumping into people on an almost daily basis who are using the book in its natural environment. The winter of 2024/25 was devoted to writing another book for Cicerone, a guide to the Cuillin Munros which will be coming out in 2026. In the long term, I plan to produce a large, "coffee table" type book about the Cuillin, a combination of epic photos and interesting tales. Much of the winter will be spent weather-watching, picking ideal days for photography. Typically, with a promising forecast, I will be up early and be on the ridge for sunrise but best of all are multi-day trips. Last winter, I walked around the coast then had a bivi on the summit of Sgùrr na Stri in deep snow. Night time photography under the stars with views down to Loch Coruisk and across to the Cuillin Ridge was pretty special.

High above Coir' a' Ghrunnda is a small cave by the bealach between Sgùrr Sgumain and Sgùrr Alasdair. In summer it can be a damp, drippy, and midge infested but in winter it can be transformed into a fairy-tale spectacle. Icicles hang from the roof, snow covers everything, the sun will rise over towards Sgùrr Dubh Mòr and photos can be taken from the luxury of your sleeping bag. It's a venue I often visit and Bridgette refers to it as "our spare room."



Sgurr Sgumain bivi cave, “our spare room”

Work and play are very much a fusion with little separation. Recently, a client and I were enduring torrential rain and high winds as we ascended Sgùrr a' Ghreadaidh. The client asked what would be my ideal day off. My reply was that I'd be high on a peak for sunrise. The next day was meant to be a rest day but the lure of a good forecast proved too much and I was up by the Inaccessible Pinnacle for dawn.

Relaxation and leisure will also be Cuillin-orientated. Bridgette and I might walk down to the beach for a walk, coffee on the campsite, possibly a kayak trip on Loch Brittle where we might see dolphins and seals, or white-tailed eagles soaring overhead.

Bridgette is an artist who works with locally gathered seaweed so a beach walk, whilst rest for me, is really work for her. It's rare for me to leave Skye and Bridgette jokes that I have to be dragged kicking and screaming across the bridge.

Life in the glen may not be perfect and certainly wouldn't be for everyone, but for us it feels like we are living our dream. It is a binary thing split between a super busy summer and a more relaxed rest of the year. Work,

rest and play are all closely linked into a seamless lifestyle very much in tune with nature and the seasons.



Sgùrr Thearlaich, Sgùrr Alasdair and Sgùrr Sgumain seen from Sgùrr MhicChoinnich during an inversion

Adrian's website can be found at allthingscuillin.co.uk. Adrian is also an ambassador for keelaoutdoors.com and builttosend.com.