

How not to wear Crampons and other short stories from Scotland !

Allan McDonald

Given the pretty poor start to the winter season it was heartening to get a decent forecast for a change and so Neil (Metcalf), Leon (Winchester) and I arranged a wee trip up North for a long weekend.

We drove up very late on the Friday night intending to find somewhere to sleep on the way before finishing the journey to Fort William the following morning. At 1.00am just as we left the bright city lights of Glasgow Neil said he was tired so we began to think of looking for somewhere we could get our heads down. I knew we could bed down near Tarbet and so at 2.00am we unrolled our bivvy bags and other impedimenta outside the toilets which at dawn offered us a grand view of the loch [Lomond]. It was the first time I had enjoyed a bivvy with en-suite facilities it was just a pity they were closed though.

The rest of the journey to Fort William passed smoothly enough and there was hardly a cloud in the sky, Glencoe was stunning and we pulled over so that my companions could take some photographs of the Buachille while I watered the roadside heather!

A quick breakfast at Morrison's in Fort William saw us back at the car where we thought it best that Neil tried on the borrowed winter boots and crampons as if all else failed he could hire a pair in Nevisports. The boots went on ok however the crampons did require a bit of ingenuity and we had to point out that the points always face down towards the floor and not the sole of the boot and the two sticky out points at the back of the boot actually go at the front, they are called front points to help ! – after Leon and I had picked ourselves off the floor we decided it was best Neil hire a pair of step-ins !

We drove to Aonach Mor and cheated by getting the Gondola up to 2000ft as by now it was gone eleven. As we walked out of the top station a biting wind greeted us and suddenly a hot chocolate seemed most appropriate however we spurned such niceties and walked out towards the ski tows which the path (kind of !) follows towards the summit itself. We did intend to go climbing as the conditions looked most promising and were it not for some overbearing ski patrol lady telling us that our Ice Axes could be dangerous to the skiers we had to walk a bit further away from the ski slopes thus making the walk in a wee bit longer. We joked about impaling skiers on our axes, a la sheesh kebab to while away the steep slog up the hillside however we soon rounded a shoulder and as Ben Nevis came into view all such thoughts were forgotten (only briefly though!) as she looked truly alpine in her mantle of pristine snow.

Soon enough we left the horrible ski tows and found ourselves on the barren plateau leading to the summit of Aonach Mor a kilometre away and some six inches higher than the surrounding terrain. We found the (so called) Easy Gully which forms the descent and access to the climbs but given that the cornice was some twenty feet in width and that a huge crack was present right across it's length we decided to bag the two munro's instead. In continuing glorious sunshine we plodded across the plateau to the cairn on Aonach Mor and then down and up again to Aonach Beag before re-tracing our steps to catch the last Gondola down after a simply superb winters day out.

The ski company were taking advantage of the great weather and had laid on a tempting barbecue and so Leon enjoyed a weight watchers [not !] Venison burger and Neil had a frozen veggie one ! We all had a much needed beer and made our way to Bank Street Lodge (recommended !) in the thriving metropolis that is Fort William.

The next day we had a (Leon) alpine start and left the lodge at 10.15am to head for Ben Nevis in again fantastic weather with not a cloud in the sky.

The path up the Allt a Mhullin is now much improved and we arrived at the CIC with not only dry feet but dry throats due to the searing heat. Whilst working our way through a late lunch (It had gone 1.00pm by now) we chatted to a Scotsman who suggested Ledge Route (Scottish Grade II) as a feasible project given the fact that we had not bought any harnesses, ropes or other heavy things. I had my mind set on another good walk though allowed myself to be persuaded into doing the climb and I was glad I was as the next couple of hours were amongst the finest I have enjoyed in the mountains to date.

We had a somewhat inauspicious start as soon as Leon stepped on the snow he found a rather large hole nearly disappearing to the waist which lightened the mood.

The climb began up some averagely steep snow before breaking out of the gully to follow a wide ledge which led to another steepish snow slope and then another ledge [there is a pattern developing here !] which we followed till we landed on a superb ridge. The views revealed to us on attaining the ridge were simply amazing as one could look out across a sea of peaks as far as Skye and the higher we climbed yet more peaks showed themselves to us. The climb was little more than a snowy scramble but incredibly airy and all too soon after a final steepening we landed on the summit plateau to see the Mamore's and the peaks of Glencoe glistening in the mid afternoon sunshine. We espied other parties on Tower Ridge which looked truly Alpine, voices drifted across from unseen climbers on other climbs and the whole spectacle was magical in the extreme. The wind picked up as we made our way to the summit and once attained I sat down for a bite to eat and a coffee while waiting for my fellow mountaineers. Snow Buntings danced over to me in the hope of some morsels of food but they should know better as I was ravenous though they did seek solace from another party who gave them some sausage roll !

After a brief walk down the wrong path we eventually found the right route down to the CMD arête and then we dropped down a very steep slope into Coire Leis and back to the CIC where we re-grouped and walked out after a magical day.

After such a day it is, as I understand, a club tradition to indulge in an 'of the hill pint' and so we did in a cracking pub [Grog and Gruel – recommended !!!] where we resisted the temptation of solids and stuck to the beer, well several actually and some whisky, before getting back to the lodge for our tea and some much needed sleep.

See the photos using the link below

www.gwydyrmc.co.uk/photos/BenNevis