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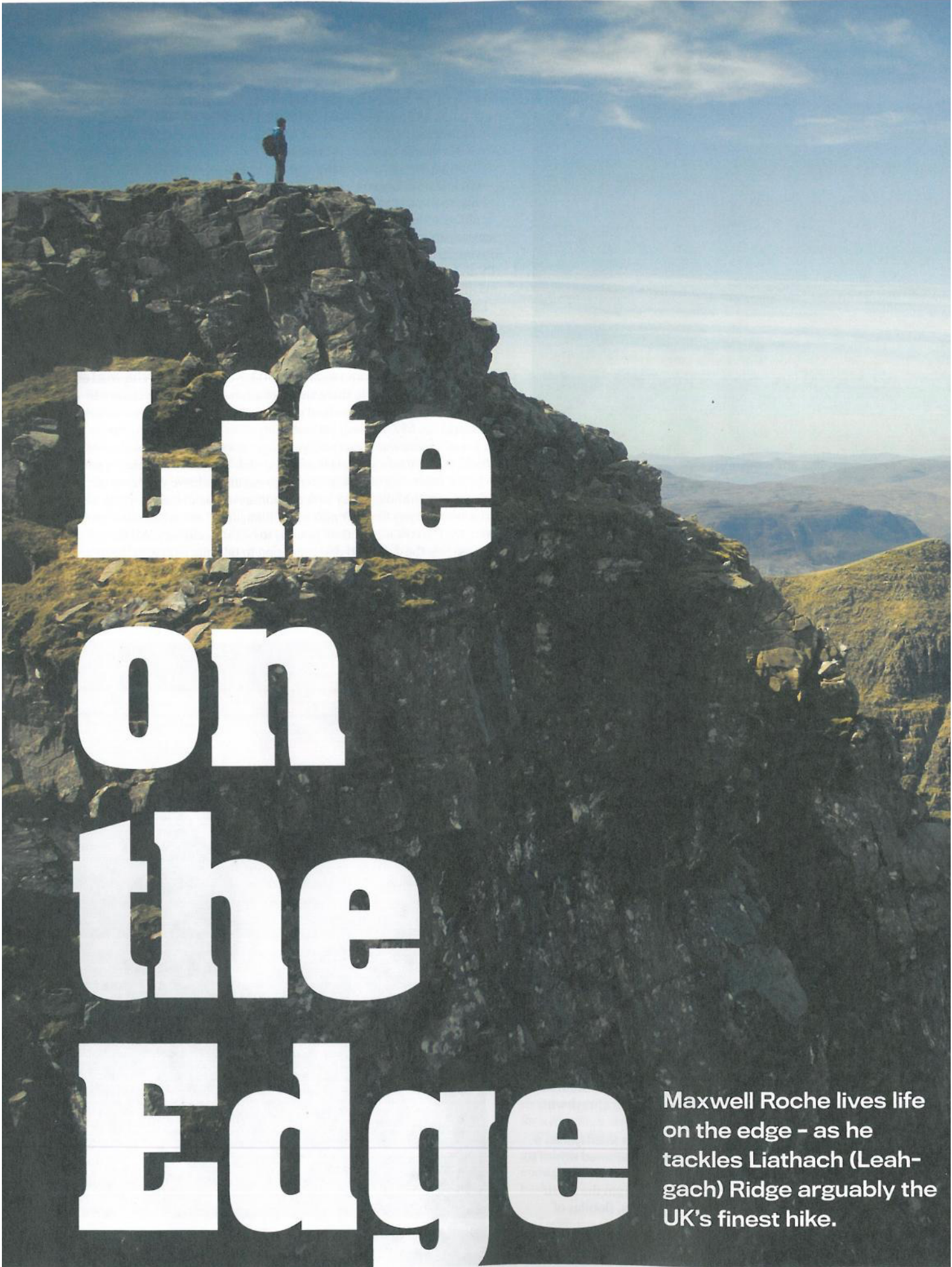
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# Life on the Edge

Maxwell Roche lives life on the edge - as he tackles Liathach (Leahgach) Ridge arguably the UK's finest hike.



## Words & pictures

Maxwell Roche

**A**

Are you a drinker with a hiking problem? Well, then look no further than a weekend at The Torridon Hotel (home to the world's finest whisky bar) and a traverse of the neighbouring Liathach Ridge.

"That'll be eight pound and forty nine dear," says the old lady behind the counter as she stretches out her wrinkly digits with a flourish. The pinging noise made by the old fashioned cash register seems to trigger my friend Chris's memory. "Oh" he says, "I almost forgot. Could I have a bottle of sun cream too please?" The lady's eyes shift toward the ceiling quizzically, before settling back on Chris. With an apologetic tightening of her moustachioed mouth she replies "I did buy a box laddie, but that was back in nineteen-ninety-three, and it's long gone off since." As Chris and I step out of the Torridon General Store, and into the scorching sunshine on the afternoon before our hike, we begin to realise how uncommonly lucky we've struck the North West Highland weather.

Liathach (which translates as "The Grey One" in Scottish Gaelic) stands with an aura of impregnability 1,055 metres above Glen Torridon in the remote North West Highland region of Wester Ross. Research ahead of our trip had uncovered multiple sources professing it to be a mountain whose grandeur could not be rivalled by any other in the British Isles. With an ascent profile of 1,326 metres, the 11.5-kilometre hike along its tortured ridge, which involves the scaling of two Munros (283 separate Scottish summits over 3,000ft/914m listed by mountaineer Sir Hugh Munro between 1856 and 1919), is ranked not only among the most prodigious in the UK, but also among the hardest and most strenuous. My good friend Chris and I set out to attest the rumours.

"Aye now this is no monstrous brute" I overhear the barman say as we settle ourselves into wingback armchairs at the Torridon Hotel and sit gazing, open-mouthed, at the hundreds of bottles of malt whisky that adorn the wall behind him. A mounted stag's head protrudes from the oak boards above the door, and it's glass eyes look disturbingly alive as they reflect the dying embers of the evening fire; I avert my gaze toward the clock, it's striking midnight. The barman



salutes the man with whom he's been conversing and harks in our direction "After a nightcap are we lads?" "Yes... something like that," I reply "In fact we wondered if we could fill our hipflasks. We're off up the mountain tomorrow and we need something to wash down our sandwiches when we reach the summit." The barman's eyes light up and within seconds he's winding the cork out of a bottle and pouring us two measures. "As I was explaining to that gentlemen," he says gesturing across to the man at the other end of the bar who's raising his glass toward us and looking a bit squiff, "This is a whisky that'll get you up the hill and down again. It's a wee bonfire in your mouth." Chris and I look at each other sideways and grin... our luck is in! "Would you like to sample a few different drams gents before you fill your flasks?" says the barman looking suggestively toward the tower of twinkling bottles. "Why not," says Chris who's glass is already empty, "What would you recommend?"

It's 3:00am and Chris and I are donning the last of our equipment. A number of stars can still be seen glinting in the half-light against a deep purple sky. Eerie clouds are stretched across the moon like a scene from one of those T-shirts worn by heavy metal enthusiasts. We shoulder our packs, lock the car, and stride up the start of the path at Coire Dubh Mòr. Thankfully our bellies are already full with cold haggis, black pudding and tattie scones left out for us by the hotel staff. They must have known that after an hour sampling Scotland's finest malts, and less than two hours kip, we'd be requiring a

little something to steady our heads, and settle our stomachs. Needless to say we look toward the imposing silhouette of the mountain, which appears near vertical from the roadside, and begin our Highland campaign with gratitude in our hearts.

We've been walking for two hours now, back and forth along the Coire Dubh Mòr valley footpath, and we're already lost. According to the guide book the safest and most direct route up the mountain starts below the south face, and follows a well-trodden and impossible-to-miss cobble stone path to the ridge crest. Naturally though we'd decided to forgo that option in favour of an alternative, described in the guidebook as "a hard-to-recognise route but far more exciting". Lamentably for us the former was proving true and the latter less so. As the sun begins to throw it's first golden lances toward the highest peaks, and the few remaining clouds burn asunder, we give up looking for a path, hastily convene, and decide on a more spirited course of action. We pick a makeable looking line up between the sandstone buttresses on Liathach's east face, around its subsidiary peak of Am Fuar-Mheallan, and toward the summit of Stùc a Choire Dhuibh Bhig (where the famous ridge begins).

"Chris!" I shout for the third time with no response "It's safe. Come up now mate!" We're nearing the first summit and what has been a pretty steady scramble up tussock slopes and scree, is now becoming a steeper and more serious affair. I'd volunteered to reccie the previous section over a small rocky outcrop, and communicate my findings from

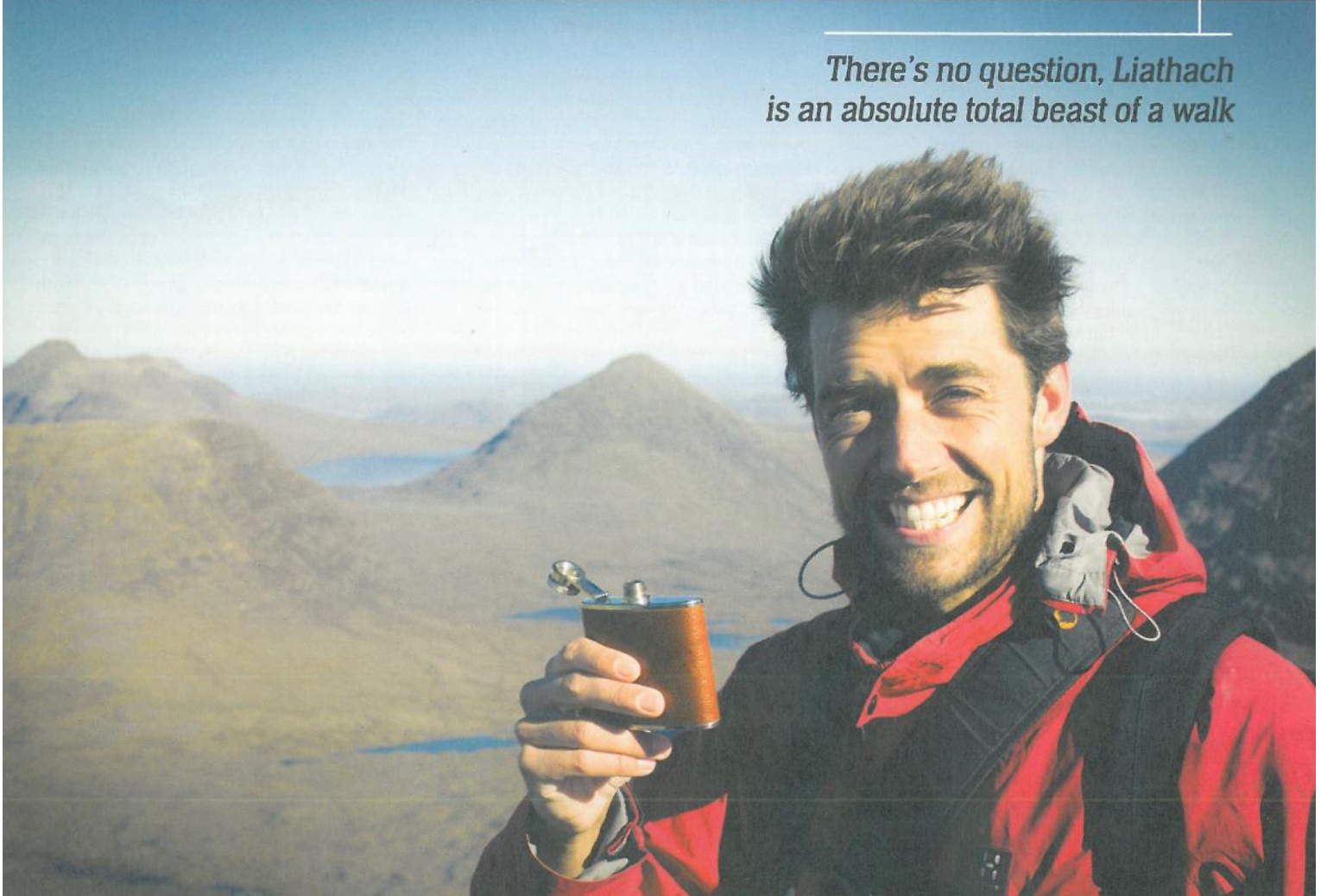
the top. Unfortunately my encouraging calls are now being uselessly swept away down the valley on siphoning winds. Luckily however, just as I decide to set about descending, Chris's hooded head pops over a rock and into view. We negotiate the final hundred metres of sandstone scree together and by 7:00am we're standing at 915 metres atop Stùc a Choire Dhuibh Bhig, the easternmost vertebrae on Liathach's reptilian spine. Having earned our first cause to celebrate we snatch the hip flasks from our packs and take a few warming swigs. As I enjoy the recognisable progress of the fiery earthen liquid down my neck, I look west toward Beinn Eighe, another esteemed mountain of the region. In stark contrast to the neighbouring red and chocolate sandstone peaks of Liathach, it is capped with 500-million-year-old Cambrian basal quartzite which shines metallically like a freshly polished trophy in the morning light. We each take a second swig from our hip flasks, indulge in a small chunk of cheese and feeling small below the red striated claw-like form of Liathach, forge onwards.

After a further three hours of glorious progress the sun is fast reaching its zenith, and so are we. Spidean a' Choire Leith at 1,055 metres, Liathach Massif's highest point, and the first peak on the ridge to hold Munro status, defiantly dominates the landscape ahead. With unseasonably light winds and pristine cloudless skies we have been scrambling steadily across the steep scree and boulder covered terrain with ease and without impediment. The serrated and



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*There's no question, Liathach  
is an absolute total beast of a walk*





barbarous crest along which we've travelled can now be seen clearly stretching out behind us all the way to our starting point at Stúc a Choire Dhuibh Bhig. Visually however, the main reward does not present itself until we've gained the summit cairn. It is not until then that we are gifted with an extra 180 degrees of prodigious loch-strewn panorama. Before us now stretches the final fingers of the Scottish mainland. The ancient denuded landscape, sculpted by the alluvial and glacial ravagings of millennia can be seen reaching ardently out toward the horizon, before giving in and sliding beneath the Atlantic. "Could there be a better backdrop for a banquet?" I ask Chris. Not likely we both agree, and set upon our ham sandwiches with gusto.

Between us and Mullach an Rathain, at 1,023 metres, and the second of Liathach's Munros, now stands what the guide book reports to be the biggest challenge of the day; a series of jagged and notorious pinnacles called Am Fasarinen (The Teeth). Ground that is severe enough to result in such tragedies as have sadly befallen hikers on Am Fasarinen over the years seems worth avoiding, especially after a few too many draughts from the hip flasks, so we clamber tentatively over the first couple of airy and exposed pinnacle tops before opting to descend to "the easy route", a narrow goat track that circumnavigates the needle-sharp summits. Unfortunately however, the goat track proves even more exposed than the tops themselves. In places, the path is often not wider than 30 centimetres and is subject to much erosion and falls away vertically all the way to the glen 1,000 metres below. This

section of the climb is certainly the most committing; with no descent options to speak off we have little choice but to see it through. As luck would have it though, Chris owes me one, so I decide he is to be the guinea pig on this and I send him ahead to test for any loose sections of path and so on. This he does with style, and fortunately, without incident. Good man.

As we round the last pinnacle and gain the ridge once again, the gigantic sweeping slopes of Mullach an Rathain, and the dusty path that lead to its apex, come into view. The relaxed angle at which it rises, and the many colours that drip down and mix upon its smooth terrace, remind me of a painter's pallet held in readiness before the view beyond. The changing tableau also brings with it a change of pace. The path widens and jagged boulders become smooth compact shingle allowing for easier progress. We take a long draft from our water bottles (and a wee nip from our hip flasks) and revel in the prospect of our final ascent. We gain the summit of Mullach an Rathain at 2:00pm, after nine and a half hours on trail.

From Mullach an Rathain all that remains is the steep and lengthy descent back to the glen. The trail proves to be a bit of a knee-buster, zig-zagging unpredictably on uneven ground but its early stages do offer a small consolation in the form of a perfect convex ridge - a ridge that gives way to perhaps the most delectable view of the day; Loch Torridon at high tide calm and mirror-like, the sun hanging pendulously low in the afternoon sky, and the hotel now in sight, nestled amid pine trees at

the water's edge. Two and a hours later we're to be found slumped once again in the wingback armchairs of the Torridon Hotel whisky bar, nursing and nosing two shapely Glencairn glasses, and recounting our adventures emphatically to the hotel staff. It's certainly a hike at the end of which a little bit of luxury is well deserved.

There's no question, Liathach is an absolute total beast of a walk, perhaps not in distance but in terms of the continued severity of terrain both on the way up, and on the way down. In fine weather I think it's perfectly possible for any wholehearted hiker of stout persuasion. In winter though, or in much less than perfect conditions, I'd recommend approaching it with caution. We were lucky enough to enjoy some of the best weather in Scottish history during our climb, but if the clouds had rolled in, as they often do, and visibility had decreased, I worry that with no easy opportunities to retreat things could get ugly for all but the most experienced mountaineers. That being said, the cause of such trepidations i.e. the sustained exposure experienced on a ridge walk is also its most thrilling characteristic. When the majority of your journey is spent so high above the landscape, the majority of your journey is also spent in the company of a sweeping magnificent panorama. This unique uninterrupted perspective, afforded by the Liathach Ridge Traverse, is what makes it, in our opinion, a compulsory excursion for all UK adventurers, and perhaps the UK's finest hike.

**For more information on whisky tasting and where to stay please visit, [thetorridon.com](http://thetorridon.com)**

