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ISSUE 135: MAY | JUNE 2018 £4.99

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SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

PHOTO: ANDREW J. COOPER

LIATHACH RIDGE

THE UK HIKER'S HOLY GRAIL?

Maxwell Roche heads to Scotland's north west to discover whether or not the Liathach Ridge Traverse deserves the fervent praise lapped upon it by all who have been before.



The time read 3am as Chris and I donned the last of our equipage. Stars glinted in the half-light against a deep purple sky and eerie clouds stretched across the full moon like a scene from one of those t-shirts worn by heavy metal enthusiasts.

Our bellies were already full, despite the unsociable hour, with cold haggis, black pudding and tattie scones, left out for us by the hotel staff. They must've known that after an evening spent sampling Scotland's finest malts, and less than two hours kip, we'd require a little something to steady our heads and settle our stomachs ahead of our Highland campaign. So, with gratitude in our hearts, we shouldered our packs, locked the car, and started up the path from Coire Dubh Mòr.

Liathach (which translates as 'The Grey One' in Scottish Gaelic) stands 1,055m above Glen Torridon in the remote North West Highland region of Wester Ross. Multiple sources profess it to be a mountain whose grandeur cannot be rivalled by any other in the British Isles. With an ascent profile of 1,326m, the seven-mile hike along its tortured ridge is ranked not only among the most prodigious, but also among the most strenuous in the UK. My good friend Chris and I set out to attest the rumours.

By 7am, after a solid scramble up tussock slopes and sandstone scree, we stood atop Stùc a Choire Dhuibh Bhig, the easternmost vertebrae on Liathach's reptilian spine. Deeming our arrival sufficient cause to celebrate we dug out our hip flasks and took a few warming draughts. As I enjoyed the recognisable progress of the fiery earthen liquid down my neck, I looked west toward Beinn Eighe, another esteemed mountain of the region. In stark contrast to the red striated sandstone of Liathach, it's capped with 500 million-year-old Cambrian basal quartzite, which shone metallically like a polished trophy in the morning light. We each took a second swig from our hip flasks, indulged in an apple, and forged onwards.

The sun was fast reaching its zenith, and so were we. Spidean a' Choire Leith, Liathach Massif's highest point, loomed overhead. As we approached the summit the final fingers of the Scottish mainland became visible to the west. The ancient denuded landscape, sculpted by the alluvial and glacial ravagings of millennia, could now 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 asked Chris. Not likely, we both agreed and set upon ham sandwiches with gusto.

Between us and Mullach an Rathain, the final summit in the Liathach chain, stood what the guide book bills to be the biggest challenge of the day; a series of jagged and notorious pinnacles called Am Fasarinen (The Teeth). We clambered tentatively over the first couple of airy and exposed tops before opting to descend to ‘the easy route’, a narrow goat track that circumnavigates the sharp summits.

Unfortunately the goat track proved to be even more exposed than the tops themselves. In places the path, often not wider than 30cm and subject to much erosion, falls away vertically 1,000m to the glen below. As we rounded the last pinnacle and gained the ridge once again, the sweeping slopes of Mullach an Rathain, were revealed. The relaxed angle at which it rises, and the many colours that drip down and mix upon its smooth terrace, reminded me of a painter's pallet held in readiness before the uninterrupted view beyond.

After a knee-busting descent that lasted all afternoon we were fortunate enough to find ourselves slumped, once again,

in the wingback armchairs of the Torrindon Hotel whisky bar, nursing and nosing two shapely Glencairn glasses, and recounting our adventures emphatically to the barman. It's certainly a hike at the end of which a little bit of luxury is deservedly afforded.

The sustained exposure of the Liathach Ridge Traverse is certainly it's most thrilling characteristic. The chance to journey so high above the Highland landscape, for hour upon hour, and in the company of such a resplendent tapestretic panorama is what makes it, in our opinion, a compulsory excursion for all UK adventurers, and probably the UK's finest hike. **AI**

WHERE TO STAY

Maxwell and Chris stayed in the fantastic Torrindon Hotel (www.thetorrindon.com), where they gratefully made the most of the whisky bar. Alternatively, there are campsites near by, while the Torrindon Youth Hostel is another handy option.