

## THE SMC HUT ROUTE

By Alec Keith

FOR ALL its varied landscapes, and despite the efforts of Grieve et al (SMCJ, 1978, p227) Scotland has no definitive summer or winter outing to compare with the Alpine Haute Route. Such was the topic chewed over by Hamish Irvine and myself one Christmas Eve as we retreated from the Coire Cas car park, our attempts at climbing repulsed in a spray of gravel and small shrubs. Skiing, we decided, should be ignored, the snow too fickle, the province, after all, of the worms; and clearly it is no bad thing that the vibram-shod hordes do not have too many classic summer routes to churn up and bury under gas canisters and toilet paper. We gave up and wondered instead if the present shape of the Club (angular and stooped, with a discernible bulge at the midriff) had anything to add to its fine history of long days on the hills, and so it was that Hamish conceived the SMC Hut route.

It was a basic idea, the simple linking of the four SMC huts on foot by any reasonably aesthetic line. Obviously the huts were to be used, and the journey should take as little time as possible, each day leading to a new hut, though for reasons of human frailty the 73-mile stage from the CIC to the Ling could be split with a night at the Cluanie Inn, in keeping with the finest traditions. While countless variations are possible, the distances involved (the route described is 140 miles) mean that the shortest lines are to be preferred. Like any grand plan we agreed it should be done and then many months passed and the Hut route was spoken of only in moments of idle pub banter.

I made a tentative foray from the Ling in the gloom of the following November, but got no further than Achnashellach before a tendon in one of my knees complained. I hitched home with a clear conscience but was secretly relieved. A sharp exchange with Hamish revealed his unhappiness with my disloyalty, and it was agreed that this was to be a joint project. But I reckoned this pledge could be overlooked for a bit in the light of Hamish's next conception, a conception with a shorter and more predictable period of gestation.

In this window of opportunity I slunk guiltily into the Raeburn one Sunday early last May for a second try. The weather was forecast to be fairly settled but cold, and much snow still lay on the hills. Good

conditions, but I was nervous, unsure if my body was capable of four days' sustained effort without a good rest in between.

I'd not stayed in the Raeburn before; it's a typical committee hut, and its location doesn't inspire. The hut was empty, which was a problem for someone who sees flushing a toilet as a technical challenge, the frighteningly large gas cylinders meant that the cooker was out of the question; the water pump made a lot of noise but would only produce air; and the electricity tripped out at breakfast in the dark.

I was away shortly after five, trotting along the road towards Dalwhinnie, chilled by the morning air but happy to have started at last. The plan was to run a fair amount of the way, but my sack turned out heavier than expected, crammed as it was with a clutter of shoes, maps, bananas, cakes, pit and so on, and my jogging would fade into a painful thrashing motion after a few hours each day. Also there were a lot of bags of a horrible white powder which would no doubt have interested the Constabulary, but it was only an energy drink of uncertain flavour, slightly better swallowed than inhaled. I followed the track along the side of Loch Erich and made good time jogging in the sun to Culra.

On Ben Alder it was still more winter than summer, and I was lured off the Bealach Dubh path on to the Long Leachas ridge, kicking the odd step in hard old snow, topping out on the plateau just as a band of cloud blew over the sun and sat on the summit. As I dropped down to the Uisge Labhair and ran down to Loch Ossian my legs began to seize up and my movements became more sluggish. I stopped for lunch at the hostel with Tom Rigg, receiving an enthusiastic welcome from a puppy called Beinn Eibhinn and a more circumspect one from a stag called Windswept.

After cutting over a boggy shoulder on Leum Uilleum I came down to Loch Chiarain and managed a half-hearted trot down to the Blackwater Reservoir, kept going by the sight of the Buachaille and the Blackmount hills peering round Beinn a'Chrulaiste at me. The final treat was the low pass between the Blackwater dam and Altnafeadh, a real Slough of Despond in which I wallowed haplessly.

It was half past five when I reached Lagangarbh, finding the builders busy with Phase Three of the renovations. There were plenty of signs of their efforts as well as a large hole where the toilet block used to be. After a ritual meal of tuna and pasta I just managed to crawl upstairs to the bunks before falling asleep.

Tuesday was cold, windy, misty and unfriendly. But it was the easy day, the goal being the CIC, so there was time for a lie-in. I plodded stiffly over the Devil's Staircase in drizzle, to indulge the previous day's food fetish (half a chicken) in Kinlochleven, creating an unnecessarily heavy pack for the rest of the day with other, additional goodies. The route was due to cross the Mamores to Steall then go over the Ben to the CIC, but the snow on the higher slopes was going to be pretty icy and my running shoes were a bit

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inadequate for that and yes it was still very windy . . . Looking back it was the right decision, although an unsatisfactory one. I sneaked round the Mamores on the West Highland Motorway which took me to an unavoidable tea-stop at one of the Glen Nevis cafes. The youth hostel track up to the Halfway Lochan was as tedious as ever, and great blasts of wind tore down the Allt a' Mhuillinn on the traverse round into Coire Leis. Hadrian's Wall appeared briefly through the murk, icy and complete.

The midweek section of one of our kindred clubs (which can remain anonymous for the usual fee) was in residence in the CIC, including in their number the Hut Guest from Hell, whose activities dominated the hours ahead. His climbing companion freshly choppered off the Ben, the Guest rapidly reduced himself to a state fit for admission to the Belford on a mixture of (other people's) drinks and it was midnight before his rantings turned to garglings and his lights went out. The night was made complete when my mantelshelf on to the top bunk went horribly wrong and I plummeted shins-first on to the wooden frame of the bunk beneath.

After these excitements I slept in on Wednesday, woke, panicked, and shot out of the hut shortly after eight for the next leg, a 33-mile flog to the Cluanie Inn via Banavie and the Caledonian Canal towpath to Gairloch. I eluded a pack of baying dogs while passing through some private-looking grounds in Achnacarry on the way to Loch Arkaig, then followed a vague path up the Allt Dubh, passing a Geal Carn on its east, then going down to another path by the Allt Ailein. My body ground to a halt up here, afternoon nausea caused by a powdered drinks' overdose on top of weariness and a general lack of inspiration. I sat down and thought about being sick. In retrospect any true entrepreneur would have dug in and waited for the arrival of the rescue teams and some cheque-book-waving journalists. Meandering on, mind elsewhere, I fell off the path and tumbled into a bog; thus refreshed I cantered down through forestry to the bridge over the Garry at Aultnaslat.

The weather's foggy ambivalence began to clear now, hazy sunshine peering through, and my mood improved too. After a mile on the road, a path by the Allt a' Ghobhainn took me out of Glen Garry and over into Glen Loyne where there was a big and still and deep river to cross. A pull up steep grass led to the old road and I jogged down at about six o'clock to the Cluanie, which sat in pleasant evening sun, surrounded by a patchwork of green and white hills.

Staying in the hotel was an unaccustomed luxury, and it is easy to see why this lifestyle appeals to Club members both past and present; we younger ones of course would quickly become outsized and indolent if such pleasures were afforded to us on too regular a basis. My aching body enjoyed the comforts of a bar meal, a hot bath, and a soft bed. Sadly it was all over by six as Friday was to be a long day, 40 miles over fairly rough country. From the moment my feet touched the ground it was all pain; it was clear that there was no bounce left and that a day of attrition lay ahead.

I passed by Alltbeithe then headed west to Gleann Gaorsaic and down into Glen Elchaig. It was a clear and cool spring day and I watched wisps of mist being teased off the tops of Beinn Fhada and A'Ghlas-bheinn by a strong north-easterly wind. From Carnach a good path took me over between Faochaig and Aonach Buidhe to Maol-bhuidhe bothy for a lunch of the last of the Dundee cake.

The generally mindless content of the entries in the bothy book indicated that, with the increase in the number of people enjoying the freedom to roam these days, there is a correspondingly greater number of extremely sad people in the hills; by the time I had circumnavigated Beinn Dronaig there was one more. I squatted on a tussock in the middle of a bog near Bearnaid, gripped by an energy burnout, strength sapped by the wind, listlessly recalling the tale of a small group of soldiers from colonial days who were surrounded and vastly outnumbered by a ferocious and extremely agitated Enemy. Prospects were grim. A frightened private (let him be called 'Perkins') asked his commanding officer (let him be called 'Sir') 'Why us, Sir, why us?' To which he received the answer, 'Because we are here, Perkins, because we are here.' Mallory wasn't so far off the mark, really. Thus comforted I walked slowly on past Bearnaid bothy, up the hillside behind it, and down the other side to splash through the Carron at Achnashellach.

My mood swung back now; it was in the bag. I almost revelled in the grind up from the station to Coire Lair, watching as the evening sun picked out every detail on the hills around me, ignoring my poor battered feet. The bealach between Sgurr Ruadh and Beinn Liath Mhor appeared at last and Torridon spread out ahead, colour fading in the calm of advancing darkness. I stumbled down the last miles to the Ling at about nine, shattered but satisfied. The quality of my celebratory meal of soup and rice left something to be desired, but it no longer mattered. The night was restless, my muscles taking their revenge with some acute cramp attacks. Next day was hot and joyous in Torridon and I made my way back to my car at the Raeburn by bus, train, hitching and bicycle, ready for the weekend's trip to Skye.

The future of the Hut Route is uncertain now, as the Huts sub-committee ponders how to extend its empire. The Hon. Secretary appears to have ignored my suggestion to make a bid for the Cluanie, so the Hut Route may shortly require an extension.

And Hamish? After some cursings he duly abandoned wife and wean a few months later (only temporarily, of course) to complete his own Hut Route, a New, Improved and undoubtedly Better Hut Route; but that's another story.

THE READER may find it difficult to read in the margin.

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