

The Clachaig Clamber

Any route that starts and finishes at the Clachaig Inn must be a good route, or so my reasoning went. Okay, so the start is a bit brutal – 2500 feet of scree, rocks and dirt in about a mile- but after that its flat for a couple of miles. Except that it isn't. After all, Aonach Eagach does mean notched ridge, and those notches don't make for care-free running, but they do make for a sensational start: running the wall of Glenoche. And then, there's the continuation over a Chailleach to the Devil's Staircase – a little trodden delight, an interlude before the main course.

Of course this can only be the Buachaille, an incomparable mountain that stands proud of the moor, and on that day, with rock buttresses highlighted by late evening sun, it stood resplendent against the darkening sky. Rain threatened then poured. I didn't know the scrambling route up Lagangarbh buttress but followed my nose in the pouring rain, the mists swirling all about. By the summit I was cold and wet. By the end of the ridge I was colder and wetter still, and a soggy rat emerged on to the road in Glen Etive to be eaten alive by voracious wee beasties. Dinner was a somewhat perfunctory affair given flavouring by a swarm of the black devils in the hastily prepared Smash. Gloves, balaclava duly donned against the infidels, I forded the river to savour the delights of vertical tussocks in the dark whilst mounting the diretissima on Beinn Mhic Chascaig. Only my trusty poles prevailed to propel me up this slope of untold terrors, and after that anything seemed easy – that is until I followed my nose once too often and ended up crag-bound East of Meall a Bhuiridh, dithering in the dark as I sought away down. To and fro I went until my nose smelt out the right course to the heather of the moor.

And so to the flatlands where legs can run and minds can wander without fear of falling. Then its up, up and away on another big climb to another Aonach Eagach- this time a rather less fearsome wall that leads to Stob Ghabhar. Stupidly I opted for another diretissima – again with tussocks galore and an impending wall of slabs and tussocks that is Meall nan Eun. At 5am it was not welcome, although I could not fail to be struck by rising above a sea of swirling mists, as the sun strikes the myriad of twinkling lochans that define the great moor of Rannoch.

The rest I knew well – a switchback of stone strewn ridges that culminate in the fine East ridge of Starav – before that 3500 foot descent from the heights of Starav to the steamy forests below. I was broken by the brutality of the slopes, so that I couldn't even jog up the gentle inclines of the forestry track. Strange as it may seem, I was forced to enjoy the day, focussing less on speed and more on just being part of what is truly 'the great outdoors'. There's no people, few tracks, no habitation and no roads – just sea, mountains and me. Up, up, up to the top and down, down, down to the next pass. That's the way it goes, albeit slowly. The ground is very rough hereabouts – crags punctuate knee cracking slopes of scree, tussocks and boulders – that is until the final headwall of Bidean rears up alarmingly, crowning everything around.

From there its down over the Queen of the Glen – Stob Coire nan Lochan – and a final jog up to the beckoning haven of the Clachaig and a most well deserved pint. Cheers!