

MAGICAL MOUNTAIN MOMENTS

THE ISLE OF SKYE

We four (Jess, Val, Kathy and myself) had “done “ Arran, enjoying a full fortnight of gloriously sunny, dry, warm days, totally inconsistent with the island’s normal weather. As a result we climbed every peak, walked every ridge and valley and visited the stately home of the laird. As we approached the island on the ferry in thick mist the uniformed gentleman on the pier was shouting “Have your pear dewes ready please”. We left, again in a mist and could be forgiven for believing that it was in fact a mystic, not a real island, especially remembering the unusually fine weather which we had enjoyed.

The following year we set our sights on another mystical island, with, a world wide reputation and an even more demanding programme of climbs to be ticked off. The Black Cuillin is reputed to be the best British equivalent to an Alpine Ridge on offer and we were to be a larger party of six, adding Ray (police cadet) and Bette (a policewoman).

We had booked the cottage of Mistress McKay at Dunvegan, but unforeseen domestic problems reduced the party to just Ray and myself.

On the way through Scotland we stayed the night at a cottage on Lochleven and the following day climbed a direct route to the summit of Sgur nam Frannalch (3168ft) and onto the Aonoch Eanoch Ridge as far as Am Bodach.

Skye, unlike Arran, came up bright and clear out of the sea and after a days rest we were ready to set about exploring the Ridge of the Black Cuillin. After traversing a couple of sections of this dramatic ridge we had a very long last day from Sgur nan Gobhar to Sgur Dearg (3206ft) to stand at the base of a legendary rock climb, The Inaccessible Pinnacle.

The West Route to the summit was graded as Difficult, but I was wary, as most climbers were of the opinion that Scottish grades were a little higher than those further south. The cold grey gabra was a delight to handle and, quite honestly, I cannot remember any details now of the climb, except of course, that I found it exhilarating with the sheer drops to the sea beneath my feet. All too soon I was on the summit, making a sound belay and bringing up Ray.

We bathed in the gloriously hot sun and traced our route down to Glen Brittle via the stone shoot and Coire Lagan, whose dark waters shimmered in the heat and we promised ourselves a bathe on the way back.

The eastern ridge, our descent route, looked equally exposed and exciting, but was only graded as a moderate climb. I made a belay and Ray climbed down to make a first stance, warning me that many of the much used rocks were distinctly loose and unreliable.

I soon discovered for myself, how worn and loose many of the ridge rocks were and stopped to consider the situation. Below me was a novice climber, who would have to take the full weight of my body should I come off and in all probability would be dragged off too. I unclipped the rope and sent it down to Ray and climbed, with extreme caution, to join my companion. I then secured Ray for the second pitch and so we reached the base of the crags, after an equally memorable decent.

Almost half a century on, long after I had given my climbing ropes to an enthusiastic yachtsman in Suffolk, I read an article in which I was informed that the eastern route on the Inaccessible Pinnacle is hardly ever climbed these days as it is considered unreliable and a descent is normally achieved by an abseil.

We found the stone shoot gruelling and stripped of to plunge into the waters of the Coire which looked most inviting after such a hot day. The top 12 inches had been warmed by the sun but as we plunged deeper, the water was just short of freezing cold.

We were back at Glen Brittle Hostel as the sun was sinking after a magical mountain moment which had lasted 12 hours.
RS 17/01/07

Photo - Bob Stansfield - top of the Inaccessible Pinnacle on the Cuillin Ridge of Skye after a successful ascent of the western ridge.

