

Monsters of ROCK

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAN HALEWOOD; MARCUS MCADAM

THE JAGGED PEAKS OF THE CUILLIN RIDGE ON SKYE
PRESENT A FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE FOR **SIMON BIRCH** 



“WE BAGGED OUR FIRST MUNRO, FROM WHERE THE ENTIRE RIDGE CAME INTO VIEW AND WITH IT THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE THAT LAY AHEAD”



Previous pages: the notorious ‘In Pinn’, the only Munro whose ascent is technically classed as a climb. Clockwise from far left: Coir’ a’ Ghrunnda with Soay and Rhum in the distance; Simon on the ridge; Simon climbing Sgurr nan Gilleann; guide Alan walks a rare stretch of level ground, with Am Basteir top left and Sgurr nan Gilleann coming into view; Simon abseiling off the ‘In Pinn’



All right, I confess: after 30 hours of the most brutal climbing, scrambling and walking I’ve ever encountered, I’m battered and bruised – but not quite beaten. It’s a brilliantly sunny June afternoon and I’m perched high up on the fabled Cuillin Ridge on Skye, surrounded by some of the biggest and most dramatic mountains in the country.

The air’s crystal clear and I can see virtually all the summits that I’ve already climbed strung out along the length of the fiercely serrated ridge. Competing for my attention is the view over to the east as I can also see a vast swathe of the north-west coast of mainland Scotland from the Ullapool hills way up in the north to Ben Nevis way down in the south. Amazing.

The Cuillin Ridge is 11km from end to end, making it the longest mountain ridge in the UK and running along its scarily narrow spine are 22 separate summits, 11 of which are Munros. Most hillwalkers tick off these Munros in a series of there and back forays on to the ridge, but I’m climbing the entire ridge in one continuous lung-busting expedition. However, unlike some crazed super-humans who’ve run it in under four hours, I’m aiming to take just under 36

hours including a night sleeping out high on the ridge under the stars.

To give myself a fighting chance of nailing the route in one go, I’ve not only worked hard at getting mountain-fit, I’ve also hired the services of a guide, Alan Halewood, to lead me through the potentially lethal labyrinth of rock.

The action began early the previous morning when we headed out of the Glen Brittle car park to a rapturous send-off from skylarks singing high in a perfectly clear sky. We walked swiftly south along the coast path towards Coir’ a’ Ghrunnda and in less than three hours we’d climbed on to the ridge and bagged our first Munro, Sgurr nan Eag, from where the entire ridge came into view and with it the scale of the challenge that lay ahead.

I wasn’t worried, though, as I knew Alan would make sure that I didn’t come a cropper. Soon he was demonstrating his mountaineering skills and detailed knowledge of the ridge as we headed towards Sgurr Dubh Mor, which was the second Munro on our itinerary.

A massive lump of a mountain made up of a jumble of rocks and boulders, the summit of Sgurr Dubh Mor is notoriously difficult to find but

Alan niftily weaved his way through the mass of rock, tying me on to his rope as I climbed the first of what would turn out to be countless grade 3 scrambling routes.

From here we headed straight towards Sgurr Alasdair, at 992m the highest Munro on the ridge, which most Cuillin purists reach by tackling the notorious Thearlaich-Dubh Gap, a massive gash in the ridge which requires an abseil in and a tricky climb out. We gave this a miss and instead scrambled a long way down off the ridge, only to have a sweaty climb back up underneath Alasdair by way of the south-west traverse, a sneaky way of avoiding the gap, popping out on the summit by way of a short, sharp, scramble up a chimney.

By now I was really flying and lapping up what was turning out to be one of the most exciting days of mountaineering I’d ever had. Knowing that I was safe in Alan’s capable hands, I raced up and down the next Munro, Sgurr Mhic Choinnich, confidently taking all its climbs and abseils in my stride. Quite simply I felt invincible.

Not even the looming bulk of the infamous Inaccessible Pinnacle could phase me. An extraor-





“I SNUGGLED DEEPER INTO MY SLEEPING BAG AND WATCHED THE SUN DISAPPEAR IN A BLAZE OF GLORY BEHIND THE WESTERN ISLES”

Ready to hunker down for the night in their bivi bags, Alan and Simon watch the sun set with Sgurr Thuilm in the foreground

Dinary narrow fin of rock perched on top of Sgurr Dearg like some gigantic plume, the In Pin strikes fear into those hillwalkers who’ve never climbed before, as it’s the only Munro whose ascent is technically classed as a climb. In no time I was scampering up behind Alan as he climbed up the In Pin’s easier east face before abseiling off the steeper west face. Awesome.

I’d now got five Munros tucked under my climbing harness but still Alan kept up the pace as his aim was to bag another two before sun-down. The result was that we continually moved, stopping only to break for tea and a brew way down in Coire na Banachdich, which Alan knew contained the highest spring on the ridge as by this stage we were running worryingly short of water.

Re-energised and rehydrated, we climbed back on to the ridge for the final push of the long day just as the sun was starting to dip, bathing everywhere in a magical, golden light. With Sgurr na Banachdich and Sgurr a’ Ghreadaidh successfully bagged, we headed down to the An Doras bealach, where we were to spend the night, sleep-

ing out on the bare ground with nothing but a low, circular stone wall for shelter.

“Today wasn’t that difficult,” I said to Alan as we sorted out our kit for the night. “Just wait until tomorrow,” he replied with a sly grin, “today was just the warm up.”

And with that slightly worrying thought I snuggled deeper into my sleeping bag and watched the sun disappear in a blaze of glory behind the distant Western Isles.

Alan’s prophetic warning came true as no sooner had we got back on to the ridge the next morning when I abruptly found myself face to face with Sgurr a’ Mhadaidh, a snarling, wild beast of a mountain and my eighth Munro. In addition to its summit, alarmingly Mhadaidh has four vertiginous tops, all of which need climbing in a never-ending series of hairy, energy-sapping climbs and heart-stopping abseils.

But what makes Mhadaidh such a seriously savage mountain is its exposure, which is the most extreme and nerve-racking on the whole ridge. The only respite from the onslaught came while I waited for Alan to lead the way up a crag and I **D**

The bare tops of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh – the eighth Munro on the ridge



BEFORE YOU GO

Book

The definitive guidebook to the Cuillin Ridge is *Skye Scrambles*, published by the Scottish Mountaineering Club, £25. www.smc.org.uk

Guide

Simon Birch's guide on the ridge was Alan Halewood, of Climb When You're Ready. Prices start at £160 a day. Expect to spend two days and one night on the ridge. www.climbwhenyoureready.com

Another company offering guided traverses of the ridge is Go Mountaineering – see www.gomountaineering.co.uk. Hike Scotland offers one-week walking holidays on the island – see www.hikescotland.co.uk.

Kit

When doing the ridge in one go it's crucial, as far as possible, to take with you lightweight kit, such as the Alpine Attack 45:55 rucksack from Lowe Alpine – see www.lowealpine.com. The Infinity 300 sleeping bag and the Alpine bivi bag – both www.rab.uk.com – are also ideal.

Some guides recommend using scrambling shoes, but Simon found his Scarpa SL walking boots perfect. www.scarpa.co.uk

Accommodation

The bunkhouse at Old Inn at Carbost is the perfect base for your attempt. It costs from £17 per person per night, from March to end October, and ensuite double and twin rooms are available. www.theoldinnskye.co.uk

D could listen to the sound of cuckoos drifting up from Loch Coruisk far below.

More knee-trembling fun was had tackling all three of Bidein Druim nan Ramh's knobbly tops, which were only slightly easier than those of Mhadaidh.

Luckily there was a temporary reprieve from all the back-to-back climbing when we hit the relatively level ground that allowed us to walk to Bruach na Frithe, my ninth and easiest Munro for a much needed break. By this stage I wasn't feeling quite so invincible having been duffed up and pummelled by Mhadaidh, but with only enough time to wolf down another energy bar I was soon dangling from Alan's rope as we climbed to the summit of Am Basteir, the penultimate Munro.

It was now mid-afternoon and as we began the approach to Sgurr nan Gillean, my final Munro, I was seriously suffering. My body was getting ready to shut down, and having had to deal with such punishing exposure all day my head was totally fried. Willing myself on, I made a final push and reached the summit. Phew. "Well done," said Alan, shaking my hand. "There's a cold beer waiting for you down there," he added, pointing to the Sligachan Hotel far below.

And with that I began the long descent, carefully picking my way through the boulders. Battered and bruised, yes, but defiantly not beaten by the Cuillin. ■

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