

The Aonach Eagach

A classic day out on Glen Coe's mighty ridge proves this is a route everyone should tackle at least once in their life...



Words and photos
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In the frigid trench of Glen Coe, folk are waking up to a cold and gloomy day. But here on the summit of Am Bodach, Juggs and I are above the clouds. The first rays of the morning sun have illuminated the high mountains of Lochaber and we stand transfixed at the inconceivable beauty of these peaks seemingly adrift on an ocean of vapour.

Almost two miles distant lies Sgurr nam Fiannaich and we hope to be stood on her utmost inches later in the day. However, the gulf between us is occupied by the most celebrated arête on the Scottish mainland... the Aonach Eagach. Will Fiannaich's siren call prove to be a dangerous lure onto the icy rocks of the notched ridge? Only time will tell, though in the short days of winter, time is at a premium.

With great care we pick our way down Am Bodach's infamous bad step, though our entrance exam is soon forgotten as we ascend onto Meall Dearg, our first Munro of the day. Ahead we are confronted by a spectacle that knocks the clean mountain air from our lungs, a narrow ridge punctuated with towers and clefts. Its south side is sun-drenched and alive with colour, its northern aspect frozen in lifeless sterility. We exchange knowing smiles and giggle like

schoolboys as we unpack our harnesses, slings and karabiners.

Down we go, meeting a steep chimney that falls easily, eliciting a stream of superlatives without a trace of hyperbole; this is every bit as good as they said it would be. We are committed now and getting off is not an option. At times we are plunged into a low-vis deep freeze but soon emerge back into the blue, completely detached from civilisation in an authentic mountain heaven. On the brink of ecstasy we climb short walls, peer around frosty corners and float across a tightrope crest until we are stopped in our tracks. Barring the way are two rotten fangs which fall sheer into the

creamy opacity below... these are the notorious 'Crazy Pinnacles'. It's time to deploy the rope.

The holds dictate a traverse of the treacherous north side and I lead delicately on, draping slings over spikes as I go. I'm nervous, for the countless though unseen fathoms beneath my feet are keenly felt. Happily the difficulties are short-lived and once again we are striding with purpose, but there is a sting in the tail. Our way off the great pinnacle is covered in *verglas*. We abseil down and clamber over the final turret... Aonach Eagach is ours.

On the summit of Sgurr nam Fiannaich we shake hands and settle down to watch the sun sink over the hills of Ardgour. Soon it will be time to descend by torchlight, but first we will sit and reflect on friendship, adventure and a joy found only in the mountains. **T**

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