

THE WINTER TRAVERSE

12km, 3000m ascent, Grade IV ** 2/3 days**

Approaches and descents add 12km distance and 1000m height gain/loss.



It is usual to travel from north to south because the major difficulties can be avoided in this direction by abseil. The hardest sections of the ridge will be no more than grade IV, but most of the ground is grade II and III in both ascent and descent with dire consequences for a simple slip.

Speed will vary hugely depending on snow conditions, daylight hours and whether a set of footprints shows the way. Given a good forecast parties would be well advised to pack provisions for three days unless they know the route very well, know of existing tracks or are highly competent alpinists. With all the prerequisite planning and conditions in place the climb is a thoroughly absorbing challenge involving at least 10 abseils.

Equipment: One 50m rope, a small selection of pegs and nuts and plenty of abseil tat is needed. Take one ice hammer per climber, sharing both on just a couple of short sections. Bivvy gear will depend on many factors but remember that there are 14 hours of darkness in mid-January.

The major difficulties and abseils are as follows:

The West Ridge of Sgurr nan Gilleann

Abseil the lowest section down Tooth Chimney on the north side.

Am Basteir to the Tooth

Abseil towards Lota Corrie from the rift immediately west of the summit. Down climb to the Bhasteir Nick.

The Bhasteir Tooth

Return to the Bhasteir Nick and gain abseil slings in the cave at the top of Kings Cave Chimney by dropping through a small hole on the Sligachan side. If blocked a peg belay in the wall of Am Basteir allows Coire a' Bhasteir to be reached by a 25m abseil.

Traverse of Bidein Druim nan Ramh

Abseil from the north peak to the gap. The easiest line to the summit, in good conditions, follows snow covered slabs on the Harta Corrie side linked by short ice steps on the left (south) side of the face. Descend from the central peak and abseil into the next gap.

Traverse of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh

An easy 20m abseil descends the second top. The only good abseil from the third top is approached by descending 50m down a twisting gully at the western end of the south face. A good spike lies at the end of the fault above the final 15m wall.

The Inaccessible Pinnacle

The East Ridge (IV,4) is a heart stopping climb in full conditions. The south face is almost always dry rock but the crest can hide treacherous quantities of snow. The West Ridge is impossible if covered with snow unless the flake at 10m can be lassoed for aid.

King's Chimney

It can be hard to find the abseil point above the top of King's Chimney; follow the crest down eastward and slightly left from the summit for 60m. A 25m abseil from the large block above King's Chimney just reaches the upper ledge system that descends to Collies Ledge. From the bealach below, the ascent of Sgurr Thearlaich can be awkward.

The Thearlaich-Dubh Gap

Climbing the short side of the Gap will be technical Grade 6 in all but the most banked out of conditions. The top has been lassoed for aid in the past but is not easy. Most parties abseil into Coir a' Ghrunnda to avoid the difficulties. Avoid the temptation to return to Glen Brittle and complete the Traverse with a joyous romp to the summit dome of Gars-bheinn as the snow turns red in the sunset.