





THE NEW Cuillin

UNDER THE MAGIC SPELL OF WINTER, THE ISLE OF SKYE'S BLACK CUILLIN IS TRANSFORMED INTO BRITAIN'S OWN ALPINE RANGE WITH SCENERY TO MATCH ANYTHING IN EUROPE. HOWEVER, ITS COASTAL POSITION HAS CREATED A REPUTATION FOR UNRELIABLE CONDITIONS. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AWAY FROM FICKLE ICE LINES TOWARDS MODERN MIXED ROUTES HAVE TRANSFORMED THESE UNIQUE MOUNTAINS INTO A MAJOR WINTER CLIMBING DESTINATION.

MIKE LATES TELLS THE INSIDE STORY OF THE REBIRTH OF THE BRITISH ALPS.

Sifting through new Cuillin routes that Andy Nisbet had sent me to include in the next guidebook, I realised a whole lot of winter developments had been going on right under my nose. For over a decade I'd lived on the Cuillin's doorstep, had a few memorable adventures, but was still making lots of criminally-early starts over to Torridon or down to the Ben in order to get my fix of winter excitement. Meanwhile, a bunch of mainland raiders had added 30 new routes with apparent ease and consistency. Clearly I'd been missing a trick - but what was I doing wrong?

The way it was

Throughout the 'nineties, I'd waited patiently for ice to grow for 3 weeks or more into great immovable falls where my precious axes wouldn't touch rock and my drive-in screws wouldn't shatter the ice I was trying to climb. This was the world of Scottish winter climbing I'd been introduced to: weather watching, optimism, and a huge amount of patience. Eventually we would see ice formed continuously on one of the four famous Cuillin routes; *Waterpipe Gully*, *White Wedding*, *The Smear*, or *Icicle Factory*. Standing beneath a dripping apparition and an early return to the Sligachan bar was invariably the reward for our efforts. I began to accept and resign myself to the common perception that the Cuillin just wasn't suitable for winter games.

A different approach

Commitment to higher numbers of winter clients increasingly forced me out when I thought the Cuillin were 'out of condition'. I usually found quite the opposite, but put the quality more down to luck than anything else. Without realising it I soon built up a repertoire of reliable outings for different conditions and varied ambitions. With hindsight I can see that, no longer looking to climb a single objective, I had opened my eyes and used my imagination far more. For the first time in my climbing life, I was regularly relying more on my own judgement than on a guidebook grade and description.

Know your mentors

So who had been so active and what had they been doing? A small number of enthusiastic individuals with their different partners developing the majority of climbs is a pattern that repeats itself throughout climbing history and the Cuillin in winter is no different.

The two main players were Martin Moran and, a name new to me, Dave Ritchie. Dave has been prolific with more than 30 new Cuillin winter routes. Martin is an exceptionally fit and driven guy and currently one of the top Scottish winter climbers around. Although Mick Fowler had left his mark by climbing *Whispering Wall* (VI) and *Chock-a-Block Chimney* (V) with Paul Ramsden in 1999, he had been quiet by his own standards. Most significantly, they rarely seemed to have gone home empty handed.



THE SECRET IS TO GET UP THERE AND FIND GOOD CONDITIONS, INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR CONDITIONS TO COME TO YOU.

Where to play

A high percentage of development had been in the eastern Cuillin giants Clach Glas and Blaven. The car park can be reached in just half an hour from the Skye Bridge and the approach walks are short too. Every face now holds winter routes which is great news with aspect being so critical. Most cliffs can be clearly studied from the road and the huge steep corner of *Clough's Cleft* (V,6) had often caught my eye. Big ice often forms in the upper reaches so it was no surprise to discover that Dave had climbed it in 2000 and rates it as probably the best route he has climbed in the Cuillin.

Coire a' Bhasteir overlooking Sligachan is the most natural Cuillin winter corrie with westerly winds drifting in snow and plastering it to the steep walls. Martin had developed numerous routes on the Pinnacle Ridge faces of Sgurr nan Gilleann including a back-roped solo of *Forked Chimney* (IV,5) and I've even had success here myself on *Gingini Chimney* (VI,6). The North Face of Am Bastier is crisscrossed by loose basalt ledges and chimneys but Dave had gone exploring and found it far more suited to winter climbing than summer. I've repeated both *The Deadline* (III,4) and *Am Bastier Chimney* (IV,6) and can vouch for them having memorable crux pitches and a big face feel.

Six separate routes showed that Sgurr Thearlaich had clearly grabbed Dave's attention despite lying $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up the Great Stone Shoot. I finally made the effort during the winter meet this year and discovered the reason for going

so high straight away. Cemented chockstones, frozen turf and icy cracks gave great climbing on a new line that I annoyingly managed to leave out of the book. The following day Paul Cunningham and Charlie Hill confirmed the quality and added a direct pitch to Dave's very good *BC Buttress* (IV,5) which I also managed to forget!

Action time

After a summer absorbing all this new mixed climbing beta, I found myself looking at the cliffs in a different manner. Like a light bulb coming on, I realised that the Cuillin is a mixed venue and always will be. The secret is to get up there and find good conditions, instead of waiting for conditions to come to you. I was quite excited at the first sight of snow that year.

I very clearly remember the first time I put my new approach into action. I'd read accounts from many great climbers about the quality of *Slanting Gully* and in December 2004 I threw any remaining hesitation to the wind. The result was hours of engrossing mixed climbing and a top out on *Foxes Rake* in the dark; I was hooked. Ever since then, I've rarely found the need or desire to leave the island in search of winter fun; in fact my trips to Ben Nevis have become so infrequent that I may have to give my key to the CIC hut back.

A new era

Developments in mixed climbing have been phenomenal over the past decade in terms of tools, ambitions and achievements. These may have been slow to reach the Winged Isle, but leashless axes flew across the bridge in 2008 with the predictable increases in standards. As word has spread there have been Cuillin visits from a number of leading Scottish climbers; Guy Robertson, Mark Garthwaite, Pete Macpherson, Ian Parnell, Greg Boswell, Simon Richardson, and Iain Small.

Garth and Guy's ascent of the summer HVS *Dawn Grooves* at VIII,8 was a significant leap but currently the most sought-after prize is *Hung Draun and Quartered* (VIII,8). The line follows an outrageously overhanging line of chimneys at the right-hand side of Am Bastier's north face. Martin first climbed the line in summer 1996 at E3 and returned in late 2008 with Nick Carter when the many chockstones were verglassed solidly into place. Nick's blog records Martin saying 'harder than any grade 8 I've done'. Some armchair pundits considered the conditions as too black and unwintery. The second ascent was suitably white but less ice meant chockstones were loose and one eventually cut through a rope which seems to vindicate Martin's choice of conditions.

This new guidebook should generate interest in winter climbers of all abilities, and I look forward to climbing craic around the fire in the Old Inn at Carlost this winter. The area is so huge that I'm confident that we will still be enjoying whole mountains to ourselves, even after you've read this article. ►

PREVIOUS PAGE: A full Winter Ridge Traverse is one of the finest winter routes in the UK and a traditional Cuillin ambition but there is plenty more to do. Jamie Hageman looking to Am Bastier from Sgurr nan Gilleann. **JAMIE HAGEMAN THIS PAGE:** Mike Lates on the first ascent of *Gingini Chimney* (VI,6), an example of all too rare Cuillin ice. **MARK PRATT FACING PAGE:** Guy Robertson following pitch 4 on the first ascent of *Dawn Grooves* (VIII,8) on the north face of Sgurr MhicCoinnich. One of the toughest winter routes on the island and a pointer for future developments. **MARK GARTHWAITE**





Not knowing exactly what you'll find is one of the biggest attractions and challenges to the winter climber. Patterns do emerge though, and the Cuillin is no exception. Here are some of my personal rules of thumb.

Keep looking

I soon discovered the need to go high, which is pretty obvious really; you wouldn't expect to climb before reaching the CIC too often. On approaches, wet black rock can make your heart sink but the top 250m of the Cuillin sees dramatic variations in temperature and effects of the wind. Cloud-cover can work both ways; it may insulate and stop any freezing but just as easily can be building up a crucial layer of ice. Another factor is the huge variation with aspect which is really where the secret lies.

One of my finest examples of persistence was *Eilidh's Ceilidh* (V,7) in March 2008 with Pete Macpherson. The sun had got at all of the objectives we had considered, and spirits were low. Heading up the TD Gap Gully, I found the east-facing wall shadowy and still coated with rime ice. A crackline soaring up past a roof towards the top of Sgurr Alasdair suddenly fitted the bill perfectly.

Storms are good

Conditions build up very quickly in winter storms with a sea-level temperature below 6 degrees and north-westerly gales being ideal. There was no snow on the Tuesday before the 2011 winter meet but a 2-day maelstrom left no doubts about the Cuillin being in full winter garb by the Friday. One good friend often refers to this damp Skye snow as producing 'instant neve' on exposed areas. By contrast, the last 2 seasons both had periods of very cold weather that were also very dry. Without a thaw most of the snow blew off into huge drifts leaving fairly unhelpful conditions high up, but some unusual mid and low-level water-ice possibilities.

Enjoy the Ridge

'Experience of club members is that fairly easy excursions become major undertakings' wrote Bill Mackenzie in the 1957 guidebook. Traversing sections of the Cuillin Ridge, not just the whole thing, is allowed. I love it - give me a section of the Ridge under snow and I'm enthralled by the terrain and the logistics of staying safe. It's frequently scarier than climbing the routes, and completely absorbing. Summer route-finding difficulties are supplemented with a permanent need to reassess and alter techniques; move together, take pitches or abseil?

Traversing above the void can be terrifying and there are frequent opportunities to consider that alpine classic 'if I go off this side you jump off the other'. Anyone cynical about the alpine analogies made with the Cuillin probably hasn't been on the Ridge in winter. There are 12.5km of this type of challenge and it's never disappointing!

Mike Lates runs Skye Guides (www.skyeguides.co.uk) and is author of the new SMC guidebook *Skye, The Cuillin*. ■

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Travel

Roads, bridges, and causeways have made travel to the Isles very fast nowadays. Allow 2hrs from Inverness or Fort William to the Skye Bridge. Broadford is 10 minutes from here, Portree 40mins and Glen Brittle 50mins. Ploughing and gritting is good so snow rarely blocks the roads. Travel webcams <http://trafficscotland.org/lev>

Accommodation & food

The BMC hut www.bmc.co.uk in Glen Brittle is the cheapest, well situated accommodation. The Old Inn bunkhouse in Carbost www.carbost.f9.co.uk is open at weekends and more if demand justifies it. Self-catering cottages go for a snip at this time of year. Broadford and Portree are the 2 main centres and less

than half an hour from Sligachan. Both have bunkhouses, supermarkets, take-aways, and a selection of bars offering meals.

Season and weather

Any time from mid-October to mid-March when the sea-level temperature is below 6 degrees. Summit temperatures on www.mwis.org.uk are

useful. I try to blog conditions regularly www.skyeguides.co.uk. Sometimes temperatures do jump rapidly but those up for a big mountain adventure will always find the Cuillin obliging, snow or no snow. If the tops are really out of bounds the microclimates of Skye are likely to offer a dry rock climbing venue at Neist, Elgol or Kilt.



Recommended routes

Grade I *The North-East Ridge of Sgurr a Bhasteir*, 600m. Wind scoured, so hardens rapidly to give a long straight forward ascent from the Bhasteir Gorge to the summit at 900m. Views of *Pinnacle Ridge*, Am Basteir and the Tooth are stunning.

Grade II *South Buttress Gully*, 210m, Blaven. This huge hidden cleft managed to stay off everyone's radar until my birthday last year and what a present it was. An obvious dog-leg was used when the initial 30m ice pitch wasn't formed this season.

Grade III *Foxes Rake on Mhadaidh*, 300m. A long

mountaineering route rising across this huge North face. I've placed screws on this route more than any other in the Cuillin, possibly because it is such a reliable option. Normally snow with 2 pitches of ice through the steepest section. Descend the *Thuilim Ridge* (III) to regain Coir' a' Mhadaidh or continue to An Dorus and take a road hike (2km).

Grade IV,5 *BC Buttress on Thearlaich*, 110m. A short reliable buttress high on the mountain with 3 good lines all at similar grades. The line that I climbed was well iced up after just 2 cold days and had excellent protection, rock and turf. Adjacent gullies and routes

sound equally good. Abseiling back into the Stone Shoot is easy and gives the best descent and a chance to do more than one route in a day.

Grade V,7 *Eilidh's Ceilidh*, 50m, TD Gap Gully. I think this could become quite popular with the technical difficulty sustained throughout. I remember the moves as hard but 'all there' and Pete found plenty of gear. Traverse horizontally right before abseiling back into the TD Gap.

Grade VI,6 *Grand Diedre Direct*, 70m. This south facing summer classic won't be in condition often;

get there soon after a westerly storm. Pitch 2 is the crux, and the climbing is superb. Abseil from the normal anchors into the TD gap on both ropes and you'll nearly reach your rucksack.

Grade VIII,8 *Dawn Grooves*, 175m, Sgurr MhicCoinnich. Guy called me the evening after we'd climbed *Grand Diedre* and I confirmed that the rocks were plastered. He and Garth were on the Ridge by dawn next morning then abseiled to the foot of the best cliff in the Cuillin. 7 fun hours later Skye had its first grade VIII. A big storm is needed to bring this one into good condition.



FACING PAGE: Francis Blunt tackling *Am Bastier Chimney* (IV,6) a classic basalt fault typical of the mixed routes in the Cuillin. MIKE LATES **THIS PAGE TOP LEFT:** Mike Lates exploring new terrain on Sgurr Thearlaich, home to a good collection of mid grade winter routes including the excellent grade IV *BC Buttress*. SAM HALLIGAN **THIS PAGE TOP MIDDLE:** Simon Lane threading the Window on Sgurr nan Gilleann, one of the many famous features of the Cuillin Ridge. MATT BARRATT **THIS PAGE TOP RIGHT:** Sam Halligan & Tom Howard high on *South Buttress Gully* on Blabheinn, 'a reliable grade II cracker'. MIKE LATES **THIS PAGE LOWER:** Dawn rises across the south end of the Cuillin Ridge taken from the summit of Sgurr Sgumain. KARL DAVIES