

## Two (or Three) Days on Meagaidh

by Ruaridh Pringle

Let it never be said that Ollie is taciturn regarding pursuits of the boudoir. As his old grey VW Polo lurched onto the gravel of the Creag Meagaidh car park, I was beginning to feel I had been present, as a rather dumbstruck spectator, through the entire appalling, awe-inspiring range of his seemingly endless amorous encounters. To be fair the conversation was not entirely one-way (though my contributions were more defensive parries than anything else), but it soon became clear that for Ollie there was no concept or act which could not be embodied with startling vividness in a single crisp phrase, and I was soon relegated to the role of a rather humble protégé.

My dreams in the tent that night were of a disturbed and slightly sweaty nature, but with effort I managed to focus them on the spectacular view we had enjoyed on the journey up, of the currently visible comet: a bright diffuse ball which dwarfed the moon. Our plan had been to start early, but our night drive meant it would be eight before Ollie's prevarication's allowed us to begin the long haul up the railway sleeper path into Coire Ardair. To our dismay, the occupants of seven other cars had already beaten us to it. This was most unsporting - it was Tuesday, for God's sake: mid-week! We trudged into the inner coire intent on inspecting *The Pumpkin*, but as we approached one of the boulders beneath it, one of the pair already there literally sprinted up the slope to the climb's base. I was surprised when he didn't reinforce his territorial claim by urinating on it.

Only the first two pitches looked formed anyway, so we opted for a closer look at *The Wand* and *Diadem* - classic and beautiful grade V,5 and V,4 lines - and soloed up the easy snow and ice of The Sash to their base. *Diadem* looked good, but *The Wand* looked glorious: bristling with rimed organ pipes and sporting two huge, translucent green ice umbrellas.

The previous day I had inadvertently eaten a whole green chilli. It had ambushed me from the depths of a Chinese takeaway, leaving me speechless for ten minutes. Unfortunately, now was the time when the full gastric effects of this culinary booby-trap were to begin their manifestation, forcing Ollie to endure an unspeakable and malodorous ordeal - and then, to add insult to injury, to pass me toilet roll a sheet at a time. It was probably this which propelled him up the first pitch at such speed, but whatever the reason he led it in fine style for someone who had only ever led grade IV on ice before.

The second pitch was steeper and more sustained; finishing in a cave below the second ice umbrella - which overhung by an amazing seven meters. Ollie came up steadily, commenting on the exposure (which was pretty phenomenal), especially when he then led off, traversing round the umbrella's edge. I half expected obliteration as he collapsed it, but followed him through without incident. The pitch above him was a series of three delectable vertical ice walls - the last involving swinging from a small ice cave onto a free-standing icicle. We shook hands at the top, and then - because it seemed a shame to spoil a great day with a night-time epic - trotted back to the car-park.

Next day, and up to the coire, again just as late. *The South Post Direct* (V,4) this time, and for once we faced no competition. Ollie steadily led the first pitch of seventy degree ice, taking at least another hour to belay before bringing me up. I arrived to find him pinned, like some dementedly grinning Gulliver, amidst an explosion of rope stretched between no less than seven anchors, all apparently "crap". We moved together to the base of the next hard pitch - where to our joint dismay the chilli struck again, and I had to suspend myself on the rope for more undignified outpourings through the velcro'd flap in my home-made salopettes; which unfortunately, owing to a miscalculation on my part, was created rather too small for its intended function. Each sheet I was offered came with the words "I don't believe I'm doing this", followed by a pragmatic "well, when you've got to go, you've got to go".

The pitch was fairly steep and sustained, with some rotten ice. After it, came more easy ground up which Ollie led, until finally (for reasons known only to himself) he teetered up eighty degree cruddy snow-encrusted rock above the obvious ice-screw belay stance, just to clip in a friend so that I could enjoy ten precarious metres of unprotected downclimbing after retrieving it.

The top pitch was a good deal harder than I had expected. I found myself cranking up at least twenty metres of vertical ice, with only the occasional foot-hole with which to ease tiring muscles. The wrist-loop on my borrowed hammer wouldn't tighten properly: I had to take all the strain on my hand, and as I neared the top, my arm pumped out completely. I grabbed the shaft with my other hand and hung from it - ten metres above a solitary ice screw which had put a crack clear across the ice pillar it was embedded in - until I had recovered enough to swing the axe again. I resumed at a careful pace, resting where possible. The pitch was exactly one rope-length. This I discovered when pulling over the final bulge felt like lifting an elephant. The weather was turning very nasty, so I quickly bashed in a deadman and T-axe, and we made a run for the top.

"I have", observed Ollie, in the teeth of the gathering blizzard, "no compass".

I rummaged in my rucksack, quickly reaching a disturbing conclusion. "unfortunately - and this, I have to say, is frankly the pits - I have no compass either"

Ollie agreed that this was indeed most unfortunate.

"I really cannot explain such a monstrous oversight. I could have sworn that, as we departed from our belongings at the foot of the crag, we both had compasses".

Ollie agreed. Those meddling extra-terrestrials were clearly to blame, he said. Heaven knows what they had done to our bodies as well: for all we knew it might be Thursday and were both now pregnant. Compared with this possibility, descending safely from one of Scotland's most notorious navigational black-spots through a blizzard and white-out in the half hour left before darkness seemed a doddle.