

## Pastimes

By David Monteith

*"The car park's looking a bit full Monty."*

*"It is, and it doesn't help with all the construction works for the funicular adding to the scrum. Most of that crowd over there aren't skiers, they look as if they'll be heading for Sneachda."*

*"Yeah, and the usual wintry blast is coming down Coire Cas to greet us - wonderful, typical Cairngorm!"*

*"Just the ingredients for a classic winter day Steve! But I don't fancy queuing in this weather, how about your bit of unfinished business in Lochain? Its nearly thirty years since our little adventure."*

*"OK, I'm on. It's bound to be quieter, it's a longer walk!"*

*"Fine. We'll maybe just call in at the ranger hut to check the avalanche forecast and weather, just in case they've changed from last night's web predictions."*

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March 1972 was not a classic winter month for snow and ice climbing. Conditions were what I know now are euphemistically called 'thin'. In our innocence we had tried hard to decipher the radio 4 shipping forecast on the long drive up the old A9, but made little of it. We lacked understanding of the effects of tropical air, in numerous warm sectors, that had been stripping the cliffs of their potential build up of snow and ice. But we had blind optimism on our side, and after all March was officially a winter month.

Three of us had driven north from Durham for the weekend, to sample our first real taste of winter climbing. We had all been on the hills in winter; I had been on an ice cap in Norway; Steve had been to Greenland; we had both done grade I gullies. Bob, the third member of the party - he had been to the Alps! Together we considered ourselves ready and prepared for the great quest, little knowing or caring about wiser counsel or experience.

On the Saturday we had found our way into Coire an-t-Sneachda. The first route selected was "The Runnel", described in the Guidebook as straightforward and steep - it was steep if not straightforward, particularly the top exit chimney, but we climbed it in good time if not in good style. There had been only one other pair in the Corrie, it actually felt like a wilderness experience.

My trusty Chouinard Frost axe (with bamboo shaft) had performed well, and my new Salewa hammer (with short rubber coated handle) was, well, my new Salewa hammer - perhaps I should have gone for one of the longer, more traditional, North Wall jobs, like Bob's. Steve had read a magazine and been shopping; he was experimenting with an axe and ice dagger combination!

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*"It looks like Friday night on the M6 going into Sneachda. I think we made the right choice."*

*"Thank goodness, that wind's wild, but it should be reasonably sheltered in the gully. There only seems to be one pair ahead of us, let's hope they're going for some buttress route."*

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Our chosen route for day two had been "The Vent", in Coire an Lochain. It was given grade III in the guidebook - it was our intention to move up the grades! The success of the previous day bolstered our confidence and we headed off under an overcast sky, full of youthful vigour. The map was produced and we set a slightly lower course than the previous day to access the farther corrie. It did not take long and soon we were climbing the boulder ridge up to the base of the deep cleft that is "The Vent".

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*"That other pair seem to be heading up for No 4 Buttress over the slab. Bit risky with the snow like this"*

*"Monty! One of them's come off!"*

*"Wow look at him go! ..... Hang on, it's a sack ..... spewing bits of kit."*

*"It is! Look at that hat and overtrousers being taken by the updraft. Poor sod, the sack's done a cartwheel now, there's gear all over the place, I bet he's pig sick."*

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The view up into the cleft did not bode well, there seemed to be far too much rock showing. As we got closer the middle part of the route showed old snow with a steep twisting ice pitch above. But the biggest shock was a huge chokestone low down, presumably where the start of the long ice pitch should have been.

Suddenly we felt vulnerable; we had seen no one since leaving the security of the car park, and big chokestone's were not in our winter sports plan. Somehow the huge acreage of the Great Slab below seemed to mock us, and the upward struggle through the ice age rubble that is its bordering ridge, was that much the greater. Reluctantly we pressed on.

Slowly the outline of Jean's Hut grew smaller and the corrie floor became obscured by cloud and spindrift. The weather was worsening. At the foot of the route we took a closer look; it appeared greasy, lichenous and not at all inviting, but after some discussion Bob declared it would go. We started to kit up, after all, he had been to the Alps!

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*"He seems to be heading down to salvage his gear Steve. Let's go up to the snow scoop at the base of the gully and gear up."*

*"It's a bit different to that first time Monty. There's a huge bank of snow at the bottom of the gully, it seems plastered."*

*"Yeah, the guidebook now gives The Vent III/IV, presumably in recognition of its ability to vary more than the average Scottish winter route!"*

*"I guess we were there at a IV time then!"*

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Bob moved up under the chockstone and confirmed the rock was wet and greasy. He had a lanky frame and after a huge heave upwards somehow managed to bridge out to one of the walls. With several grunts he was up and we were left with the proposition of emulating this apparently supernatural feat from our alpine mentor.

After much struggling the reluctant tyros got over the obstacle and we all made rapid progress up a steep bank of nevé. Bob found a peg belay below steeper ground, where the snow turned to ice. He and I settled ourselves on a stance, it was Steve's turn to lead and to demonstrate the technical superiority of his chosen axe and dagger combination.

I was parked in mid gully on a shelf cut into the bank of snow, whilst Bob had the belay position by the peg. Steve set off with gusto, reassured by being back on what we thought was the true medium of winter climbing. We might have noticed that the guidebook declared the upper step was of 'almost vertical ice' but the detail had somehow eluded us.

Sat facing the gully my thoughts turned to more esoteric wanderings: why was I here, the savage beauty, the seeping cold, etc. these ruminations were rudely interrupted by a general state of alarm transmitted down the rope, and a cry of despair!

Bob appropriately took more interest in belaying. Just in time; Steve ejected from the upper gully at speed, bounced off my helmet (now tightly pressed against the snow) and landed unceremoniously just above the chokestone. The ropes tightened like steel. Bob was whipped against the gully wall, hands clenched tightly forwards, as he took the strain on his waist belay. The peg held.

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*"Off you go Steve. You must have landed somewhere about here, but several feet down. Just amble up and get a belay below the upper ice pitch where you came off."*

*"OK Monty but I'll leave that to you this time."*

*"I wonder if anyone ever recovered your ice dagger?"*

*"If they did, they'd be welcome to it."*

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After what must have been thirty seconds Steve stood up. We were all in a slight state of shock, particularly Steve; he had just taken a 90ft fall onto a single peg. I don't know who spoke first but from above we ascertained that Steve had a gash across his forehead and he looked pretty battered. The precious dagger was still in the ice above, a lonely mark of his upward progress. Minutes later he started to creep back up the snow to join us.

As Steve struggled up, Bob and I quietly decided it was prudent to retreat, as there was obvious bleeding from his head wound. He approached the stance and looked decidedly pale. Bravely, Steve offered me the chance to complete the pitch and recover the offending instrument. I promptly declined! Bob took over; he lowered me to the security of the stance below the chokestone and Steve followed. A hasty abseil and Bob joined us; it was time to go home, tails tucked firmly between our legs.

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*"You made short work of that Monty, and it was really well protected."*

*"These modern ice tools are something else and the new screws just go in like a dream. No contest!"*

*"I'll just lead through to the plateau shall I?"*

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It was a slow, cold trek back to the car, but the activity seemed to revive Steve, its owner and driver. Our protestations to visit a Doctor were cast aside and a plot was made to reach Perth in four hours, seek food and continue onto Durham that night. I pulled off my ice armoured ventile jacket and replaced it with a dry wool sweater ready for the A9 ordeal. The heater in his Singer Gazelle was basic and the rear passenger in particular had a freezer like ride.

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*"Thank God for Gore Tex! That wind's coming all the way from Siberia and the snow is being blasted like grit" "Just pile the kit in! We'll follow the rim of the plateau ... try to drop down the Goat Track, but we'll have to watch out, there may be too much slab building on it. Hell! The surface here is just scoured ice. What time's your flight back to London?" "It leaves at 5.30. I should be home and tucked up in bed by 10.00." "Good. Lets go, we should have plenty of time to get to the airport."*

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After dropping down the ski road we headed south from Aviemore in the gathering gloom, the headlights dimly picking out the first twists and turns by Loch Alvie. I settled into the back seat and tried to keep warm, but concern for Steve warned sleep away. Four and a half hours later we were searching the streets of Perth for somewhere to eat. A rather dour looking Chinese restaurant offered bleak comfort and we ate in the deserted interior. I think we reached Durham about four in the morning.

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*This year Steve made another foray north to test himself against the Scottish Winter. I picked him up at Inverness Airport and the next morning we were off again to the Northern Corries. Conditions were marginal, with a lot of unconsolidated snow and little ice, but the weather was clear and crisp, we decided to brave the Sneachda queues. Arriving in the corrie slightly late, we found a gap in the chain on the only decent bit of ice - the 'Mirror Direct'. A team were just completing the pitch as we geared up and I joined one of them at the stance.*

*"Great pitch", I greeted him.*

*"Yes. The snow's a little suspect though", he replied.*

*"Yeah. I think we'll just escape right when you're clear", I retorted. "Where are you from?"*

*"Bristol University", he declared unselfconsciously, "We're in a group, up for the week, the rest are with a guide that we've hired for a few days. We were out with him yesterday brushing up on techniques and this is our first route this year."*

*The years unfolded. "Terrific, great way to get experience. Enjoy your week", I replied.*