

Above the Clouds, Below the Stars

By Finlay Wild

The festivities had brought me home to Fort William and on Christmas Eve I found myself in Glencoe atop Sgor na h-Ulaidh with my dad. We were in awe of a beautiful cloud inversion which floated below us to the south, shielding the valleys with a cloak of cool air. I remember looking north to Ben Nevis and its winter cap of snow and really wanting to be there. Four hours later we were back home and I was hastily alternating between frantic last minute wrapping of presents and getting my hill gear ready. The upshot was that at about half six in the evening - as kids everywhere were getting the sherry and carrot ready for Santa by the fireplace - I set out from Glen Nevis to walk up the Ben by the tourist track; in the dark, and with a heavy rucksack.

Of course, low down everything was clouded over and it was hard to imagine getting any sort of views from higher up. My headtorch reflected off the mist and everything felt generally damp. But as I made my way up the track I ascended into the layer of cloud and gradually started to pick out stars shining through the mist from above. Gaining more height I became aware of the top layer of cloud lying below me: a blanket over the cold valley.

Having been based in the city for months, I had forgotten how powerful the stars are on a clear night. There were just billions of them - to state the obvious! Going across the flat ground above the halfway lochan I was able to switch my headtorch off and walk by the starlight alone. Later on, the crescent moon turned orange as it set to the west. Faint glows shone upwards through the clouds from above the illuminated towns: Fort William, Spean Bridge, Corpach...

Donning axe and crampons for the final steep section and plateau I was pretty pleased to finally see the familiar sight of the trigpoint and emergency shelter looming out of the darkness beyond my yellow oval of artificial light. Reaching the summit plateau I thought about the huge north face standing just a stone's throw away through the darkness. The great and sometimes tragic history of this place was more pertinent to me now than ever as I let my thoughts drift to all those lost in the mountains. Even though I have been up Ben Nevis many times it felt very different now in the dark, alone with my thoughts.

Thinking about most nights of our lives when we dream in bed at lower altitudes, I considered how little time I have spent bivvying out under the stars amidst the solemn, silent mountains. Maybe this was why I found the whole experience so thrilling; it was really my first time on a summit for the night. I finally crunched over to the summit at about nine o'clock, put on loads of layers, and then went to check out the emergency shelter.

It must have been a bit freaky for the two guys trying to sleep in said shelter when from the darkness came the clang of my ice axe on the door, followed by a head and shoulders looming in on them, dazzling them with headtorch light. While it all looked very cosy, I wanted to take in the starry heavens so headed back out into the night to set up my bivvy bag behind one of the ruined walls of the old observatory. It must have been amazing for the scientists all those years ago, when nights like this one broke the rule of cloudy, wet ones.

As I had taken the effort to lug my camera gear up the hill I got my tripod set up and attempted some long exposure star shots. In between adjusting the camera, I wandered around near the summit trying to take it all in. Some epic music on my MP3 player made the whole experience pretty surreal as I danced around trying to keep warm. I felt an affinity with the pagans who danced around fires under the infinite canvas of stars, worshipping nature - although probably not on the summit of the Ben! Initially it felt pretty eerie walking about exposed atop our highest peak under such a brilliant sky. Maybe I have been watching too many sci-fi movies, but I remember feeling that if anything supernatural was to happen to me it should be now; on this volcanic alter beckoning to the cosmos. Needless to say nothing did happen; except that I continued to be

mesmerised by the natural beauty of the world, and also reminded of our utter insignificance in this gigantic universe. And that was enough, frankly.

Some more photos, more layers, and the last cuppa from my flask and it was time for some sleeping bag-based star gazing. It was pretty cold during the night, but the reward each time I woke up was the universe shining back at me from through the gap in my bivvy bag.

Waking at about half seven the dawn views were as good as I had hoped. Looking east towards Schiehallion a beautiful orange band grew, sandwiched between the clear sky and the fantastic sea of cloud that extended pretty continuously in all directions. Peaks poked through from below like icebergs amidst the tumultuous sea, or Antarctic mountains piercing the engulfing ice.

Suddenly the sun crept over the lip of the Earth and started rising; orange to yellow; bright; warm; alive. It was almost like I was doing laps of the summit as I walked from side to side, taking pictures and memories. As the sun continued its endless arc, ephemeral shades lit the barren mountain top. The warm rays were well received after a long night, and I had to work hard to remind myself that I was in an inhospitable place. But such a place it is, and camping out or doing a moonlit ascent could be dangerous in the wrong conditions.

After an hour or so my stomach was starting to worry about why I wasn't at home prioritising my position at the table for Christmas lunch. I made my way back along the plateau - which looked a lot more familiar in the daylight - and starting descending towards the fluffy clouds. Before I knew it I was engulfed in grey and it was hard to imagine I had just come from such a contrasting place. Now there was definitely no reason to hang around as there were no views, it was damp and Christmas activities awaited.

Heading down the track I counted 32 people walking up towards me on their morning calorie burner. It's certainly to be recommended as a way of making a little extra space for festive treats. It was a satisfying feeling to be able to tell people that the cloud would soon part as they ascended and a brilliant vista awaited them. I felt like Santa!

Back in Fort William it was still Christmas morning even though I felt like I had already had a rewarding day on the hill. Feeling pretty satisfied, I tucked into an extra large portion of dinner with no worries. Later, I came across a quote from John Muir which articulates really well the feeling of that day:

"The grand show is eternal. It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never dried all at once; a shower is forever falling; vapour is ever rising. Eternal sunrise, eternal dawn and gloaming, on sea and continents and islands, each in its turn, as the round earth rolls."

For me this sums up the eternal beauty of our wild places. They aren't designed to be beautiful and they certainly don't make a special effort to impress on particular days; but in our minds there are times when we are just blown away by the vast and silent grandness of our mountains and our world.