

Go the far north  
Do dark walking



# ONLY BY THE NIGHT

As the clocks go back and the world gets darker, don't hang up your boots

and mourn the end of the long days. Celebrate the beginning of the long nights...

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Descending Ben Klibreck in the gathering gloom and (above) enjoying it fully gathered.



**T**he room at the inn feels lived in, heavy with old blankets and beds imbued with faded, sumptuous comfort, like a bedroom in a grandparent's house. Thick curtains stand open, and the single glazing rattles with every blast of rain unloaded onto it by an unchallenged wind. Outside the window, thick black. There is nothing for miles. Nothing but bogland as old as humankind, and far-cast mountains adrift in it. And darkness. It's 11pm and there has already been seven hours of it. And there will be another 10 of it before sunrise. We are in the emptiest quarter of Scotland's far north at the darkest time of year. And it's absolutely brilliant.

That afternoon we'd watched the sun slide behind the horizon while we were still very high on the frost-rendered

shoulder of Ben Klibreck, the isolated Munro that shocks the gentle contours of Sutherland's Flow Country with complex contours and sprawl.

Contracted between dawn and dusk the day had been lit sharply, by light that comes sideways from a sun that never staggers very high before falling. It's a signature of this late time of year.

The reason we're here is to climb a mountain. But the reason we're *here* to climb a mountain is, there is nowhere more dramatic to witness the most extreme, most Arctic-like of Britain's

mostly comely climate quirks: the winter solstice. The shortest day. Or, put a slightly different way, the longest night.

By the time you're reading this, you will have put the clocks back an hour. Many do this with a grumble. Suddenly it's dark when you come out of work, vitamin D becomes a coveted commodity, and the world starts to freeze. Look at it positively, though, and – besides being on the countdown to Christmas – it's your opportunity to appreciate Britain's stranger edges, and embrace its wildest time of day: night. ❏

**“The day was lit sharply by sideways light from a sun that never staggers very high before falling.”**



A part-frozen lochan on the route to Ben Klibreck.

You could say hillwalking at night is a strange and silly thing to do. Ask people why they walk up mountains and they will say it's for the view, the experience of height, the spectacle, the drama. They won't say, "Ooh, for the *blackness*."

That's because humans follow the schedule pathways defined by evolution: you set off when it gets light, you come down when it gets dark. You move by day, and sleep by night. Which is why walking in the mountains after dark feels so illicit, so edgy. But mountains don't have bedtimes. They don't close; they just change. And like anything else that causes a surge of adrenaline, night walking can be addictive.

Ascending towards Ben Klibreck from the remote Crask Inn was electrifying in the dying sun. There is no path to the mountain beyond a short, boggy track from the road, so the way was all through frozen lochans and speckles of snow. There is a lot of space here, in a beautiful flattening between distant peaks. To the north are the sea-sentinel mountains, Ben Hope and Ben Loyal. To the west ancient giants: Foinaven, Arkle, Quinag. And to the east, Klibreck. It's a rough climb, but steady. It's a shame: the lean ridge that leads to the summit is blustery and the views of this complicated, isolated mountain with its corries and high



Night walking: not for everyone. But beloved by some.



Navigation - and light - becomes vital.

lochans muffled by cloud. From here on a clear evening the views would leave anyone awestruck.

There is none. And it's getting dark. Descending Ben Klibreck in the gloom, the awareness of

the dark and its weird clarity begins to take hold. Everything you trust to transport you home - the lines of the land, any tracks at your feet - flattens and goes black. You can't trust your eyes

any more so your other senses claw at the void. The wind direction becomes noticeable because you notice it more. There's sound: here in Sutherland the *ribbet-ribbet-peep* of woodcock, the hiss of wind in the bog grass moving around your surroundings - but mostly there is no sound. Underfoot, each step needs thought. There are frozen bogs, empty leg-sized funnels with ice-lids, streams to leap, things to trip over. Your feet become your eyes.

Walking by day is safer. Warmer. You can see your map, the mountain you're climbing, the world below. By day mountains tolerate us. By night they lose this tolerance, and our view of them becomes rightly driven by our built-in caution. Given a full moon and perhaps a cover of snow anyone out might find themselves spellbound in a monochrome wonderland: but on a Munro on a cloudy night near the solstice? The charms are more elusive, but the edge is still there.

A red meteor in starless space is a car on the distant A836. After an hour, a light far ahead: the inn. Something to aim for, and the map says that's okay. Soon, it's fires and beer inside a little box of warm light in darkest, wildest Scotland. It's a nice feeling.

If it's the mountains at their least humane you seek, night walking is a fascination that grows on you and gives a sharper edge to our wildest places.

And night happens every single day. You can ignore it. Or you can embrace it. Do the latter, and welcome to the club. You're a nyctophile: you like the night. **T**

## 'HELLO DARKNESS, MY OLD FRIEND' Walking by night, according to this lot...

■ 'I prefer to set off on a night stroll at dusk... I like the way my familiar surroundings are differently transformed by twilight as I walk through them. Some things melt into their background, others reveal surprising new identities.'  
Chris Yates, *Nightwalk*

■ 'Taking a trip out into the night, particularly in remoter spots where its power is not diminished by artificial light, is perhaps the closest we'll ever come to entering a magic kingdom of trickery and illusion.'  
Dixe Wills, *At Night*

■ 'Noctambulism is usually taken to mean sleepwalking. This is inaccurate... noctambulism means walking at night. Generally people noctambulise because they are in search of melancholy. I had found another reason for being out at night, however, and that is the wildness which the dark confers on even a mundane landscape.'  
Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*

Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*

■ The song of mountain-streams, unheard by day, Now hardly heard, beguiles my homeward way.

Air listens, like the sleeping water, still,

To catch the spiritual music of the hill.

William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*

■ 'Although I am an old man, night is generally my time for walking.'

Charles Dickens

“There are frozen bogs, empty leg-sized funnels with ice-lids, streams to leap, things to trip over. Your feet become your eyes.”



Watching out for streams, avoiding frozen bogs... all in a night's walk.

● OFF FOR A NIGHT WALK? SEE PAGE 54 FOR SOME IMPORTANT SAFETY TIPS...



Arriving back at base for the rest of the long night: the remote, uniquely homely Crask Inn.