

Throbbing, nagging, seething, gnawing, pecking, crushing, needling, burning cold, cold, cold, cold, cold, *cold* that creeps into your bones and pulses through them with a kind of rhythmic squawk. Sunrise is an hour away, we're approaching England's highest point, and the temperature punctuates every breath and thought. And my only thought is this: it will be worth it. Or more accurately: *it (cold) will (cold) be (cold) worth (cold) it (cold).*

HIGH DAWN

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“This is magic, magic, magic. The kind of moment that with every passing second gilds itself onto your memory like dripped gold.”



Apart from being thermally shrill, the other stand-out quality Scafell Pike possessed on this particular morning was silence. It's England's highest mountain, and quite possibly the busiest. Walk up here in the middle of the day and the mountain is less of an escape to higher ground than a social experiment. You may like lots of people, you might not – but climb within the usual constraints of the daytime and the choice of whether England's highest mountain is going to be yours alone is entirely out of your hands. Want to take that choice back, at the most scenically incendiary time of day?

We know it's hard to drag yourself up. We know a wall of darkness is unappealing at the door of the B&B or the tent. We've touched on the fact that it may be nippy up there, too. But, my word, there's a lot to be said for getting out and getting high very early.

So the idea of this impulsive walk was to see the sunrise from the summit of Scafell Pike under cover

Scafell, Mickledore and the notorious Broad Stand buttress catch dawn light from Scafell Pike.

of snow. That's a big winter tick, right? Aspiration in a box. The sort of thing immediately imagined as gold-hued, mauve-framed mountain glory: the opportunity to see the landscape awoken and ignite, steaming, from a frozen sleep. That was the hope. But in the Lake District at this volatile time of year, it's almost better to presume hopes dashed and be pleasantly surprised, than to hope for the best and end up crushed.

At 5am, it was still fully dark. A flabby moon was diffused behind cloud coloured filthy by its light, the absence of stars in the sky making the weather of the coming day hard to call. From our valley ascent, the possibility of dawn looked almost laughable. Picturing the map in my mind, I thought about this. Scafell Pike, whose bulky embrace we were clambering up into, was blocking the entire eastern horizon from north to south. Any early hints of dawn happening over there would be blotted by the dark before it reached high enough for us see over the mountain. From this route, night would last as long as night could.

Coolly spacious, the mountain's silence felt physical: a quiet rush you could almost hear, but not quite. Maybe it was the fact that it was early. Or that there was no wind at all. I could have been hearing the blood hissing around in my ears, which is what happens when things are really, really quiet out there. Or maybe the frost – snow higher up by the slighter silvery look of things above us – had frozen everything tight. Whatever the reason, it was like the landscape was enjoying the effects of a stiff decongestant, and we walked in to the great natural amphitheatre of Hollow Stones to complete church-like silence.

This place is incredible at any time of day or night. It's a vibe, a feeling. If you've ever been to Venice, it's like that moment when you walk out of the labyrinth of streets into the wow-space of St Mark's Square for the first time, or what I imagine it must be like to emerge from trees to suddenly find the Grand Canyon spilling from your feet. Everything explodes from closed in to wide open and, instantly, little you is standing alone in the hall of the gods.

Actually, there are two of us here – but we know each other well enough to know talking is the last thing either of us wants to do, and not just because of the cold. Up to the right, the black wheel of Scafell Crag climbs, fracturing into pincers at the Scafell Pinnacle, then diving into Mickledore's huge gap before rearing up again into spire-like Pike's Crag. In the dark this whole dramatically raked skyline is just a frosted silhouette, and a sinister one at that. Without the light's perspective the whole prospect looks like it's leering down on you like the teeth of a collapsing trap.

Even the path takes some concentrating on. The boulders, and the way spurs climb and fall tongue-and-groove-like in this valley, make it hard to stay on course; but before long we are ascending steadily towards a notch on the left-hand skyline, to the pass between Lingmell and the highest ground in England. Cairns start to appear, big cairns, broken cairns, scrappy cairns that might not be cairns at all. As they pass, degree by degree the black skyline ahead starts to



The 978m summit cairn, with its war memorial plaque.

Below: Scafell Crag and Pike's Crag, frosted up on descent.

descend towards eye-level. Snow appears underfoot. Wind begins to bristle. A stubby turret appears ahead against a sky now grading from black to purple, then – as we arrive onto the highest ground in England, 977m above sea-level – the skyline drops to knee height and the panorama behind it breaks into view.

This is magic, magic, magic. The kind of moment that with every passing second gilds itself onto your memory like dripped gold. I can't describe it – look at the pictures – hills layered in blue and blue-white with high snow and cold, with wind-ruffled frost over everything near and far. It's the most gorgeous thing.

Damn cold, though. The wind at this point is hard to ignore, turning a passively brutal chill into a bared-teeth maniac. I'm no good with things like this





Exploring the summit plateau of Scafell Pike – a mountain whose very highest point is most definitely not its highlight.

but I'd hazard a guess that the ambient temperature is at least -10 deg C. With wind chill, it's at least minus a million.

Now comes that fleeting pre-sunrise moment where everything high starts to glow, gathering subtle light from the east. Then the mountains in the valley begin to steam, mist rising delicately between them.

It's an ethereal moment; then comes the main event. So we stand and watch the dawn break over the horizon to the east. For about half an hour, out of 53 million people I'm the highest.

The solitude of the moment makes it. By day this place will be complicated by human preoccupations and paranoias: am I spending too much time here? Should I get out the way so that chap and his wife and his dog and his three friends can come up? Is he spending too much time there? Why won't he get out of the way so I can come up? Etc. Often, a summit is never quite the zenith you hope it will be. This morning, this one is.

And it strips back the Pike to the Pike. It belongs to you. You can appraise it, explore it and absorb this most elevationally distinctive summit at the most dramatic time of day. Sorry to keep going on about it. But it's worth getting up early for. It really is.

We're stopped, shaking, in what we think is shelter from the wind. A sweet bag is so cold it sounds and feels brittle, like it will shatter. The stove is cranked up, its ability to cope with gloved hands tested and cursed in cold-addled speech through a frozen face. Soon a warm drink is on the cards, and as its thawing effects take hold and the question "Dlo you momt sun nelly mamy tlea?" becomes the contented "Ahh. Jelly baby tea."

Rehumanised slightly, we start to explore the summit as the dawn spreads across the sky and the landscape's colours begin to shuffle around and take their places for the day.

It can be said, I think, that Scafell Pike needs a bit of help to shine. It's a very, very rocky mountain – to one

person it might be 'harsh, even savage' (Wainwright, *The Southern Fells*) and to another 'deserves to be tidied up' (Mark Richards, er, *The Mid-Western Fells*). It's a big boulderfield, no mistake. So covered in crags that the whole mountain is, essentially, one big crag. But in the cold it's a lot prettier, a uniform wasteland becoming an array of flat, footprint-clean snow patches among mounds of white-mantled stones. The summit itself is the least enticing part of all of it. But such is the geography of England's highest point that the top – almost literally – isn't really the point.

The summit of England is like the apex of a Bedouin tent, all slacks and steeples, messily lassoing a single, seemingly arbitrary point in the middle of nearly a square kilometre of boulderfield. These satellite summits are perhaps Scafell Pike's finest moments. Little watchtowers and crusts on the edges like Pike's Crag, Rough Crag, Broad Crags snatch hidden sights of Upper Eskdale, Great Moss, down to Mickledore to Broad Stand and Scafell, onto Hollow Stones

“A few minutes at dawn in the right place, then who cares if it clags in later on?”

towards Wasdale, to Great Gable's dashing face and east towards Bowfell and the Crinkles. That name, by the way, was never supposed to be singular. *The Pikes of Scafell* was the archaic intention, and the warty, indistinct nature of the top suits this name far more than its modern corruption.

We wander for a bit, thoroughly pleased with ourselves and steadily falling in love with England's highest mountain all over again. A change of light, a change of hour, the injection of Himalayan-level cold – that's all it takes. And while these conditions are far from a daily occurrence in this part of the country, in winter there will be plenty of mornings like this. All it takes is a few minutes at dawn in the right place, then who cares if it clags in later on?

We descend the way we came, looking up left at Scafell Crag again – without doubt this massif's most charismatic feature. What was black and overbearing a couple of hours ago is now white and angelic in dawn mist, side light picking out the crag's relief. The air warms as we drop, sound appears as water unfreezes, birds awake and the land seems to liven.

Three hours after our red-eyed, numb-fingered ascent required five layers cinched tight around eyes, I'm walking in a light top and considering sunglasses. That's a big change in a short space. We would be back at the Wasdale Head Inn in time for lunch. Since waking up we'd walked in the dark, witnessed that earth-shattering dawn from the frigid highest point of England, and finished in the rich greenery of Wasdale.

It's what this time of year is best at: contrasts. It's not just four seasons in one day; it's four days in one morning. And even a busy place like Scafell Pike can be stripped back to your own private paradise. So c'mon. When all's said and done in life, it's not the lie-ins you'll remember. 

