



VVVVroom with a view

ALWAYS THOUGHT OF CAMPERS AS TENTS FOR SCAREDY-CATS?
THINK AGAIN. HIRE ONE OF THESE, AND IT WILL TAKE YOU
FURTHER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE...

Words **Simon Ingram** Photographs **Tom Bailey**

The Crask Inn stands alone atop its scraped pass like a brick mirage. It's the last stop between the Northern Highlands and the Really Northern Highlands, where distances become Lake District-sized carpets rolling out towards a horizon of contorted mountains, and any human assertions on the landscape weaken to tokenistic prods: a cattle grid here, a telegraph pole there. And, of course, the inn.

Inside the lounge-like bar were four whiskery folk, an elderly walker who was clearly the happy side of hammered, and one knackered-looking dog. None of them said anything beyond a smile, but it was clear our arrival was something of an event.

"Evening. Are you serving food?" I enquired.

The barman glanced nervously behind him into the kitchen. "Well... no, not really," he said, wringing his hands. "We could probably make you some sandwiches?" he offered helpfully.

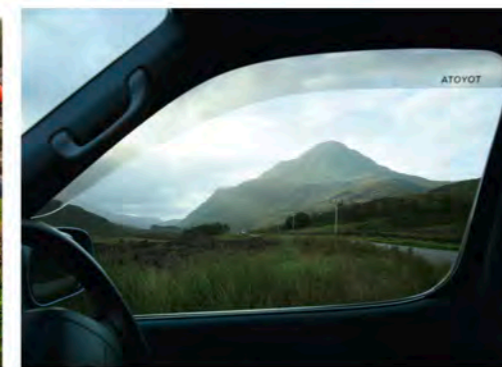
"That's all right. We'll keep moving." I thanked him and turned to leave.

"Which way are you going?"

I pointed at the ceiling. "North."

A dark expression crossed his face. "Isn't much that way. Not for miles."

I threw him a grin. "Doesn't matter. We've got a *camper*." ▶



It was a perfect autumn evening, and Scotland's far north was in fine form. I walked out into the brittle sunlight, feeling a scampering of chill. The surrounding hills were glowing a soft, rust red – a fine contrast with the sleek silver thing I was walking towards. A thing which, over the next two days, would allow me to explore one of my favourite places in the world more comfortably and more comprehensively than I thought possible. Something ridiculously, grin-stretchingly cool. Potentially lifestyle-altering. A home. A way of life. A van, in fact.

A campervan had never really occurred to me as a piece of hill-walking kit. To me they seemed the realm of people fond of paisley upholstery and discussions about awnings. Why would I want a camper? I had a tent, my boots and a squint. That was enough, wasn't it? No, as it goes. A tent doesn't have natty blinds and the ability to cook bacon or chill beer. It doesn't have comfy seats that magically turn into beds, a

wardrobe or a heater. And, most importantly, it doesn't thrum smoothly between far-cast hills at 60mph – then provide a thoroughly comfortable, rain- and -midgeproof home right at the foot of them.

Now, I'm aware of the fact that it is terribly unfashionable these days to express enthusiasm for a machine that burns fuel that isn't grown, farted or squeezed. So by way of acknowledgment, if you're frowning by this point, best put the skids on here and turn to the eco piece on page 33 instead. But I hope you'll bear with me. It's a fine ride.

The plan, like most good ones, was simple: drive, explore, climb hills, eat bacon.

The north Highlands is the perfect place to find yourself at large behind the wheel of a portable bedsit, where you can glide unimpeded across miles upon miles of magnificent desolation and stop at the bottom of any hills that look worthy of an exploratory scratch. Here lie mountains of charisma, which rank high among the UK's most desirable summits. Most, however, lie so far off the radar and away from most practical springboards that for logistical reasons alone

they are difficult to warrant a trip on their own. But draw the strings of accommodation, transport, kitchen and supplies together into one purposeful package and suddenly life in a place of impractical distances gets a lot more streamlined. Decisions become more impulsive, everything becomes liberatingly simple and you become a free-form, highly agreeable hill-bagging mercenary. Easing out of the drive of Highland Campervans in Inverness at the wheel of our silver Toyota Granvia – newly stocked up with neatly stowed supplies and decisively christened Nigel down a phone line by photographer Tom's four-year-old son – I was positively bouncing up and down in my seat.

First on the list was Ben Hope.

As big British mountains go, Ben Hope is up there. It is in fact the furthest up there. Bearing the title of Most Northerly Munro, and really the last eminence of note before Britain slides into the Atlantic, it asserts itself with pride and dominance. This is not a small mountain, and it sits alone above squalls of tunefully named hills of which few have ever heard: Ben Hutig, Feinne-Bheinn Mhor, Meall a' Bhata...

Ben Hope always had a somewhat mythical, untouchable feel to me. Before I laid eyes on it, this was probably down to its stirring name or forbidding location. But as soon as I saw it, I realised that its most striking attribute is most certainly its shape.

"Cor," I said.
"Mmm!" Tom replied.
"Quite a thing, isn't it?"
"Mmm..."

Some Scottish mountains are striking because they look like they have just been shattered (An Teallach) or dropped from another planet (the Quiraing), or are about to roll away (Suilven). Ben Hope catches the eye simply because it's a bloody great mountain in a place where there are few others. It's tall, sheer, pointy and sprawling, hurling ridges and chasms from its peak in the unhinged manner of more famously dramatic mountains much further south. Yet here it is, all the way up here in the banished north, its nearest contemporary the more modest but equally staggering Ben Loyal, half a day's walk to the east. By the time Tom and I were easing into its shadow, it was getting late, but as our

The open road, *deux oeufs*, a fine view and a camper called Nigel: these wheels were made for walking.



JEREMY ASHCROFT



Climbing the shoulder of Ben Hope – before the weather lost its optimism.



Left: the summit of Ben Hope in glorious conditions.

Right: the al fresco equivalent of a not-so-sadly lacking onboard shower.

Below: appreciating Ben Stack.



ultimate destination was approximately three feet behind the driver's seat – an agreeably peculiar feeling of rootlessness, this – we indulged in a little exploration. Climbing it that night wasn't on the agenda, but finding a nice viewpoint to fall asleep to most definitely was.

"Here?"

"No. Can't see it without straining my neck."

Ten minutes along an exquisite loch later: "What about here then?"

"Mmm. No. Not the mountain's best side."

Another 20 minutes later, the van began to climb onto a high, airy road, silent of traffic, where the landscape suddenly rolled out in all directions. Chiming perfectly with our gasps, a pull-in appeared. "Ah. *This* will do nicely."

In his acclaimed book *The Wild Places*, Robert Macfarlane spends a night on Ben Hope's summit. It's fairly safe to say he was in thrall to Ben Hope's otherness among British mountains: he describes it as

'holding the solstitial opposites of north; it knows both the affirmation of the never-vanishing sun and the indifference of the 18-hour night.' He also rather splendidly observes that there is nowhere else in Britain where you could 'better feel a *sense of bigness outside yourself*,' borrowing a term employed by the American environmentalist Wallace Steigner. However, despite being a committed seeker of wilderness, the mountain's solitude rather rattled Macfarlane, and his reaction

warrants quoting at length:

'I turned east and south, straining to see if there was any flicker of light in the hundreds of miles of darkness around me. Even a glimpse of something lit, however distant and unreachable, would have been reassurance of a sort. Nothing. No glimmer.'

Were Macfarlane on the summit now, he would have seen a glimmer: our van, cosily lit, parked utterly alone and bereft in the darkness to the north. From my bunk inside, I read the chapter with saucer eyes, periodically peering through the blinds at the fading outline of Ben Hope, a boomerang of cloud arced across its darkening upper contours. Despite the somewhat intimidating nature of both my view and my bedtime reading, I couldn't wait to get up there.

The following morning – after a highly civilised breakfast of bacon and egg rolls, fresh coffee and Radio 4 – we relocated to





the western foot of the mountain.

The walk up from the road to the mountain's shoulder, while hardly one of Britain's most inspiring, holds much in the way of interest. Within minutes, we spotted a golden eagle wheeling lazily among the ramparts of Ben Hope's ribbed summit cliffs – the legacy of a volcanic past and a heavy glacial workover. Like many northern hills, it looks impregnable from beneath. But as we ascended the heathery slopes, the mountain dropped its defences.

"Imagine what this'd look like from the sea."

From above a buttress on the shoulder, I turned to look out towards the Atlantic. As Tom had remarked, the view from the water must be striking, and something of a beacon as only a 3,000ft mountain rising from flat scrub can be. Indeed – as I found out later – the seemingly optimistic name of the

mountain is actually of Viking origin, from the Old Norse *hjøp*, which means 'bay.'

Another thing that was rapidly losing optimism was the weather. The clarity of the views began to thicken soon after we had left the camper that morning, and by the time we started to shuffle up the huge summit cone, we were in cloud. Ben Hope is a big hill: long and lean, a stretching cat of contours with an extensive south ridge, along which we were now working our way. Mist has a habit of foreshortening things, often manifesting itself in two ways: a seemingly distant shadow of further, bulky mountain in front of you suddenly rolls effortlessly beneath your feet as an inconsequential rise; and the fuzzy horizon ahead, which you take to be the edge of your visibility, suddenly shoots towards you as a cliff edge. Both happened today – the latter alarmingly, as I wandered a little too

boldly towards Ben Hope's dramatic western drop-off. Eventually the summit appeared, and after the briefest of ritual and regard, we turned and fled.

Amazingly, at a damp 800m contour, the camper's comforts made themselves felt even here. "This," I said, taking a bite from one of two carefully packed bacon and egg rolls, "is marvellous. Despite feeling so very wrong."

Bacon sandwiches as hill food notwithstanding, we were glad to arrive back at the camper, where – within minutes of stowing our wet gear – the kettle was on, coffee was brewed and the map was out.

It was almost impossible to decide where to go next. Free from the constraints of booking anywhere, walking in anywhere to camp, or factoring in return time, the entire north Highlands were at our disposal. And that's a lot of mountains.

"I propose," I began, perhaps a little grandly, "we put the map away, drive, and climb whatever we like the look of."

"Sounds good." Tom took a sip of coffee and considered this. "Just let me check we have enough bacon."

The afternoon brightened as we began to cruise aimlessly across the yawning, open expanse ahead. This is one of the Earth's most beautiful – and distinctive – landscapes, and by late afternoon it was in a particularly angelic mood, the low sun backlighting grey hills against a brilliant gold sky, and smelting the waters of the lochs with rascal shafts of light. Miles pass effortlessly here – there's plenty to look at, be it sea, mountains, dinky villages or secluded beaches, and it's a magnificent feeling to drive in the knowledge that should you find somewhere you like, you can stop and make it your home for the night.

We skirted Loch Eriboll and headed north along the coast towards Cape Wrath before turning south at Durness through almost primeval scenery. Beyond Laxford Bridge and a few shaky junction decisions, we rounded a corner and – exactly in unison – exclaimed: "Oh: *that* looks good!"

'That' was a pronounced peak, which leapt from its surroundings with considerable alarm, and in pleasingly sharp style. Almost reflexively, I steered the camper towards it and about 20 minutes later we were regarding it from a small pull-in that we had decided was a fine spot to spend the night.

"What is it, then?"

"Not sure..." I frowned at the map. "Which way did we turn at Laxford Bridge?"

"Right. No, left."

"Which means *that* one," I said, pointing out of the window towards a distant but



Offset bacon intake

Worried about your bacon intake? 48 rashers provides 260g of fat and 3,000 calories (not including bread). For a 11 stone male to burn off 1,500 calories he would have to walk up Ben Nevis. With a backpack. And no bacon butties.

The spectacle of Arkle and cloud-scudded Foinaven, from Ben Stack.





Get one, do this!

Trail's Toyota Granvia camper was supplied by **Highland Campervans**, based near Inverness airport. Our van is the 'Voyager' option, costing £75 per day and accommodating two. Other options are available from £65 per day, and some vans in the range can accommodate up to five people. Call on tel. (01667) 493 976 or visit www.highlandcampervans.com



and you sleep where you stop, you can see a hell of a lot. And sometimes, seeing is enough. There were many mountains I hadn't been within eyeball distance of before, and I wanted to spend time – however fleeting – close to them, to wave, introduce myself, and promise a more in-depth visit sometime soon.

We brewed tea by An Teallach. I washed my face in the loch beneath Torridon hulk Slioch. We cruised by the commandingly isolated bulk of Quinag, before meandering slowly along what is – in my humble view – the most astonishing mountain road in Britain: chiefly the stretch of the A835 between Ledmore and Ardmair, where mountains of mythical

strangeness rise in layers around you: Suilven, Canisp, Stac Pollaidh, Cul Mor, Cul Beag, Beinn an Eoin, Ben More Coigach...

The destination for our last night was about as far from anywhere as you can get in Britain: an isolated beach on the extreme west of the mainland, called Redpoint.

Redpoint is a sliver of sand and reeds set apart from the rest of Scotland like some kind of weirdly beautiful interdimensional limbo. Stand on the dunes and look around you and the atmosphere almost crackles. The mountains of Torridon stand watchfully along the eastern horizon, the Skye Cuillin regard you from across the bay and the Atlantic

laps softly against a beach of pristine white sand. Scottish band Boards of Canada wrote a foreboding instrumental called *The Beach at Redpoint*, which sounds like the end of the world – and after exploring the beach and a (very) brief swim, we listened to it as we set up for the night, cracked open some beers and prepared dinner, watching the beacons atop Skye's mountains light up across the bay. Much of the evening was spent reading the campervan's log, which was quite enthralling. For such a shiny-looking thing, Nigel had sure been around.

And then – three nights, 532km and 48 rashers of bacon later – it was over. We returned to Inverness and, after writing in the logbook, Tom and I said goodbye to the camper, unanimous in our view that there are few better ways to liberate the possibilities of the Highlands than taking the wheel of one.

As for me, this experience had quite an effect. I now have a new bank account, into which money is glacially trickling and may one day arrange itself into the shape of a van not dissimilar to our Nigel. The nice lady who set it up for me asked me if I would like to give it a name. In a moment of indulgence, I called it 'Walking wheels'. Yes, it's daft. But it really did seem appropriate. Still does. **■**



The beach at Redpoint: an atmospheric slice of post-hill chill.



Slioch (981m) looms above Scotland's most scenic wash basin.

Camper van tips

Sleeping

It's worth spending five minutes getting the van level with chocks – this stops you sliding around in bed and keeps your cup of tea level.

Washing

Use biodegradable washing up liquid for the pots. If performing personal ablutions in streams or lakes, water alone will have to do.

Toileting

If you haven't got a portable toilet with you, you'll need to follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code as regards toileting code of conduct, which is the same as wild camping.

Boozing

Be careful. According to the Department of Transport, "it isn't illegal to drink in the back of a camper van in itself, though if the driver is drinking, the police could *technically* prosecute them for being in charge of a motor vehicle. The best thing to do is to ensure that a driver isn't drinking."

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