

COLD SWEAT

HOW A DISASTROUS 3-DAY WALK THROUGH SOME OF SCOTLAND'S SCARIEST TERRAIN TURNED INTO A MASTERCLASS ON HOW TO HANDLE WINTER AT ITS WILDEST.

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

It had been three years since Scotland last tried to kill me.

It was my first job for **Trail**. On paper, it sounded like a capital idea: canoe down a wild loch into wildest Knoydart, wild camp and wild climb some very wild mountains. In short, have a pretty wild time.

We got it. Having the cheek to plan such a superlative expedition and hope – nay, *assume* – that the weather would cooperate evidently deserved punishment. Alas, Scotland reacted to this act of temerity like a smacked shark – and wasted no time in swiftly biting us in the ass. Warm-hued hopes of a paddle through breezy air soon disintegrated into memories of a black loch, sinking canoes, the wind-ripped shouts of my companions, freezing water and poisonous weather.

I've been quietly scared of Scotland ever since.

Five weeks ago, I decided I'd gathered enough guns to have another shot at a multi-day wilderness expedition – this time in winter. And once again, Scotland bit me in the ass. ▶



Just another sunny day
in the Forest of Atholl.



The incident in question took place in the Gaick Forest – The Most Evil Place in the Scottish Highlands (don't worry, we'll come back to that). Five hours into a four day, 40 mile backpack across it, I found myself pinned in my bivvy bag by a sleet-heavy gale 2,500ft up the side of a mountain. There I was, lying in my sleeping bag chuckling to myself how lucky I was to have all my super, hyper-expensive, Zero©Tech@Lite™TKS500 lightweight gear to keep me dry and safe. And then, dangling above me like a poised spider, I spotted the first leak.

Things went pretty south from there. Within another two hours, water was seeping through the floor. My sleeping bag became a heavy and squelchy mess from the knees down, thanks to a 3/4 length Therm-a-Rest which was – who'd have guessed it – one quarter shorter than I needed it to be, and a sleeping bag cover that impressively failed to (a) do its job and (b) do half its job. The seams of the bivvy helpfully turned into upside-down canals that proceeded to empty themselves on everything inside: maps, trousers, gloves, GPS, phone, pillow, gloves and, of course,

me. By 4am, I might as well have been outside in the storm. Every piece of lightweight gear I had trusted my life to had spectacularly committed suicide, leaving me squirming around like a man trying to save a punctured dinghy. I was freezing and everything – *everything* – was helplessly and irrevocably soaked.

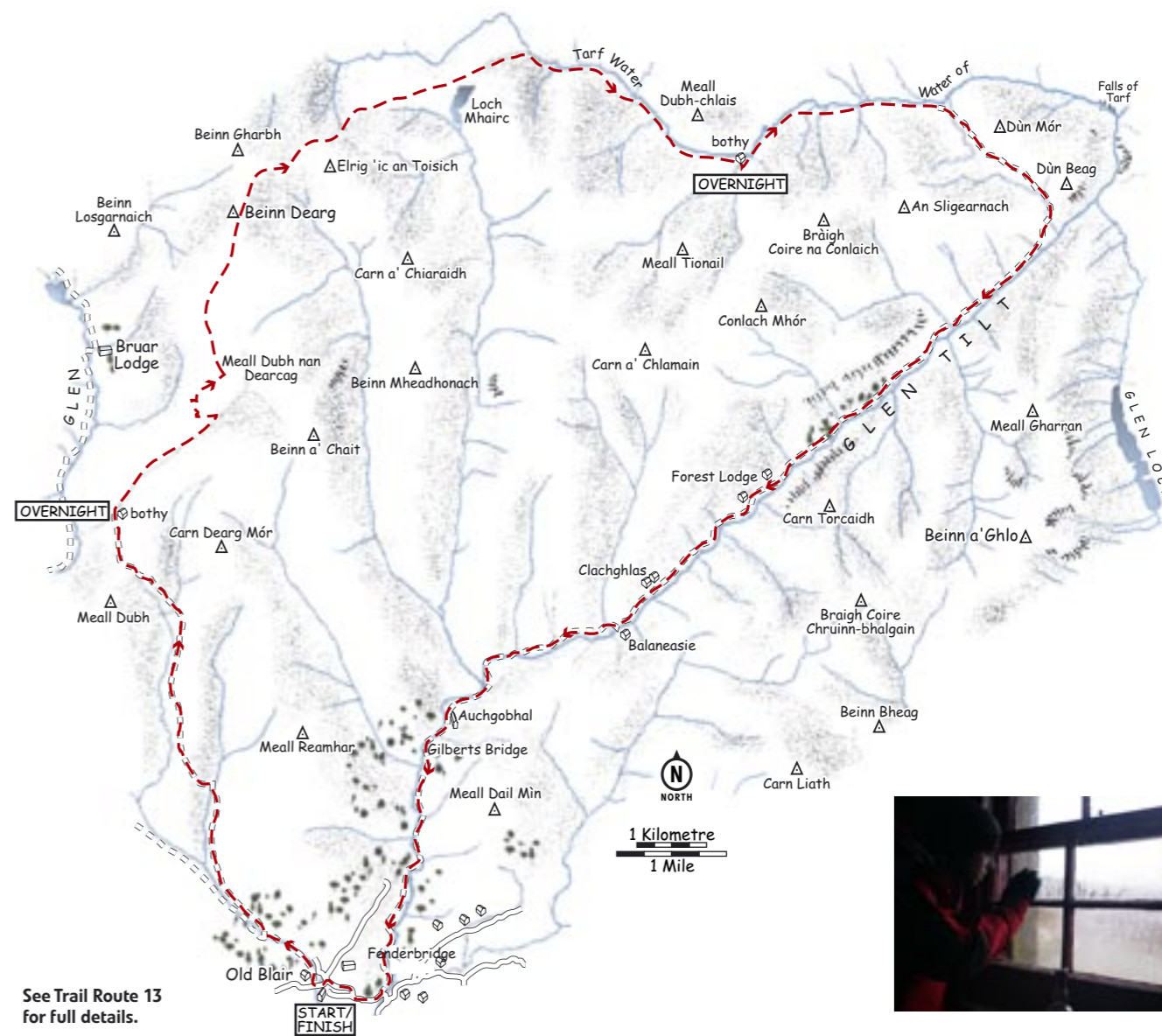
Come the nauseous light and minus 2 deg C of morning, two things were achingly evident. The first thing was that my plans were burnt. Carrying on my route would mean

Above, clockwise from top left: the mountains in a better mood; heading up Beinn Dearg's summit ridge; leaving Bruar bothy; Beinn Dearg's Munro summit.

at best an uncomfortable night out in a wet, thermally useless sleeping bag, a bad case of the shakes and a generally miserable time, and at worst moderate exposure, pneumonia, hypothermia. The second thing was – in the sobering eye of hindsight – the whole thing had been totally my fault. Staring into a tumble drier in Pitlochry, I pondered – possibly aloud, I'm not sure – the ragged holes in a plan that, back in dry dock, had seemed watertight.

A solo backpack across the Gaick Forest, The Most Evil Place In The Highlands (be patient, it's coming) with two nights in a tent, two nights in bothies and ascents of a few winter Munros in between. Super stuff – I was looking forward to being off on my own and enjoying the pleasant extremities of a winter backpack through one of Britain's fiercest places, and I consequently spent some time planning it to what I'd considered the last entreat of uncertainty.

But one maiming glitch had illuminated a slew of errors in my planning, kit-list, route, time allowances and overall execution that

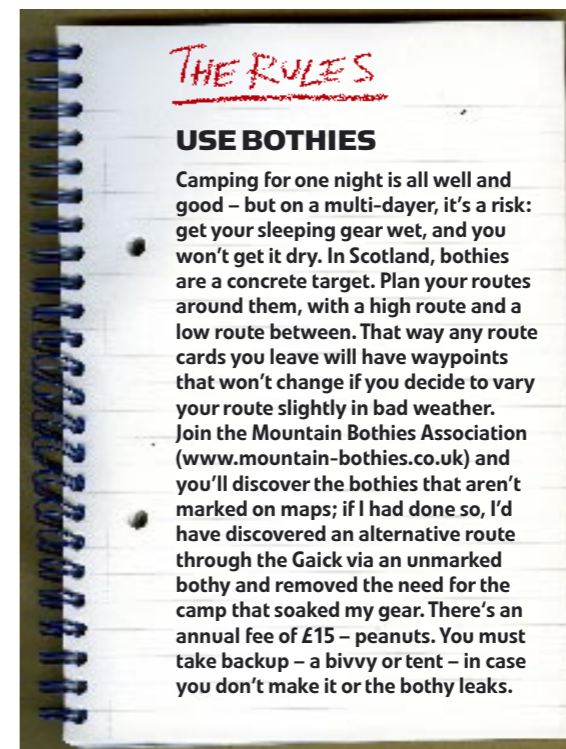
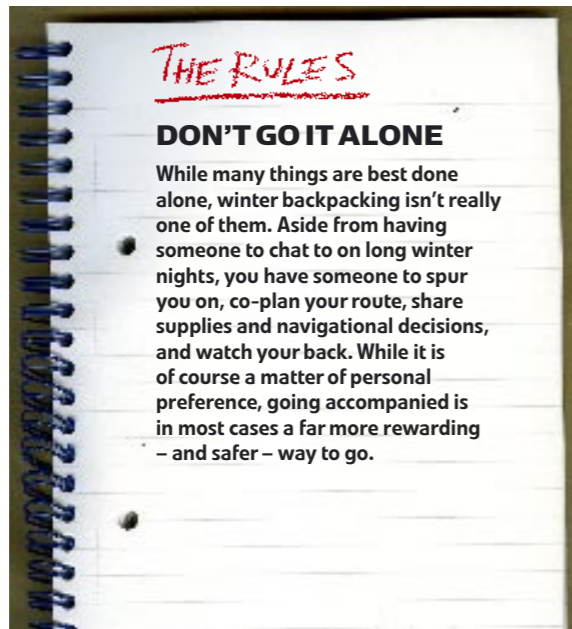


See Trail Route 13 for full details.

had caused the whole expedition to sink. Evidently, I really didn't know how to backpack in winter.

Now before you write me off as some kipper who doesn't have a clue what he's doing, hold your horses. A kipper I may be, but I've earned my scars as far as the outdoors is concerned. I've backpacked alone through some of the big, bad, scary places in the world, and considered myself fairly *au fait* with keeping myself dry and warm, even when the outdoors gets a bit cross with me. And yet in backpacking in the way to which I had become accustomed – light and fast – I had still made a series of fundamental blunders that had very nearly kicked me into serious bother.

Luckily, in abandoning my Rambo plan, once my sleeping bag had stopped spinning, I had the chance to re-think, re-plan, re-pack and try to do it properly. After all, a mistake is only a mistake if you don't learn from



it, and I was determined to claw some self-respect back from the wilderness I had just been pistol-whipped out of. And the first significant improvement was I would no longer be alone.

Tom arrived at 4pm. We immediately set off from Blair Atholl along an 8km path for the bothy above Glen Bruar. Though I had more sturdy gear on board this time, my pack was lighter as supplies were shared, and it was nice to chat. With nightfall came snowfall, and soon the squat oblong of the bothy roof materialised. The door needed a good kick and – after



Above: the first contours are hit, en route to Beinn Dearg.

Scotland. Maybe you're like me in that you rent a scary film, light some candles and lock the door, then as soon as the first monster/ghost/creepy pale kid emerges, suddenly realise it's not such a good idea and have to stick *Father Ted* on for 20

minutes before bed just to take your mind off it. But that's a good thing, right? You're *meant* to be frightened. Scary things – like scary places – just have an inexplicable, logic-free allure to them.

The Gaick itself is a deep crack south-west of the Cairngorms some three miles from where we were ensconced. Strictly speaking, Tom and I were now in the adjacent Forest of Atholl, but the entire area has a very similar smell. The Gaick earned its Most Evil Place title simply by its moon-bleak terrain, remoteness and the odd historical killing spree. Stories of huge avalanches that destroyed a soldier-filled bothy, and almost flattened the secluded Gaick lodge (in 1800 and 1911 respectively) are legend. And, like all the most emotive places, the area has sired a poem or two. There are no lonely clouds or topaz skies in these passages: just gleefully lurid descriptions that are best read in a tremulous Vincent Price leer: "*Black Gaick of the wind whistling, crooked glens ever enticing her admirers to their destruction.*" Now how – in all seriousness – could you *not* want to explore a place like that in the dead of winter? 

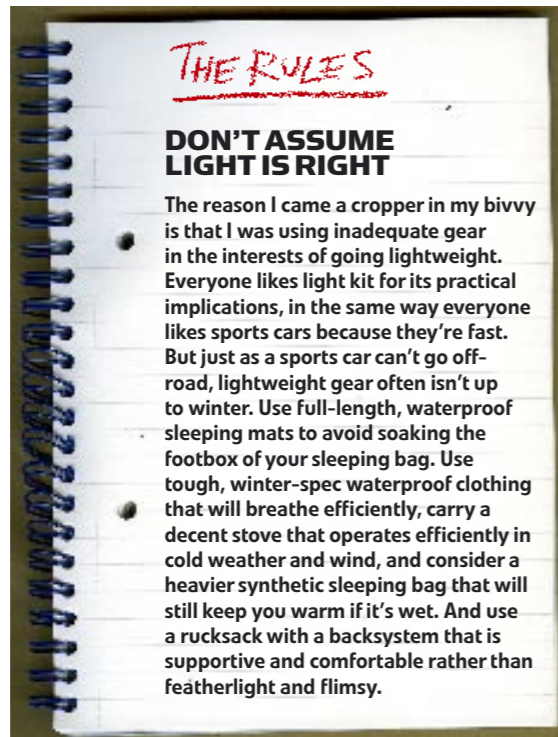
indulging in my pointless reflex of fumbling the oily walls for a light switch – we hung up our wet clothes and started to settle in.

With a fire, candles and warm gear, the grimy old place started to feel like home. Already with this new, two-bothy-no-camp-based plan, I felt like we were winning: the building was watertight and sheltered, and there was very little danger of it blowing down – the three main worries of my previous night. Now we were here, all we needed to do was enjoy it. As I fired the stove, Tom tended the firelog we'd bought in Pitlochry: "This is our only one. Make the most of it."

Soon curls of steam were rising off our clothes, the room began to warm, and I started to think about tomorrow: a challenging walk, remote terrain and a big old mountain to grapple. *This* was the way to do it.

The bothy's sleeping loft smelled of woodchip and rodents. As I lay on the floor I flipped on my headtorch and read aloud the first sentence of the laminated guidebook photocopy I had brought from downstairs: 'The Gaick is rumoured to be the most evil place in the Highlands.'

This theatrical reputation was a main reason I'd selected this part of





Above: in the Bruar bothy. Marginally better than a wet, windy bivvy.

The wind pulled at the corrugated steel roof all night, its frightened-Bee Gee whine and the scimperings of mice doing little to bother us. Next day, we woke fresh.

Beinn Dearg is the obvious target for anyone who finds themselves at large in Atholl with a mountain to kill. It's a big'un – 1008m – and, while hardly the Eiger, it holds a high-ranking position over the surrounding, Cairngorms-esque wilderness. This was objective one for today, handily en route to objective two: another far-slung bothy on the edge of Tarf Water, 15 rough kilometres to the north-east.

As we started up the lower slopes of the mountain, the daylight brought with it an impression of the virginal immensity of this part of Scotland. Despite cloud-neutered views, Atholl seemed to be all tall, broad hills above dramatic gorges, covered in broken snow blending with a thick white sky. More weather was coming, but I felt far more confident this time. My kit was waterproofed, I had spare warm gear stowed away for the night, we had a realistic goal and two brains on the navigation. Bring on the mountain.

As we carried on further into the cloud, map-checks increased. We hit the 700m mark in zero visibility and, as the drops either side of our peripheral vision began to deepen, we ditched our pride and cross-checked our position on my GPS. This was how things would go: Tom had the map, I had the GPS, and we stopped frequently to check position. Despite a few swiftly caught glitches – I'll say it again, alone this would have been a bad idea – the system definitely worked, giving us the confidence to proceed into the mist towards our invisible target. ▶

THE RULES

CONSIDER A GPS, BUT DON'T RELY ON IT

There is no doubt about it: on wilderness trips, even a basic GPS is a very valuable tool. It can give you that most vital thing – a grid reference – which will allow you to pinpoint your position amid even the worst weather. But – and it's a big but – don't rely on it. Cold batteries fail, rain can wreck the electronics, and signal can be iffy. You must use it only as a back-up or for confirmation of your perceived position. One idea is to have one person manning the GPS and another the map, comparing results every kilometre or less. That way you have at least one person concentrating purely on the map, and another cross-checking and correcting in short intervals using the GPS.

THE MISSION



The slopes of Beinn Dearg stretched forever. We were high, but other than the deterioration of the weather and further icing of the air, we didn't know it. All I had was white, Tom to my left, the pack on my pack and the snow beneath my boots – right to the summit cairn.

During the walk up, we had evidently been on the sheltered side of the mountain: as we broke over the lip of the summit, an arctic wind laden with tacks of sleet hit us like gunfire. Huddled inside the jostling bubble of our emergency shelter beneath the trig point, we attempted to eat before taking a long look at the map, peering at our watches and questioningly at each other. It was time to make a run for the second bothy: and we'd have to move it if we didn't want to be caught up by the dark.

But the weather had other ideas.

Soon we had descended into a large basin, where a lochan outflow would guide us to the TarfWater – our handrail to the bothy, and salvation.

Waves of cloud passing over us were cutting visibility to just a few metres. Increasingly, the GPS appeared at map checks as we tried to find a route through sludge-filled runnel trapdoors and stream drains tinkling invisibly under a blanket of snow. It was here I realised there had been another hole in my original plan: even if my tent hadn't leaked and my gear had not been soaked, the route I had planned for each of my days was far too long. The combination of the weather, packweight and snow-covered terrain meant I simply never would have made it.

They say there comes a point at times of endurance where the body just becomes autonomous: feet place themselves in front of each other,

exhaustion is ignored and suddenly you just move, without thinking or effort. Rubbish, I say. The pathless ground was incessantly difficult, and I was bent into the wind, clawing ahead with walking poles and squinting against the sleet so hard my face was folded in three. Moreover, the wind chill factor – which I had estimated at around minus 260 deg C – had relieved me of the feeling in my fingers. Seeking reassurance that I wasn't the only one about to jettison digits, I pawed at Tom's back and shouted in an urgent tone: "How are your fingers?"

"Lost 'em ages ago. Don't worry, we'll be out of the wind soon."

"Grand." I'll say it yet again: it was nice to have someone else along.

Eventually we joined the course of

Above: the Tarf 'Hotel' Bothy. Heaven in hellish weather.

Far right: Testing tributaries near Tarf bothy.



the TarfWater, and were proceeding east towards the little square on the map that promised walls and a roof. I was exhausted – and dark was coming.

"Come on, up you get. Not far now, just seven kilometres."

"Seven!" I felt my legs leaden.

"OK, how about four miles?"

I considered this. "Worse."

We both had bivvy bags, but if we didn't make it to the bothy it would mean death to morale, and both of us knew it. The thought of another moist, flappy bivvy made my blood freeze, and over the next six and a half frozen kilometres it gave me the push to keep going. We were almost there. We were going to make it.

Then Tom fell belly-deep into a freezing stream.

We were trying to cross the second tributary of the TarfWater, swollen in spate and tricky to leap. It was dark and, in desperation, we found a point I was definitely sure we could both manage. And we both would have. Had it been a foot narrower.

"Pull me out, you bastard."

"Oh, no... are you properly wet?"

"Of course I'm wet. Bothy. Now."

It wasn't far. There was just enough light to make out a large building appearing out of the gloaming, greeted by us both with a whoop. Day two's walk had ended victoriously – now we just needed to get dry.

The Tarf 'Hotel' Bothy, as it's nick-named, is quite a place. A tongue-in-cheek 'AA hotel' sign adorns the door, an indication that – as bothies go – this place ain't bad. I won't get carried away (we're not talking mints on pillows), but it was dry, solid and appeared to be mouse-free which, for us, put it on par with the Savoy. And it was about to get better: as we



THE RULES

KEEP THE THINGS YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON DRY

If your down sleeping bag gets wet, you're in trouble. Down loses its warmth once wet, and it won't dry in winter air. A synthetic sleeping bag will keep you warm when wet, but this is by no means ideal so you must take every precaution to keep it dry. Use a full-length sleeping mat to prevent contact with a wet floor: even if only the footbox has got wet, once you stuff the bag away, damp will spread. A breathable sleeping bag cover is fine, but ensure it is breathable – condensation is just as wet as rain. Buy a drybag and place in it your sleeping bag, a change of clothes, spare hat, gloves, socks and a duvet jacket if you have one. You can endure wet gear on a walk, but you can't at night when you're cold and immobile.

THE RULES

BE REALISTIC ABOUT YOUR CAPABILITIES

In winter, the hours when you can safely walk are book-ended by much longer hours of cold and darkness. You won't cover as much distance by day, and the risks of being caught out by nightfall are less forgiving than in summer. Work in extra time for error in your journey legs, and adjust their lengths according to the terrain. Fifteen kilometres per day is plenty over pathless ground, and you'll probably manage much less if it's snow-covered, depending on the gradient and your own fitness. Plan escape routes, and make sure you have packed for emergencies. Buy a bivvy bag that will keep the weather off if you're benighted. Construct your route from easy, realistic sections and don't get carried away with your route-planning finger.

We wanted the Beinn a' Ghlo massif for our final day, but high winds and rain threw a spanner in the spokes as far as a thousand-metre-high ridge was concerned. The decision was made to invoke our 'low route': an escape through steep-sided Glen Tilt.

The glen's namesake river was in the most spectacular spate I had ever seen, the heavy 'pock' of rocks being pulverised along the riverbed like muted cannonfire. The walk-out took the entire day, the only break in the tedium being stupendous mist-veiled views down the glen, and a brief interlude from a quad-riding farmer – the first other person we had seen for nearly three days.

"You pair look buggered."

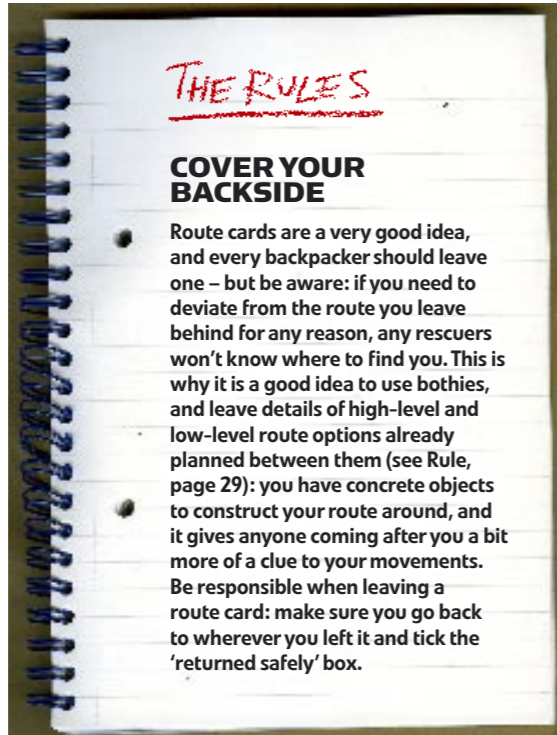
"Cheers. Give us a ride?"

"Nope. Sheep to sort. Bye!"

Clearly, we were destined to finish this walk as we'd started it. But that was okay – we had something to look forward to.

And so, Tom and I staggered into the welcoming amber of the Atholl Arms. Over the course of three rough-as-rust days, we had proved we could efficiently backpack through a winter wilderness and take on a winter Munro applying just a few simple rules. Rules which in hindsight now seemed like common sense.

Like last time, Scotland had smacked me good and hard. But at least this time I could walk away saying I had given it a little kick in return. Plus, I knew that come evening when I was curled around a steak and ale pie



looking forward to bed, some weird alchemy would take place in my mind and transform blackened, leaden memories of discomfort into scary-but-in-a-good-way gold.

Like I said, mistakes are only mistakes if you don't learn from them – and from this trip I'd learned a lot.

I'm still a bit scared of Scotland. But – like watching a good horror film, exploring The Most Evil Place in The Highlands and lots of other things that don't make sense – something tells me that's a good thing.

Retreating through Glen Tilt. Impressive glen, angry weather.



24 Hours in... Blair Atholl

Blair Atholl is a little thin on the comforts front, but the Atholl Arms Hotel (– tel. (01796) 481205) is a fine establishment that provides everything you need in terms of rest, food and alcohol. The Hotel itself has a grand fireplace, and the adjacent Bothy Bar serves good food. For supplies, there's a Spar on the main street. For further information about accommodation and activities in the area, or to request a free walking guide, call VisitScotland on 0845 225 5121.

WATERPROOFING FOR YOUR KIT

The secret to comfortable winter backpacking? Staying dry, dry, dry. Which means you'll be needing this little lot...

- Rucksack cover**
Ideal for keeping the rain off as you walk
Get one Vango does three sizes: www.vango.co.uk
- Dry bags**
Ideal for lining your rucksack, sealing in clothes and sleeping bag, stashing your rucksack outside
Get one Ortlieb's bags are as tough as bullets: www.ortlieb.de
- Map case**
Ideal for protecting your most important asset.
Get one Ortlieb (see above)
- Document wallet**
Ideal for wallet, phone, keys, batteries
Get one try Aquapak's range: www.aquapac.net/
- Rubble bags**
Ideal for extra protection for sleeping bags and clothes, food, rubbish, keeping wet gear away from dry gear
Get one any DIY store
- Ziplok freezer bags**
Ideal for GPS, anything you need to see or press buttons through
Get one available in any supermarket, but get good ones

