

To Backpack or not to Backpack. That is the question.

(by Jim Kettings, 2000 Journal)

Backpacking is hell. Once you've loaded up your rucksack and strapped it to your back you think, "That isn't to bad, I can handle this no problem". However once you've been trekking for an hour or two it feels like you're carrying a sackload of bricks with a couple of dead bodies thrown in as well.

This is what I was thinking when I was plodding the 10Km toward Sgurr nan Ceannaichean from Achnashellach station. Hours later I arrived near my starting Munro and quickly found the nearest half decent spot so I could get the weight from my back, pitched the tent and after fighting off a billion midgies, collapsed inside. I had intended doing a couple of Munros that afternoon but my morning exertions had taken their toll and when I heard the pitter patter of raindrops on the P.V.C. that decided it. I was staying put. Okay so I was on this raw food diet at the time and was carrying a bit of fruit, which is heavy, and took the wrong path a couple of times and had to backpack a bit and it's quite a stiff climb. The fact remains backpacking is quite hard. As for climbing Munros with a backpack, forget it. I've done it and don't recommend it. There was no chance of me doing that at Auchnashellach. I just used that pitch as a base to do the rest of the Munros in that area.

Later that month I fancied doing the Fife coastal path, which has been covered on the club walks, from St Andrews to Elie. I'd cut the weight right down and the route is mainly flat, even so, after a couple of hours I felt less than comfortable. An elderly woman passing me on the path remarked, "I'm glad I'm not carrying that pack on my back son". I wished I hadn't been either.

This reminds me that earlier in the year myself and Billy McKenzie had backpacked into Knoydart using the Kinlochhourn to Barrisdale path. A lovely walk of 10Km but with a backpack on, sheer torture. Billy and I were lucky, we managed to cadge a lift back on the Laird's boat. We certainly didn't fancy walking it back the way we came.

So if backpacking is all bad why do it? Well there are some advantages. It can allow you to get to remote areas without worrying about accommodation. You don't have to worry about finding anywhere to stay, anytime, as you are carrying



you own house on your back so to speak. You can pitch practically anywhere within reason in the Scottish countryside, although some estates have restrictions on where to camp. It saves time as you don't have to detour or backtrack to where you may be staying. Another big advantage is that it's cheap. That's assuming you've already purchased all the necessary requirements, (i.e. tent, sleeping bag, rucksack etc), you don't

have to spend a penny on hotels or hostels. I must admit I do enjoy camping, apart from the midgies. There's nothing quite like spending the night in the wild, snug in your sleeping bag, reading by candlelight. Much preferable than staying in some grotty bothy that you wouldn't let a dog stay in, listening to someone regaling on about their climbing exploits.

I have had some good backpacking trips, my best one ever was in August 1998 with Billy Manders and Billy McKenzie in the Cairngorms. We travelled up on the Friday night to Braemar and decided to spend the night in the Rucksacks Hotel as it was raining cats and dogs. Staying in the village had the advantage that we were able to go for a beer that night. The following day we drove to the Linn of Dee from where we started our expedition. Following the

path past Derry Lodge we reached the bottom of Carn a'Mhaim and from there started the hard slog up the Munro. It was a struggle but we weren't finished, only started. We descended into the Lairig Ghru then up Coire Odhar, passing Corrour Bothy onto the Devil's Point. From there we travelled north along the ridge and left our rucksacks, before ascending the rocky summit of Cairn Toul. Back down, we threw on our sacks again before heading onto the Angels Peak. It was a glorious day with clear blue skies where the eye could see for miles. It was a long trek to our last Munro that day and we had to come back the same way so we decided to leave our sacks on the ridge and walk



the 4Km to Braeriach and pick them up on the way back. Everything went well until we approached the summit, a large cloud seemed to descend and before we knew it we were enveloped in a huge fog. Worrying we might not be able to find our sacks we hurried back and were relieved when we found them. Continuing south we camped near Loch nan Stuirteag which is situated nearly 900 metres above sea level. As we were so high up, the following day was a dawdle. It didn't take us long to ascend Monadh Mor and Beinn Bhrotain, from where we dropped onto the path at Glen Dee to trek back to the car at Linn of Dee. A great weekend with seven Munros bagged. That trip was the exception. As I mentioned before I don't like climbing Munros with a heavy rucksack. If I can, it's far better driving near to where you want to go, pitch the tent and using that as the base. Or walking a short distance inland toward your intended hills, take the easy option whenever possible. In saying that weighing up the pros and cons I'll probably be backpacking somewhere else this summer.