



Winter Mountain Photography

TIM PARKIN GOES WILD CAMPING IN GLENCOE



Beginning Winter Mountain Photography

CAMPING ABOVE THE THREE SISTERS

Colin Prior's books on Scotland's mountains were one of my first introductions to the world of landscape photography. *Highland Wilderness* and *The Wild Places* showed me the beauty of Scotland's finest peaks but it was the winter depictions that really grabbed me. Over the last decade me and my wife Charlotte have visited Scotland every year and most of these visits have been to Glencoe. We've always wanted to 'get up high' and despite some longer walks have never done so due to lack of skills and fitness. Two years ago we decided

THE INSPIRATION

The story goes that James Britton, Charlotte's brother, took Maria walking in Scotland in winter and decided on a trip up Stobh Coire nan Lochan, across Bidean and down the Lost Valley. James is a qualified mountain leader but the trip was challenging for Maria who had done very little winter walking before. Running out of light on the way toward the back wall of the Lost Valley they met up with some Germans who weren't equipped with lights, crampons, ice axes or rope and they were committed to the descent

it was about time to do things properly and we employed the services of Rich Pyne. Rich was recommended by a colleague because of his wealth of direct experience on the hill. Although Rich suggested a trip to Ben Nevis (more likely to get snow) we decided on trip to the Lost Valley in memory of our late sister in law, Maria, who died of cancer three years ago.

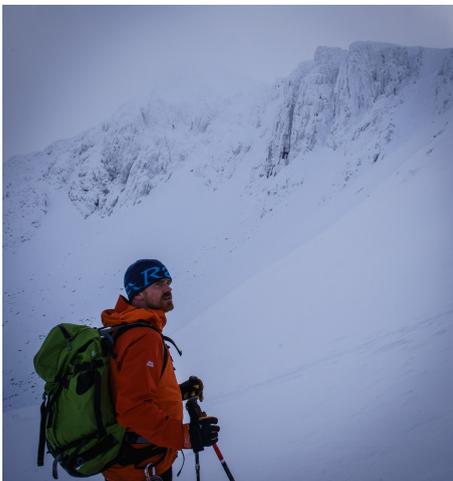
over the cornice and into the lost valley. James 'borrowed' Maria's crampons, light and axe and left her three quarters the way up the back wall of the lost valley as he belayed the Germans down the slope to the bottom. Maria told the story of singing 'Sitting on Top of The Bay' by Otis Redding at full blast to keep the jitters at bay as she clung to the cliff face looking out onto the blackness. Maria told us all about this as we saw her for the last time; good memories.



Tim Parkin

Amateur Photographer who plays with big cameras and film when in between digital photographs.

timparkin.co.uk



*Rich Pyne -
Our Mountain
Leader*

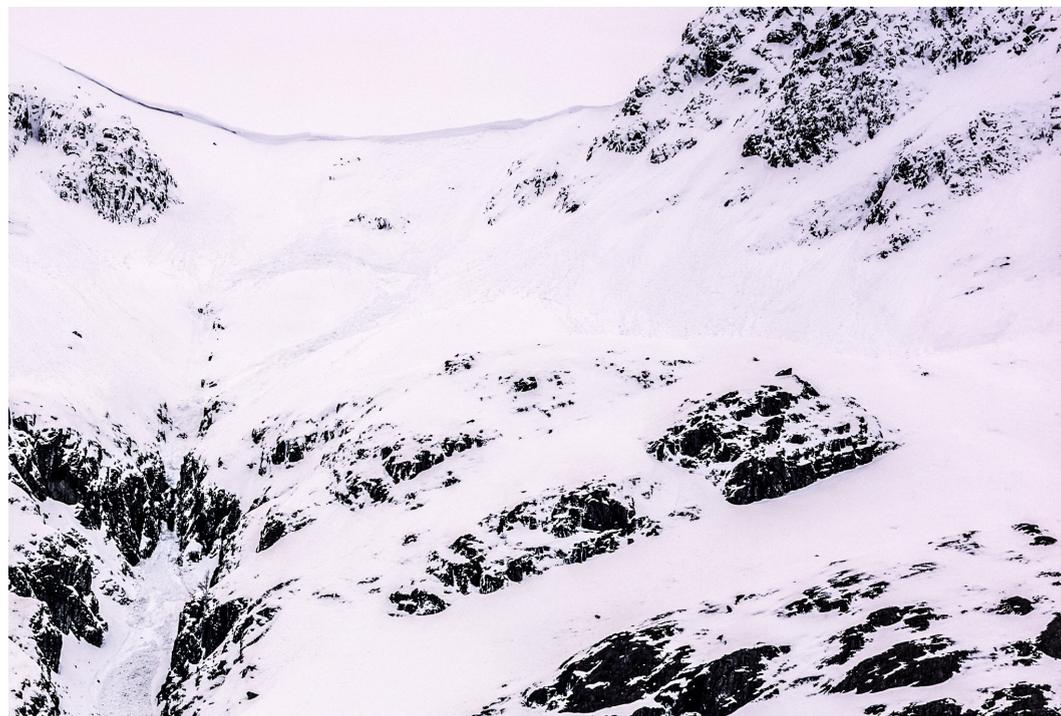


Camping in the Lost valley below the snow line

OUR FIRST TRIP

We decided a slightly less challenging first experience would be appropriate and hence planned an overnight camp in the Lost Valley and an ascent up the back wall. The King's Head makes an appropriate base for most operations in Glencoe (although the Clachaig is warmer and friendlier) and so on the morning on the walk we awoke to hovering freezing conditions and a snow pack that started at 500m with nothing below it.

Once the tent was set up we spent the afternoon practising ice axe self arrests and the use of the ice axe as general safety aid. We also reviewed Avalanche conditions (more about that later). After a gusty evening (not due to the curry) we spent the next day walking toward the back wall and working on crampon technique. After a few photographs and a brief break we were going to ascend Gairr Aonach via a south western gully. However, after seeing a big avalanche on the side of Beinn Fhada and then some cracking noises above us (sounded like shotguns firing) we decided a quick descent was probably the order of the day.



Lost Valley head wall - Too much avalanche risk to continue



TAKETWO (YEARS)

So all in all we learned a hell of a lot but didn't get much snow or altitude but I did manage to take a couple of large format pictures whilst tucked into a snow hole we dug in the side of the hill. Two years later (doesn't time fly!) and little chance to make the most of our skills we decided to call on Rich's services again but this time for a more challenging trip. This time we wanted to camp a bit higher and walk higher still in order to make sure we got some snow. The plan was to walk up to Coire nan Lochan, set up camp, do a little playing and then the following day to walk up to Stobh Coire nan Lochan.

This time I planned to take the Sony A7RII and the Canon 24-70 f/4 IS lens mounted on a Peak Design clip on my strap as I realised that most photographs would be taken whilst on the move and the in body IS and lens IS of the Sony/Canon hybrid allows me to take very slow exposures at very high ISOs and still get good results.

ASCENDING

The walk up was surprisingly easy compared with how I expected it. I made sure I started cool and managed to make it to the top without sweating wearing just a 200 weight Icebreaker Merino base layer and a hard shell jacket (my coveted Millet Goretex jacket). I'm starting to realise that some of my out of breath episodes are my body trying to cool down, not necessarily being unfit but an overheating.

The only 'snag' on the walk was a nasty step over a 45 degree sloping rock that funnelled down to a 30ft drop into the river. Instead of trying to make the step we decided to scramble up the 12ft cliff on the left hand side. It was quite embarrassing to see the 'climby' types just stride across the gap.

We met up with Rich on the way and made the final steps to Coire nan Lochan without crampons and axe because of the deep snow, with Rich teaching us good boot technique along the way.



On the way up to Coire nan Lochan

“THE ONLY ‘SNAG’ ON THE WALK WAS A NASTY STEP OVER A 45 DEGREE SLOPING ROCK THAT FUNNELLED DOWN TO A 30FT DROP INTO THE RIVER.”

CAMPING

Finding a place to set the tents up was fun with nearly a foot of snow on the ground. Too flat and you might have found a lochan and you don't know where the rocks are. Fortunately Rich had brought a snow shovel, a very, very useful accessory for this and other, more personal, tasks. Tents up and a quick dinner and we took a walk over to Aonach Dubh, foregoing the self arrest practise as the thick, new snow was doing enough arresting to make any sort of slide impossible. The cloud was well and truly in though and so we declared the day over, had a rest in the tent, cooked some food and hid for the night.



Just after nightfall the snow started falling too.



“FINDING A PLACE TO SET THE TENTS UP WAS FUN WITH NEARLY A FOOT OF SNOW ON THE GROUND.”

Half way through the night the snow turned to spaghetti



“THE SUN WAS RISING BEHIND GARR AONACH, BHEINN FHADA AND THE PEAK OF THE BUACHAILLE IN THE DISTANCE. WE HAD HAD ANOTHER 6 OR SO INCHES OF SNOW IN THE NIGHT AND ALL WAS CRYSTALLINE PINK.”

SUNRISE

The big day started early with one of the most beautiful views of Scotland I've seen. The sun was rising behind Gear Aonach, Bheinn Fhada and the peak of the Buachaille in the distance. We had had another 6 or so inches of snow in the night and all was crystalline pink. Of course the camera came out and I shot a couple of 360 panoramas as well as some details. Sadly the Sony ran out of battery as I had been using it the previous day. Normally this wouldn't be an issue as I carry spares all of the time (to keep one in warm pocket). However in this case for some reason the Sony decided to default to the previous settings, sadly these included the ISO set at 25,600. Only one of the panoramas (an incomplete one without the peaks of SCnL) was taken at ISO 640. Amazingly the high ISO panoramas were still usable (see picture on p71).

Breakfast was interesting as although we kept the water from freezing in the overnight -10 conditions by keeping it in the tent, the burner tube on our stove had frozen and wasn't letting any gas through. We eventually used another burner to warm the pipe (unattached!) which solves things.

Later, however, when we removed the canister to pack up, the canister had frozen open and was spitting out gas - something to be aware of, especially when you're cooking on another canister nearby! (we threw our canister over into the snow away from our tents - a better solution would have been to just screw it back onto the stove when you realise that it's leaking).



The conditions looked suitably Arctic

“BREAKFAST WAS INTERESTING AS ALTHOUGH WE KEPT THE WATER FROM FREEZING IN THE OVERNIGHT -10 CONDITIONS BY KEEPING IT IN THE TENT, THE BURNER TUBE ON OUR STOVE HAD FROZEN AND WASN'T LETTING ANY GAS THROUGH.”



An alternative view of the Three Sisters

OUR WALK

All warmed up and ready to go we set off on a walk up the ridge. The snow was very thick and sticky and so pretty safe again (we couldn't really slide off anything, even if we tried). This made self arrest practise difficult although we found a steeper slope to have a play near the top of the ridge. Self arrests basically involve getting yourself lying face down with your feet in the air and you ice axe point under your sternum so the ice axe point is just over your shoulder. The ice axe and your knees should be the only points of contact to get as much traction onto the ice axe as possible. The trick comes in getting safely into this position even if you fall head first and upside down. Here's a very good [video](#) showing the techniques involved.

Our walk was pretty easy though - 300m of ascent from the campsite and once we'd got onto the ridge the snow was a big harder and less deep. The snow was sublime though - wind shaped sastrugi everywhere and it was difficult to walk past them but I knew this was more about getting experience than photography and having the camera on the Peak Design clip attached to my rucksack shoulder strap made it easy to take quick photos as we travelled. As we walked the ridge, avoiding the corniced edges, we could see the basalt columns forming the outcrops - a rare sight in the UK.



Walking up toward Stobh Coire nan Lochan

“THE SNOW WAS SUBLIME THOUGH - WIND SHAPED SASTRUGI EVERYWHERE AND IT WAS DIFFICULT TO WALK PAST THEM BUT I KNEW THIS WAS MORE ABOUT GETTING EXPERIENCE THAN PHOTOGRAPHY AND HAVING THE CAMERA ON THE PEAK DESIGN CLIP ATTACHED TO MY RUCKSACK SHOULDER STRAP MADE IT EASY TO TAKE QUICK PHOTOS AS WE TRAVELLED.”



Early sunlight shaping the snow covered rocks



It was hard not to repeatedly stop to capture the beautiful sastrugi

It's interesting how your attitude to 'exposure' (that sphincter clenching reaction when you might think you're reasonably safe but your body is saying "ABORT! ABORT!") changes over time. The first time we went out in the lost valley, Rich got us to try front pointing (using the very front points of your crampons) and ice axe to get over a rocky outcrop.

Even though I knew Richard was there and the equipment was rock solid, my body wasn't happy - to the point that I was OK in the moment but once I'd got over the edge I got all emotional for a bit (a typical reaction to fear I've been told but not one I've had before). This time I was happily long stepping down the slopes even though the slope fell away down to Glencoe. It's all about getting used to how your gear and your environment behaves.

My body had learned that snow can hold your weight and it won't all of a sudden turn to mush and let me slide down the mountain and my crampons we're all of a sudden going to slip off and my ice axe turn to rubber. The relatively few major injuries in the hills is testament to how 'safe' it is if you're not stupid. Having someone with you to help your body learn these 'facts' is really important in my opinion though (and at £200 a day to support people with such life saving skills is well worth the money).



Getting confidence in the gear and conditions



Even when the slope ends in a cliff





Throughout the two days at the top of Coire nan Lochan we kept seeing one or two crows. We wondered just how they found enough to eat up at the top and then realised that they were probably pinching bits of dropped food from the climbers. This was confirmed later when we were told of a climber who had their lunch box stolen a few weeks before. To see them flying around the crags was a pleasure though - the true kings of the hill.

The worst part of the whole journey was the walk out. Black ice had formed on the path and as it was going dark we decided to keep our crampons on (especially after seeing multiple rock climbers slipping on their arses). This and the 50lb load made for ankle straining and foot pounding walking. Also being able to see the car park from the very top made it mentally demoralising too!

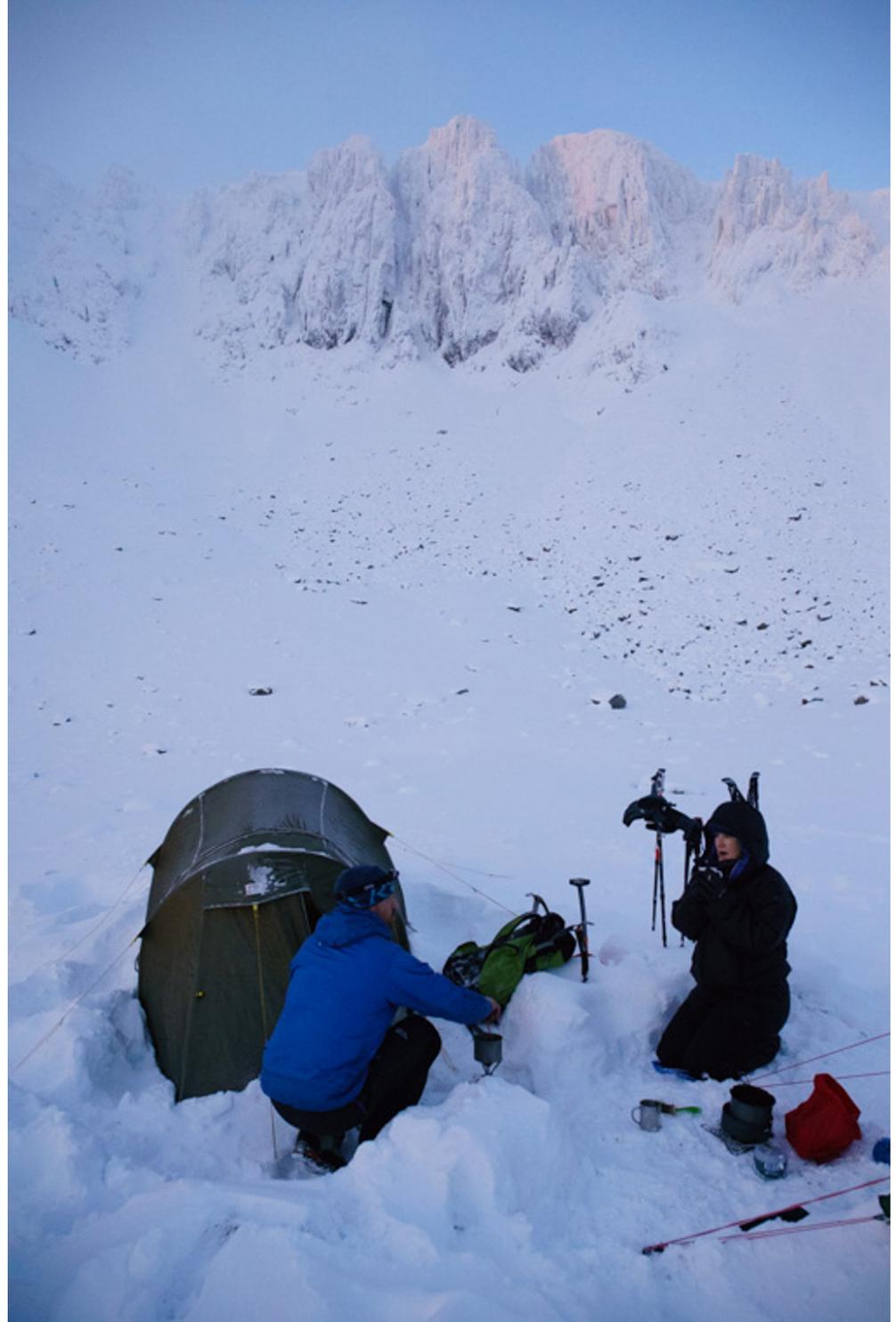
CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately the trip was a huge success for us. We proved we can manage the weight and height, even for unfit and physically restrained individuals (me with 3 fused vertebrae, Charlotte with arthritic hips after suffering Perthes Disease as a child). Being able to camp at the top meant we could take it easy on the way up and down and still spend some good quality time on the top.

We undoubtedly were fortunate with the weather. But then again, you've got to be in the game to get lucky! We used to look up the mountains with trepidation and think "That's no place for the likes of us" but with some excellent guidance from a trained Mountain Leader and a little persistence we both realised that a new world is accessible - one that I hope we'll be visiting regularly in the future.

p.s If you want a guide to mountain photography from an expert, take a look [here](#).

Keeping warm with a good cup of Yorkshire tea



For those of you interested in our gear choices, we had the following

EQUIPMENT

Tent - Hilleberg Nallo 2 GT

We wanted a four season tent that you could put up quickly in bad weather; that didn't force you to pitch the inner first; and with a decent sized porch for cooking, undressing wet layers and also gear (you don't want to be taking wet clothes off inside your sleeping area if you can help it). The tent is fairly lightweight for what it is (2.7Kg) although lighter tents can be had with various compromises. ([Putting up Nallo 2 in the wind. Cotswold Outdoor Nallo Demo.](#))

The tent performed very well and the sleeping compartment hovered around freezing allowing us to keep our water ready for a quick brew in the morning. The winds overnight were probably gusting 40mph at times but didn't really disturb our night too much.

Cooking - Primus Eta Pack Lite

This little set up was fantastic for a few reasons as well as it's lightweight (<500g) and keeps the pot low to the ground (less chance of knocking over).

The first is that it's fast, the heat exchanger pot really speeds up boil times and gives you under 4 minutes to boil a litre of near freezing water.

The second is that it works with the canister inverted which is brilliant in very low temperatures. It works because you push liquid gas through the pipe which turns to gas in the pre-warmer and it also allows you to pour a little water into the bottom of the inverted canister - this keeps the temperature of the gas up above freezing and ensures you keep pressure up. This technique works especially well when you're running low. Don't forget to turn off the gas about a minute or two before the water



The porch space in the Nallo 2 GT was great to store equipment and wet outer clothing

boils as it takes that long for the gas to make its way through the pipe to the burner.

The third is that it has one of the lowest levels of carbon monoxide generation out of a range of stoves (see [Backpacking Light](#), subscription website). This means it's as safe as you'll get for cooking inside your tent. The Eta produced between 3ppm and 13ppm from low to high power and in comparison the MSR Reactor produced between 50ppm and 1200ppm from high to low power (worse as it simmered). 30ppm is the UK safe limit for long term exposure and 200ppm is the safe limit for short term exposure (15 minutes). The level next to a

road can exceed 30ppm for reference. We're not suggesting cooking in your tent is completely safe (for many reasons) but people do do it and if you are going to do it it's worth knowing the risks.

Walking Poles - Black Diamond Trail Pro

Not cheap as walking poles go but the main reason for these is the locking mechanism. If you're walking on steep hills and zig-zagging up slopes, you either need to swap hands or resize poles quickly. I don't trust twist locks having had them fail on my (and other people I know) so it's clip locks or nothing. The [BDTP](#) clips are very quick to lock and unlock even with gloves on.

Ice Ace - Petzl Charlet

Good value, simple ice axe that is more oriented to walking than climbing and has enough length so that I wasn't leaning over all of the time. (Thanks Mr and Mrs Unsworth!)

Crampons and Boots - Scarpa Manta and Grivel G12

You can't go wrong with a pair of Mantas and although the Grivel might be a bit overkill for what I was doing I got a good price on them. If you're buying boots, make sure they're crampon compatible (stiff) and then buy the crampons to suit. Get some good advice here and don't be afraid to buy them second hand as there are lots available.



Backpack - Berghaus Bioflex 90+15

Complete overkill in terms of size but it allowed me to get my tent, sleeping bag and the rest of the gear inside without have to stuff everything in. A someone with a bad back I love the reinforced belt (it has articulated metal struts in the waist belt which means it doesn't "sag" and put too much pressure on hips) and also the articulated connection on to the waist belt which made some of the more precarious moves a lot easier (although it creaked a bit).

Sleeping Bag and Mat - MacPac Sanctuary 700 and Thermarest NeoAir Trekker

A budget purchase (£150 a few years ago) that I was a bit worried about (it's classed as three season with a comfort level at -5 deg C) but it was cosy warm in the end because the tent (and two people) kept the sleeping area pretty warm - something the don't tell you about when you're buying sleeping bags. The NeoAir Trekker just does the job and it's very light indeed.

My only issue with sleeping overall was that I suffer from Restless Legs Syndrome. This effectively means having my legs wrapped up in a mummy bag is like absolute torture - difficult to describe the pain but imagine the achy joints you get during the worst flu you've had and double it.

I'm considering moving to a quilt plus exped downmat for future trips; I've got my eye on a PhD Duo Down Quilt and will use an Exped Downmat 7 underneath it.

A good set of stiff boots and crampons gives you enviable grip on the mountain

Clothing - Mixed

The main items of clothing were Icebreaker merino wool base layers, Rohan snow pants, North Face rain pants and my trusty Paramo Torres over trousers and zip jacket. The Torres have proven incredibly useful in their mix of water resistance and warmth. Cooking in a blizzard at -8 deg C was a pleasure and I didn't feel cold once.

Featured Comments...

herb1815 : Brilliant article Tim , stunning views and images that not many people get to experience , the views really are amazing when you get up that high , I will never forget the first time I got to the top of the Coulin Ridge on Skye and looked over the edge , it took my breath away !
(not that I had any left after the climb up) shame I wasn't into taking photos back then.

Adam Pierzchala : Bravo Tim, I take my hat off to you and Charlotte for your courage. Winter in Scotland's mountains is a serious affair! Is your wonderful super-panorama on Flickr from this trip too?

Aman Agrawal : Very inspiring post Tim, its all about preparation and being educated in these kinds of conditions that makes all the difference between being perilously and hopelessly lost and enjoying while avoiding the pitfalls.

on landscape

Discuss this article

[Click here to view and discuss](#)