

No place like home

Sir Ranulph Fiennes and Tom Avery have explored every corner of the planet, yet both agree that some of the finest landscapes are right on our doorstep

Sir Ranulph Twelfth-century Wykeham Fiennes (the world's greatest living explorer), fellow adventurer Tom Avery (the youngest man ever to reach the South Pole, and 200 in so hardy-looking words clad in fleece and Pertex, have come to Skye, Scotland, to take part in the inaugural Tallish Trek, a fundraiser for the Woodland Trust's tree-planting programme sponsored by the ale's whisky distiller. It involves a moderately competitive hike around five magical, little-explored Gullies, bogs and foothills, along with a few inspiring, orienteering exercises thrown in. Then, the plan is to repair to the camp marquee, drink, chat, weather beaten, and wind tanned for food, whisky and a bit of a celtic. Two days of drama and drama, if you will.

Imagine Mike Long's *Notes in My Mind* from Donnet to Scotland and shot on a David Lean budget, and you'll start to get the picture.

Accordingly, accommodation for the tall hairy kiths and Cawdor Macra on the Tallish Trek is pretty luxury these – a small village of modern, four-roomed tents and bring-your-own sleeping bags in the boy-side campsite at Loch Brittle beach. Lots are rock festival standards and the food is, well, basic. Thank God for the complimentary drama of Tallish whisky, the indigenous island moonshine aka "Skye Channagach", heating you on the way back to your shelter when darkness finally falls at 19pm.

Of course, we are not here for the food. We are here because Skye, particularly this bit of Skye, particularly this bit of Skye, the sea is jade and the black hills are alive, wet, it beats to the moon, but it's in the stomach spectacular. Here are here to walk among its brooding magnificence, to stomp on its glaciers, to wallow in its isolation, to drink in its sunsets and darkness.

Why Skye? After all, the Alps are higher, bigger and badder, blessed with steeper peaks, bluer skies and lush valleys. The Pyrenees are unspook by persistent rain and better served by gastronomy and modern hotels. But the mountains of Scotland, and more specifically, the mountains on Skye, "isle of mist", have a topology that is stark and powerfully profound.

Black and soulful, the Cuillin has an immovable charisma that is almost unerring, while the brutal glamour of the Cuillin and its peaks is apparently named after Tom Maides records – Am Baithe, "the executioner", an Gaelic choir. "The wild catbird" demands you wild, gets you your heart pumping and makes your spirit soar.

And it's ours; a patriotic element that stirs something in Tom Avery, too. "There's an almost tangible feeling that these mountains have a soul, more powerful than that of the Alps or the Himalayas, that this land has looked like this for hundreds of millions of years," he says wondrously. "And you definitely feel a certain pride about the fact that it's part of your home. I am immensely proud of the landscape we have on the Scottish Isles and often I think the best adventures are in our own back yard. Most of us are convinced we live in a flat country. I mean look

around you... we just don't."

By coincidence, Avery had his first ever mountain experience on a school trip right here on the Cuillin, staying at the very same campsite that we are pitched on. "We climbed Sgorr Alasdair, one of the peaks right above us," he recalls nodding at the Macneil mullin and chipped incisors of the Cuillin ridge. "I remember it having a terrific and dramatic impact on my consciousness. It was bigger and better than I'd ever thought possible."

As we sit eating our packed lunches looking across the calm, Soay Sound, Avery tells me that this kind of vista is every bit as inspiring as anything he has seen on his more extreme expeditions and other trips to Torridon (northwest Scotland) and even a hike on the South Downs Way as equally inspirational.

"Sometimes I think the whole 'big adventure' thing is over-rated," he says. "There's too much emphasis on bagging high mountains, topological box-ticking and bagging about remote, foreign lands. My advice is, go for the enjoyment not the bragging rights. Try Britain before you go to Nepal. For me, it's all about being in the outdoors, miles from other people. Choosing the right place is crucial. But it's not always the highest or most famous place. You can go to Kilnsevan or Everest and find yourself queuing. There are Coca-Cola vending machines half-way up Mount Fuji. If we'd gone up Ben Nevis on a perfect day like today, it would have been crowded with people, but Ben Macduil, Scotland's second highest mountain would have been deserted."

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Where young Tom Avery is poetic and benevolent about his adventuring. Sir Ranulph Fiennes, some 31 years his senior, is coolly pragmatic and still fiercely competitive. Fit and lean, keen-eyed and playfully contemptuous, his sub-militaristic mien belongs in a long-gone era of *Kilnsevan*, *Macduil*, and *trap* points.

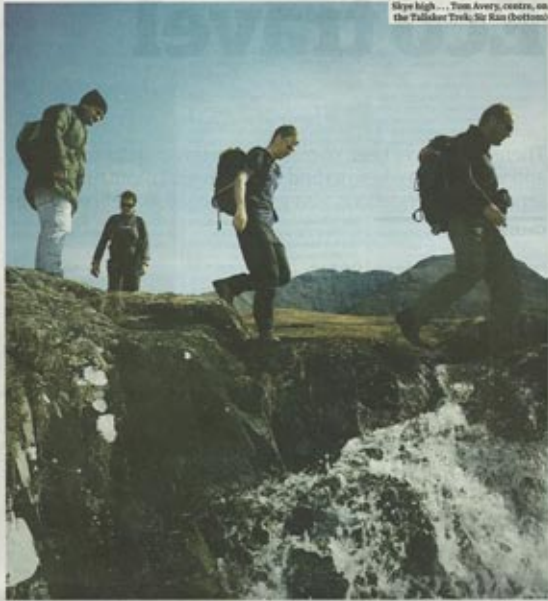
So, does Sir Ran understand the concept of walking for pleasure? Fiennes shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "No," he says firmly. "But really, I understand the concept of walking for pleasure in other people, and trekking is good fun, there are no two ways about it... but, for me there has to be a competitive edge otherwise I'm not really interested."

When Lark asks about his favourite places in the UK, Fiennes admits to having a special affection for this part of Scotland having visited with his wife 35 years ago, but really prefers belatedly sounding adventure race events: the Lower Alpine Marathon, the High Peak Marathon.

"Both of which are on our doorsteps," he thinks for a moment, then adds, mischievously, "I'll live to see, I suppose I might take up golf." Which is like walking with a bit of competition there in, isn't it?

"Golf?" says "I am so disappointed to hear that." Sir Ben smiles. "I think he's being feisty," says his girlfriend, *Susan Mills*.

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