

# Bearing Up! - A Cool Line in the Cuillin

*Paul Taylor*

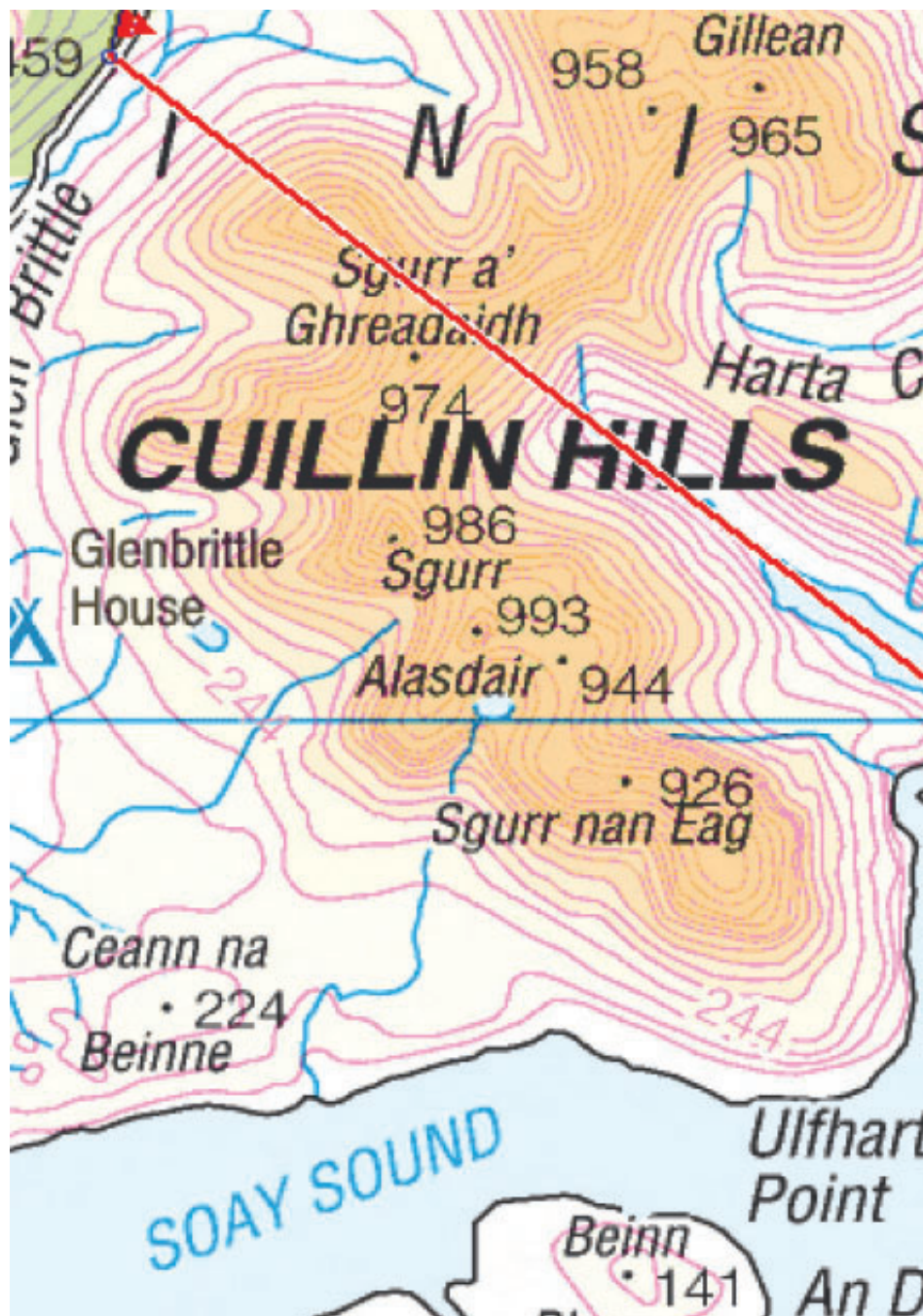
## **What is Bearing Up!?**

The Bearing Up! project is a set of wild challenges that hopefully might 'bear fruit' for the benefit of Mountain Rescue Teams following difficult lines on one bearing within mountainous landscapes, swimming challenging open waters, scrambling and climbing up steeper ground to support others in straits, and also raise awareness of the rising number of floods that have reached new levels in our valleys. All lines are followed with a 'leave no trace' philosophy and a target to 'do each route in one continuous push within a day'. The fairy world is inhabited by many different types of fairies. Like the humans themselves they live in all kinds of houses. Time does not matter in the land of the fairies.

What is a true wilderness experience? A long, exciting, mythical journey or a spiritual odyssey? (An odyssey – A long and eventful or adventurous journey or experience). What is the aim and what bearing does it have on the traveller? Is there any target or goal?

After many years of chasing blue lines on the bottom of swimming pools, I changed my ways, preferring to scale rock, or ascend mountains, or both; finding thrills following good lines. As a keen photographer, I've learnt the importance of lines-of-sight, discovering that landscape images frequently show a body of water in the foreground or background. It took many years of my time-line to piece things together, but the key that unlocked recent route plans was with the purchase of an open-water wetsuit - then it all began to fit. I'd found merman skin. My wilder adventures have usually been by climbing, but surely water and rock don't mix?... and rain stops play. My latest projects all have a common linear theme, across water and up rock, striving to create classic, memorable lines. Off we'll go.... Bearing Up!

Planning from home in Halifax, I found myself looking at maps, zooming into significant water features, thumbing through guidebooks and searching for lines in the land. I had some knowledge of landscape art and was particularly drawn to the land art and photography of 'A Line Made by Walking' by Richard Long in 1967. This work was drawing me closer to focus in on an objective, to find a new simple way to plan some 'good days out' and 'get out there'... to boldly go... and go and keep on going... straight ahead, on one bearing. Not long after, I read some of Robert Macfarlane's 'The Wild Places' and a passage that clearly described his swim in the sanctuary of Loch Coruisk. I too have an attraction for the Cuillins, perhaps it's the magnetic rock, but I couldn't fail to glance an eagle eye over one line, stretching along the map and forming the 'Skye-Line'. It wasn't just that many of Skye's main tourist attractions lay on this line, from the Fairy Pools bisecting the Cuillin mountains, through Loch Coruisk. There was more: an inland island; sea and summits; a ridge - the most awesome wall of rock in the UK, and all in a wild and remote environment. I didn't have





The Skye-line route.

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a ruler long enough to link all the points. I reached for the longest, straightest edge I could find and joined the dots.

'Bearing Up!' Mascots - two teddy-bears, from A to Z, Azimuth and Zenith, ideas raced and there was no way back. I plotted route after route on my phone's Viewranger mapping app, quick and simple, just a start, a lake, a good climb and a finish point. When is a line not straight? Answer: Everywhere. Light has been described as travelling in straight lines. But, according to Einstein's General Relativity. As a matter of fact, 'straight' is a very relative term, to keep it simple and straightforward. There is NO straight, since gravity alters the very fabric of space-time, bringing in curvature. It is safe to assert that nothing is actually 'straight'. So, by extension, light doesn't really travel in a straight line, but just follows the curvature of the space-time fabric, whatever that may be. A pretty cool example would be when this was actually observed for the very first time - when it was proved that General Relativity actually holds good.

The first observation of light deflection by Arthur Eddington was performed by noting the change in position of stars as they passed near the Sun during the total solar eclipse of 29th May 1919.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tests\\_of\\_general\\_relativity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tests_of_general_relativity).

The absurdity of straight lines soon dawns on me. My new routes cannot be completely rigid. I'm not mad! Of course, it may all be rather eccentric. I would clearly need to occasionally bear left, or bear right, or I'd travel straight into dire straits. I needed flexibility in my approach. These straightforward ventures, linear from a bird's eye view, would have their ups and downs - U-turn if you want to - but, of course there was no going back.

Cancel the Alpine holiday, we hope for fair weather, out with the midge hoods, we commit to a summer of Bearing Up! Over the sea to Skye.

Heeding some very sound advice from the Mountain Rescue Team, Rachel and I make a brief reconnaissance dash over to Coir an Uaigneis. We set off, despite grey and gloomy weather, with the ridge looking distinctly imposing. I identify a rake that leads up to Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh and my angle up onto the Cuillin ridge. This would then meet the spur adjoining Sgùrr Thuilm. Keeping on the straight and narrow, tested by jagged gabbro, I hope that there's a thread that stretches higher into the mists. Peering into the cloud gives me no further clear clues, but the gloom lifts enough below to enable us to take a back-bearing photo down to Loch Coruisk and Sgùrr na Stri, the 'Peak of Strife'. I point 'Bolt-like' along my elected future bearing. The obstacle course stretches out, baring its teeth.

Why Go On a Walk, When You Can Go On a Bear Hunt?

*We're going on a bear hunt.*

*We're going to catch a big one.*

*What a beautiful day!*

*We're not scared.*

Michael Rosen

We pitch up, with a fine dawn forecast, and I set off alone at seven in the morning, straight from the tent at the road junction (Grid Reference NG 5432 1561) on a bearing of 309°. The hill immediately climbs steeply, and I am led by a small herd of deer high on the horizon. The weather is clearly set for a good day. Ben Mèabost rises up on my left, the deer flee off right. The Cuillin are obscured behind the horizon. Boggy topped, flowering with various marshland species, Ben Mèabost is the most southerly Marilyn on the Elgol peninsula. Its flat plateau reaches only 345m and is separated by Glen Scaladal from nearby Beinn Leacach. So, time to 'tick' this, then tramp over a Tump, splash across a sea bay, scramble over another Marilyn, make a long loch swim, with an island hop, 'bag' a Munro (also classed as a Murdo) and finally scramble along a rocky ridge. What a wilderness feast!

Sgùrr na Stri peeks its head up. An eclipse of its summit occurs as I continue down into the small glen. Climbing up the other side, a new panorama is revealed, the mild but still wild nature exchanged for the more remote and rugged views of the Cuillin.

Then, down to the bay, where I'll swim over the sea, in the realm of the selkie or seal folk where perhaps I'll encounter – water spirits - merfolk and - kelpie. The Scottish kelpie either appears as a horse or as an old shabby man. He can be found in all types of waters. He is a mischievous creature who likes to drown lonely humans. As an old man the kelpie walks behind lonely travellers, tearing them apart and eating them up. A spirit called shellycoat who lives at the Scottish sea coast also is depicted as wearing a coat full of shells which make a strange sound whenever he appears. He likes to play jokes by giving wrong directions to humans who are on a journey. The Motif of the Mermaid in English, Irish, and Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales.

2.1.3. Water Spirits and other Fairy Types. Stephanie Kickingereder.

Shellycoats are considered to be relatively harmless; they may mislead wanderers, particularly those they think are trespassing upon the creature's territory, but without malice. A common tactic of a shellycoat would be to cry out as if drowning and then laugh at the distracted victim. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shellycoat>.

Camasunary (Camas Fhionnairigh) is a beautifully isolated bay lying at the foot of Blaven (Bla Bheinn). There are only two notable signs of habitation, a bothy and another larger property, privately owned; it's a lovely spot perhaps to stay a while. I hear faint cries of children playing near the house as I prepare for the first aquatic adventure of the day. Three oyster catchers flit about the water's edge on a gabbro boulder. I pack my kitbags. These buoyant, waterproof vessels are in fact an unusual eclectic mismatched collection of water containers - an orange tow-float and some bargain-choice black bin-liners! I giggle at the possibility that a refuse bag manufacturer might sponsor such adventures:

*'From our classic Cuillin range of rubbish bag products, our best-selling black waste sacks are perfect for everyday use and swim-trek expeditions. Made from 160-gauge polythene, they strike the perfect balance between bag strength and price - thick enough so they don't rip easily, but not too*



*Camas Fhionnairigh.*

*All photos Taylor Collection*

*hard on the wallet either. Tested at sea and on Scottish lochs to always keep afloat. A popular choice, these are our recommended bags for Bearing Up! as well as chucking out!*

I stick both boots in, don my merman-suit, and orange swim hat - cohall draoidheachd = magic hood.

Merfolk wear a special hat which enable them to dive beneath the waves. If they lose this cap, it is said that they will lose their power to return beneath the water. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merrow>

The water is cool, clear and calm. Changing from front-crawl to back-crawl, looking around, taking in the view, this is no place to race and no fun without lapping up the atmosphere. The waves crossing the bay buffet, disorientate and put me off balance. Overhead, a small group of gulls dive down to inspect their invader. The water is clear and shallow, and I rarely lose sight of the bottom. My forward sightings are fixed on the lofty summit ahead but, breathing to the right, I regularly glance over to the little white houses onshore in the valley. A flash of a jellyfish below pulls me up but is rapidly replaced by sweeps of seaweeds; the shallows soon reappear as I approach the craggy shore. My swimming distance so far, about a kilometre. Unpacking boots, I happily find them dry. I wrap up the damp wetsuit in my tow float's pocket. All remaining kit is bone dry and feels warm. I soak in sun and the satisfaction of having swum Camasunary bay. Sunshine, boots and socks warm my slightly chilled feet.

Next - a classic scramble, one that I was very much looking forward to. The direct route up the South-East Ridge of Sgùrr na Stri is a G Grade 1 route, gets two stars and is described as 'only for experienced scramblers'. Many reckon the summit to be Britain's finest viewpoint. By taking the ridge route I would avoid the infamous Bad Step and take in the glorious view. Strictly speaking, the summit would be slightly 'off bearing' but sometimes making a minor diversion returns major rewards. I am not disappointed. The Cuillin lie stretched out ahead, bisected by Loch Coruisk. The image surpasses that which I had imagined it to be. A brief stop at the top and then I'm off again, bearing down on Loch Coruisk to the 'Cauldron of Waters'.

The descent is more awkward. The rake to the west of the summit leads down through precipitous gabbro slopes which in turn aim directly for an erratic boulder perched upon a slab and perfectly in line with a long thin island in the middle of the loch. This would surely be a lonely, isolated,



*Loch Coruisk from Sgùrr na Stri.*

disorientating place in the mist. However, I have warm sunshine on my back, a clear view ahead and, as my photo shows, my own shadow as guide to point the way down. A perfect navigator.

Boat passengers are clearly enjoying their day ashore, having been ferried there by the Bella Jane.

At the water's edge I test its temperature. Not exactly balmy. There is not a soul in the lake despite a small number of walkers about its edge. I feel conscious of an audience as I line out a procession of burdensome baggage strung out on bungee cord and tapes. My orange swimming cap does nothing to help me blend in.

I decide to set sail. With a simple glide, I'm off, heading to my island in the sun'.

The loch has been atmospherically painted by Turner, George Fennel Robson and Sidney Richard Percy. Lord Tennyson reported his own visit somewhat wretchedly:

*'Loch Coruisk, said to be the wildest scene in the Highlands, I failed in seeing. After a fatiguing expedition over the roughest ground on a wet day we arrived at the banks of the loch, and made acquaintance with the extremest tiptoes of the hills, all else being thick wool-white fog.'*

Sir Walter Scott also visited the loch in 1814 and described it more intensely:

*'Rarely human eye has known  
A scene so stern as that dread lake,  
With its dark ledge of barren stone...'*

Perhaps you'd best visit Coruisk, like me, on a good clear day.

Rumours abound that the loch is the home of a water horse or kelpie, the shape-shifting water spirit inhabiting the lochs and pools of Scotland usually described as appearing as a horse but able to adopt human form. All that I can see is rocks, water and weed but my imagination gallops off wildly none the less. Any kelpie would hopefully let me pass!

I leave the outflowing Scavaig River which flows down to meet the sea at Loch na Cuilce, an inlet of Loch Scavaig. Only a few hundred metres long, it may be the shortest river in the British Isles. Submerged on my chilly course, but with the sun shining down on my back, I swim towards a mysterious island. Curious tourists ponder my progress. Whether they think my journey is mad, or admirable, is difficult to tell.

The water is once again clear and sparkling; perhaps swimming is spoiled by the need to wear goggles. Occasionally I stop to take them off and take in the view above water. A slope to the north-east of me shows evidence of rockfall down to the loch; most slopes are barren slabs. There are no trees. My bearing is parallel to the long ridge Druim nan Ramh, the name meaning 'Ridge of the Oars'. Each stream that tumbles down its slopes perhaps signifies a blade for the enormous 'hull'. I paddle alongside, like a sailor lost overboard from this giant longboat but heading for a rocky 'life-raft' ahead.



One of a few isolated islands, this feature is also ship-shaped, anchored midway in the loch. Its sharp gabbro rocks prompt me to wear my purple 'cros' to protect my feet when standing up.

You tern if you want to! Gulls being the only residents are surprised by my arrival aboard. Feathers and the occasional pile of bones hint that birds are the sole occupants. The green woodrushes carpet and conceal the rocky isle under my 'crocodile' shoes. I hear my name called out from onshore. So, Rachel has seen me at last! I wave back to her then, on the 'bows' of the island, slip back into the loch and take another photo. My strange selfie, featuring feet, could be titled 'Cros, but no Gaiters'.



*'Cros but no Gaiters' in Loch Coruisk.*

Less than one mile of swimming to go, I tug steadily on my trailing baggage and pull away from the island.

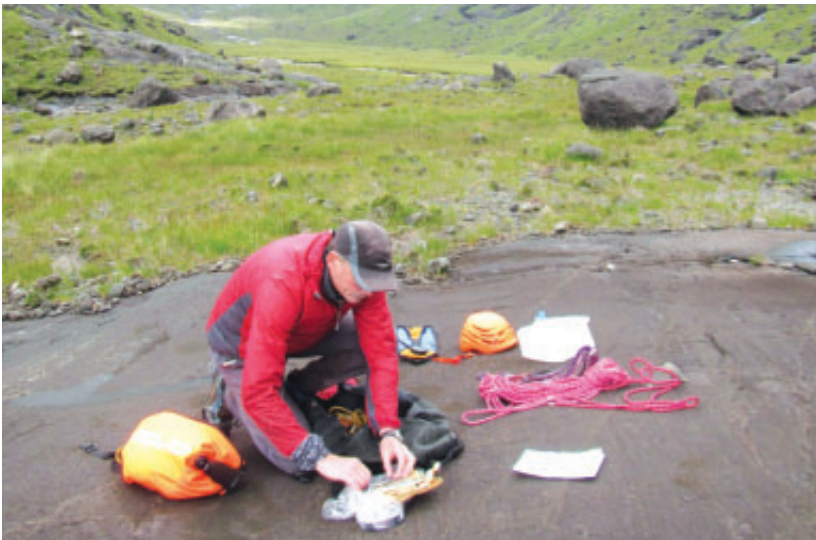
The steep, continuously steady slopes of the Dubh ridge are on the left, 'a contender for the best easy climb in Britain'. It's a very long route in a remote setting. A few tiny tourists traverse its huge foot. The rough weathered rock climbs continuously up from sea-level to the summits at 3000ft!

Sighting my target ahead, the line stretches out straight through the middle of the narrowing loch. Intermittently, I lift my head forwards above the waterline. The V-notch high on the ridge marks out the Skye-line. Despite such a clear target, I make a few zig-zag diversions off line, frustratingly buffeted by the steadily building waves. Nearing the shore, a

cheer goes out to my right. A couple call-out, something on the lines of, 'Keep going!' Thank you whoever you may be! I hope that they are not mysterious shellycoat tricksters.

Giant boulders mark the entrance of the Coruisk River flowing into the loch. Rachel is waiting on an adjacent beach ahead, acting as a witness and marshal at this glorious transition checkpoint. The bottom comes up to greet me and I struggle to stand on the uneven ground. The changeover from water to land is tricky. The surface of the water refracts and reflects complex patterns of light, and bends or warps the images of any solid, firm or stable ground, and confuses, and befuddles, my sense of balance. I concentrate on sensing a new centre of gravity as I escape the water's upthrust and move back from being horizontal to the vertical world. I only just manage to adapt to the weighty heaviness of gravity and seem to impersonate an ungainly monster wallowing out of the lagoon. Perhaps I could be mistaken for an alien creature from the deep; an ancient merman or even a new-born shape-shifted kelpie!

I wade through the clearer than crystal blue waters of the Coruisk River. I can't hold back my enthusiasm, retelling the day's events so far to Rachel who follows me along the river bank. We cross over and step up onto a warm dry slab where I lay out my kit, 3 - change into warmer clothes and produce my lunch from my chain of drybags. I have everything I need for a full day in the Cuillin and have either towed or carried it all this way, including a dry 30-metre line of 8mm rope. I really enjoy the feeling of transition from water to land, knowing that all is going to plan, and I've left nothing behind. Rachel takes a few photos and we chat within the rock architecture about the splendid surroundings that had been sculpted here, drawn out along an almost perfect line by what must have been an unswerving deep glacier.



*Repacking gear after the loch Coruisk swim.*

Erratic boulders litter the valley floor, along with smooth whaleback glaciated slabs, scoured with striations. Everyone becomes a geologist in Coruisk, it's impossible not to see the naked evidence around.

Lunch refuels my wobbling limbs. Trading in tired shoulders for less weary leg power is a welcome exchange. I check the arrangements for meeting Rachel on the Glen Brittle side of the Cuillin and set off on the next leg of my 309° journey, across the flat, marshy, boggy wetland stretching on for a thousand metres towards the Coir' Uisg Buttress guarding its head.

The buttress has been described by climber, Dave Birkett as 'the most awesome wall of rock in the UK.' Ascending its steep wall, Moonrise Kingdom is a new 130-metre high climbing route, scaled in three pitches and graded E9 (6b/c). Established by James McHaffie and Dan Varian the previous May, it is claimed as a contender for the most serious multi-pitch climb in the country. It's not my line, nor ever shall be. Too hard for me...! but, if anyone's considering chasing the title of a true Bearing Up! champion, this would be my certain line for any purists' adventures.



*Looking back towards Loch Coruisk.*

Looking back is as enthralling as looking forward. I take a glance along my back-bearing towards Loch Coruisk, its central island and my rocky descent route from Sgùrr na Stri. It's clear why the peak might give someone strife. Turning around to focus on the wall of Coir' Uisg Buttress on my forward bearing, I'm struck by how impossibly steep and sheer it all looks. There is nothing by way of vegetation other than some dusty algal deposits below overhanging faces. Adrenalin surges around my system, heightens my senses and pushes my imagination further; I feel my lonely isolation as an insignificant, tiny visitor. Coire an Uaigneis, aka the 'Ugly Cauldron', in my mind brews images of witches mixing potions high in the shattered rocky cirque above. 'Cirque des Sorcières?' I spook myself thinking in French. Glen Brittle's pools may have friendly fairies on the sunny far side of the Cuillin, but this side of the mountain is more like Mordor. Tolkien, Dante and Hieronymus Bosch all had visions of such vast, jagged landscapes. This is a pivotal point on my linear odyssey, where a poor route choice could lead to misfortune and misadventure.

Indeed, the ascent is no easy feat. The route is along the edge of a steep-sided ravine, described in the guide book as a 'defile'. Water thunders down the falls on the right. I find my way up a challenging scramble, passing old abseil slings discarded, perhaps, by long departed mountaineers maybe descending and in retreat. What a truly awesome adventure!

The slopes and walls reveal no obvious route, but a tiny zig-zag takes me up to rather loose and slippery slabs below steep overhanging walls. My mind conjures up cautionary warnings, stressing the need to keep calm and carry on up. I pause, take a deep breath, test the holds, weigh my footing and then gradually make the necessary moves. Will the way lead ever upwards, or will I be forced back? I feel uncertain. But, eventually the angle subsides, and the potential fall factor reduces to give way to an atmospheric amphitheatre split by a stream. Only a few days before, I had stood a little higher, on the spur perched on top of the wall to my right, scouting out the possibilities of getting through this section. I am increasingly confident that now the 'only way is up' and once I have crossed the stream a pleasant scramble will place me at the bottom of the rake.

The ridge map shows two parallel crag markings. I aim to take a way between them, climbing a 'stairway to heaven' rather than slipping down through any 'gates of hell'. The scrambling becomes more entertaining, less precarious and I gain height confidently. It is hot work and I'm looking forward to a breeze over the bealach, to a pause, a drink, some food and breathing in the satisfaction of reaching my favourite ridge. I climb through a constricted section, breaking through to talus, boulders and some firm scree. I now know that the ridge will soon be within my grasp.

With relief, I reach the notch on the crest below the summit of Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh, the fox's (or wolf's) peak, but no sign of any furry friends. I am completely alone. I had somehow imagined a welcoming party of ridge-traversing mountaineers, climbers or even nimble fell runners at this point, but no one makes an appearance. Even on such a beautiful day, on such a classic ridge, you can be entirely on your own.



Having completed the full Cuillin ridge traverse a few years ago, the craggy way now looks more familiar. I teeter along the ridge, clamber down to step onto a large slab and saunter across to gain my line to the summit of Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh. At 918m altitude, the view stretches out to Glen Brittle and down to mean sea level. The Munro bagged, ticked and recorded. My Skye-line Bearing Up! done.

Perhaps the upward journey is over and a further bearing of 309° from here is just stubbornly bearing down, but the ridge to Sgurr Thuilm is coincidentally on the same line! I start to descend the steep face towards this outrigging ridge spur. This will clearly be no picnic, so I stop and have something to eat. The guidebook informs me that the Thuilm Ridge is graded as an Easy rockclimb, 'contains sections which are both exposed and hard. ...is a fine scramble for those with the nerve and ability'. It is indeed steeply precipitous and route-finding proves trickier than might appear from a map. I descend a route that others usually ascend and it's more than a little challenging.



*Foxglove pointing the way down to Glen Brittle.*

Two deep gashes split the ridge and neither gives me a way down. Instead, I follow the main central buttress and eventually find the bealach. Here, a stunningly beautiful aerial pathway between the rocky Coire An Dorus and Coir' a' Mhadaidh separates the 'wolf' from the 'door'. The way up to the summit is both straight up and straightforward. Sgurr Thuilm might seem to read as an oxymoron, 'the jagged rocky peak of the rounded hillock', or maybe it's the 'rocky peak of Tulm', although Google translates it as the 'peak of the flood'. From its top I see crowds of parked tourists vehicles, stretching out and sprawling, serpent-like along the single-track road to Glen Brittle, 'flooding the way' with cars and campervans in their pursuit of 'wild swimming' at the Fairy Pools, creating the paradox of a 'wilderness car park'.

But one last challenge concerns me. The descent from this pyramid-shaped peak into Glen Brittle is cut by gullies and scarred by scree slopes. The deepest of these is best avoided by side-stepping just over to the west. I ride down on the shards of rocks, pleased that I chose to wear mountaineering boots rather than lightweight shoes. Isolated foxgloves eventually appear, poking through the rocky, rugged hillside; lower down, the marsh cotton populates the boggy slopes. My transect following the 'Skye-Line' is nearly complete. A distant lone bird soars skyward over the high horizon. The eagle's aerial bearing bisects my own terrestrial-path - a fitting conclusion to a fabulous day.

So, did travelling straight from A to Z provide me with a truly wilderness experience? Was my new, long and exciting mythical journey, my spiritual odyssey, coming to its end? What has been my aim and what bearing did this line leave on this lonely traveller? Was there any target or goal? All becomes clearer during my concluding step.



*The litter-bin at the Fairy Pools' car park.*

The route fords the River Brittle and leads me up to the car park. I am once again in the company of many fellow tourists. The combined results of such large visitor numbers at my chosen terminus have clearly left an unpleasant trace at the finish. A surreal landmark has been placed in the landscape, there's no crock of gold at the end of this line, no 'coire òir', instead two large wheelie-bins overflow with their daily input. Do the fairies mind? Does the kelpie know of this rival monster? May the curse of the boggarts be upon the perpetrators! Will any fairy folk stand together united against this foe? As I turn to wave farewell to my linear pathway through the land of the selkies, can I perhaps hear a shellycoat cry out and then laugh, 'Is the Isle of Skye refuse service bearing up?' Should I unpack my 160-gauge polythene black waste-sack? Such a devious and ironic final twist to my tale, despite it having been a very straightforward day.

There are no straightforward answers at the end of this line!

I've been going eleven hours on a bearing, but it's been a beautiful day!

### **The Skye-Line Route Summary 10th August 2017**

A swim across Camasunary Bay and a cross-sectional-bisector of Loch Coruisk and the Cuillin ridge to finish near the Fairy Pools, Glen Brittle, Isle of Skye.

- Bearing 309°
- Start location NG 543 156 ● Finish location NG 422 255
- Walk length 15.6km ● Sea Swim length 1km ● Loch Swim length 2.4km
- Scramble Grade 3\*\*\*
- Total Ascent: 1820m

### **Postscript 2018:**

Jack McGregor reports in *The Herald* of 31st August 2018 on one 'answer' to the overcrowding conundrum and the riddle of the Fairy Pools tourist trap. A new 130-space car park and toilets have been built after receiving over £650,000 of public funding, including £300,000 from the Scottish Government. Only time will tell how the fairies will fare at these pools in the future but, then perhaps: 'Time does not matter in the land of the fairies'. I am also pleased to report that on 13th October 2018, the Real3Peaks Challenge gathered 10 black bin-bags of rubbish at the Fairy Pools led by Adrian and Bridgette, with a team of volunteers from All Things Cuillin. May the fairy force be with you.

*For more information visit: [www.facebook.com/bearingup](http://www.facebook.com/bearingup).*

*For Skye Mountain Rescue donations visit*

*<http://www.skyemrt.org/donations.html>.*