



From MacDonalds to Munros to the Mera Glacier...

...the diary of an overweight mountaineer

I looked across at the summit of Everest glowing in the newly-risen sun and caught my breath. From my vantage point, 20,400 feet above sea level, high on the Mera Glacier, I was seeing the world as only gods and elite mountaineers tend to see it. I am neither god nor elite mountaineer. In fact, I am quite overweight. Now, looking over the most beautiful and spectacular mountain view I had ever seen, I realised how valuable my training in the Scottish Mountains had been.

The notion to head for the mountains first came to me in the summer of 2014 when I weighed in as heavy as I had ever been. Something had to change for sure. I have a pathological hatred of dieting, weight loss plans or 'obsessive eating' as I call it. Having tried every weight loss plan known to man, the only long-term loss had been my happiness. Panting at the top of the two flights of stairs that lead to my flat, I resolved to climb Everest.

The plan was simple, naive and preposterous. Three UK peaks of Ben Nevis, Scafell Pike and Snowdon in 2014. Then head to the Alps to conquer Zugspitze and Mont Blanc in 2015. Everest Base Camp in 2016 and then the summit of Everest in 2017. Deep down, I knew I would never do most of that but hoped that maybe wanting to would bring my weight down and my fitness levels up. Before long I found myself among the mountains of Scotland contrasting a harsh reality with a naive dream and learning so much about myself.

It's not impossible to climb in the mountains when you're overweight but it does come with its own set of physical and mental challenges. I move at a very slow pace. I tire quickly which leads to being off balance often. My knees have grown steadily weaker and I suffer from frequent episodes of lower back pain. Due to a lower level of fitness I have to be aware of my pulse rate, especially in hot weather. I also need to know my limits and be careful to avoid exhaustion in the winter. Emotionally I have to be thick-skinned, humble, with

bucket loads of determination and an ability to stay calm. I am often unconfident and sometimes downright scared.

My lack of fitness became apparent during one of the biggest scares I've had in the mountains. Early in 2015 my brother and I headed up out of Arrochar to climb Beinn Narnain. The weather was very poor. High winds, thick mist and lots of rain. Even high up, at a landmark known as the Narnain Boulders, the mountains around us were completely hidden in the mist. The boulders themselves, mere dark shadows even when we stood among them. We carried on with our ascent and made the summit, but the real problems started on the way down.

At that time, I thought all Munros were like Ben Lomond on a sunny day: clear, well-constructed paths that you see roll out for miles ahead. Frankly, that was all I was fit enough, emotionally prepared and equipped for at the time. I'd used all my available energy reaching the summit and was daft enough to think that was all I needed. My quads and my toes, crushing into the front of my boots, began to ache. This was already going to be a very long walk back and I couldn't gauge for myself how long.

We were blasted and blown almost off our feet by near hurricane winds that drove the rain at us in sheets. Completely immersed in clouds, the only thing that was visible to us was a deer fence that we'd arrived at unexpectedly, one we hadn't encountered on the ascent. My brother yelled at me so he could be heard over the roaring wind and

confirmed what I suspected but didn't want to believe. We were lost.

Unknown to us we'd missed the path back towards Arrochar and strayed down off the bealach between the Cobbler and Beinn Ime. Fortunately, my brother knew the area well and, after an hour retracing our steps uphill, we managed to find the path. By the time we did I was completely exhausted and soaked to the skin. Lessons learnt were that my equipment was not quite robust enough for the weather and I simply didn't have the level of fitness required to move effectively in the mountains.

Planning for a slower pace became very apparent during another descent in 2016. This time my brother and I were coming down off Ben Starav. Again, my energy was completely spent after traversing the sharp rocky ridge between Ben Starav and Stob Coire Dheirg. As we descended further into the bealach between Stob Coir Dheirg and Maell Nan Tri Tighearnan I was moving at a snail's pace and struggling with my balance on the rough terrain. Darkness was already closing in as we walked off the bealach into the corrie below. We only just managed to reach the river at the bottom of the mountain before complete darkness had descended. Otherwise we'd have had an unplanned bivvy. It wouldn't have been safe to continue the descent from the corrie in the dark.

Having started out relatively unsupported in 2014, I now wear heavy knee supports on both knees and make extensive use of walking poles. I have a daily stretching routine to try and keep my muscles supple

and gently strengthen my core. This also includes several stretches for my lower back to loosen the muscles there and in my hips to overcome lower back pain and sciatica.

I wear a sports watch and monitor my heart rate. During one of the hottest days in the summer of 2018, I pushed for the summit of Cairngorm after having walked across from the summit of Ben Macdui. I'd considered descending into the ski resort instead of pushing for the Cairngorm summit because I was feeling so tired. In hindsight, I should have. By the time I clambered onto the Cairngorm summit, for the first time in thirty years, I was exhausted, distressed and dizzy. It turned out my pulse had reached 204 beats per minute.

The mentality of an overweight mountaineer requires several factors. First, you need to be thick-skinned. The looks I receive from others on the mountains vary from surprise to downright shock or concern. Those looks alone could have me hiding out in the car. I've learned over the years, however, that most people we meet in the Scottish Mountains are extremely friendly and helpful. They are not judging me, just concerned, and often wanting to help. It's that camaraderie and encouragement which gives me the self-belief to keep going into the mountains.

For sure a sense of humility is required. Fortunately, it's easy to feel humble when surrounded by the majesty and beauty of the mountains. There has to be an acceptance that I am going to be one of the slower walkers on the mountains. It's not uncommon for me to see people leaving the car park hundreds of feet below me and be talking to them within half an hour before they move on past me. We all get to the top in the end and the advantage for me is that people can tell me the conditions up top as they pass me on the way down.

It's also vital to know your limits and turn around when you need to turn around, whether you've reached the top or not. My brother and I attempted to summit Ben Nevis through the night via the Mountain Track in 2019. I had a cold at the time and had started to struggle before we had climbed 600 feet. We climbed on through the night and soon found ourselves crossing the Halfway Plateau across the Red Burn and on towards the zig-zags. Even as high as the zig-zags, looking up at the summit ridge tantalisingly close, I had to tell my brother I needed to turn round. He was full of encouragement, telling me I'd made the right decision. High on the mountain in the middle of the night in sub-zero temperatures was no place to risk my condition deteriorating further.



Opposite page: Glen Coe. Above: From left to right: Everest in the background from Mera High Camp; Stella Point on Kilimanjaro at 5786m; Toubkal, the highest point in the Atlas Mountains at 4167m; Abel and Sean McBride at the summit of Ben Starav. Below: Sean at Everest Base Camp. Images © Sean McBride.

Finally, and in common with everyone else on the mountain, a clear head and positive mindset need to be maintained. When the weather closes in and there's thousands of feet to descend over miles of rough terrain is not the best time for the 'critical self' to emerge. I need to read the map, consult GPS or my phone. The conditions and the emerging situation need to be assessed and reassessed. I need to be ready and able to revert to my survival kit and communicate that situation and location should the need arise. I need to do all of this despite any voice in my head telling me I shouldn't have come here in the first place. It's not so much about telling myself I can do these things. It's as simple as I need to do them to survive.

Over the years in the mountains, I haven't

lost any weight, in fact I've still gained, but that hasn't stopped me. To date I've summited 54 Munros and, though a modest tally, the experience has been nothing short of amazing. Though I've found myself either in, or passing through, Glencoe every other weekend, the sight never gets any less breathtaking.

The experience of climbing the mountains here in Scotland and the encouragement of so many people I meet in them has been fantastic. It has taken me to over 20,000 feet in the Himalayas, to the rim of Kilimanjaro and the summit of Mount Toubkal. Scotland is my home and I truly feel like these are my mountains. They are wild and beautiful, and I love being among them. ❧



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