

The Cuillin

Gordon Stainforth describes how he tackled his third photographic book on the British mountains which concentrates on this fine range on the Isle of Skye.

This was in many ways the most difficult photographic assignment I've ever undertaken — partly because of the notoriously fickle Cuillin weather, and partly because of my insistence on shooting as much as possible on medium or even large format cameras. Overall, these are the most difficult mountains in Britain, with thirteen of the summits harder to reach than any others in the country. They are also very big, rising virtually from sea level to over 3,000 feet, and a lot of them involve quite long approaches across boggy terrain.

As with my previous books, I wanted it to be a rather personal statement of the way I see the place. I wanted to create a photo-essay bound together by a well thought through, and evolving line of argument.

The starting point of my mountain photography is always to try and see the subject with fresh eyes, to get at the raw wonder of the place, or — for want of a better word — the real *magic* of the place. I wanted to surprise those who have never been there that we have in Britain mountains anything like as impressive and dramatic as these. To make them feel something of the impact which they had on the first alpinists who came here in the last century, to whom the Cuillin was a revelation.

Any Cuillin enthusiast will tell you that these mountains have a quality all of their own. It's all to do with the weather, the sea, the extraordinary, rough gabbro rock, and, above all, the light. It's a landscape full of contrasts: while it is frequently dark and sombre, it is often a place of wonderful colour. The rock itself can change from black to orange to deep red depending on the quality of the light. Another important aspect one has to try and convey in a book of mountain photographs like this — and particularly in one about the Cuillin — is the extraordinary power and scale of the landscape. I often say to people who haven't been to the Cuillin that I doubt if I'd find the Grand Canyon more impressive than Coire Lagan or the Harta Corrie.

Because I wanted to see the landscape in all its aspects, this meant being on location for many months. I was particularly keen to get a good portfolio of the mountains in winter, because few visitors or climbers ever see it in this guise. Fortunately, the winter last year, while not as cold as this one, was still a lot more snowy than the previous three. Because of its proximity to the sea, the Cuillin seldom retains its snow for very long; so the photographer really has to pounce after a snow storm. As with all mountains, the

transformation is quite breathtaking: even some of the easiest summits, like Bruach na Frithe, can become truly Alpine in character.

Once the summer had arrived I was able to tackle some of the more difficult climbing and scrambling projects. While all the pictures in the book which are *of* the Cuillin are taken with the Hasselblad, I preferred to use a lighter medium format camera when I was on the Ridge. I have a Fuji 690 range-finder camera — like a giant Leica — (which I was fortunate enough to obtain very cheaply second-hand), and also the smaller Fuji 645 version. Often, on the harder climbs, I would dispense with the heavy tripod and go with a combination of one of the Fuji cameras and a Nikon FM2 with a very wide (20 or 24 mm) lens, and take a bean bag or a mini tripod.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most difficult shots of all were the evocative distant views of the Cuillin I desperately needed for the opening of the book. The problem of course with distance is haze. My various climbing friends were, I think, amazed how often, on fine clear days, I would head off *away* from the mountains. What a lot of people just don't seem to understand is that days which are good for climbing are often not particularly good for photography; in fact the reverse is often the case, with stormy, showery weather providing infinitely more interesting light. It's almost a rule of thumb: the worse the weather, the closer you need to get, the better the weather, the further away.

So I spent many days tramping around remote moors, and distant coasts, like a surveyor — and, in an embarrassing number of cases, failed to get a publishable picture, thanks to the haze. Many of these viewpoints I returned to several times and even then I didn't succeed. I slogged up to the summit of Beinn Dearg Mhor in the Red Cuillin four times before obtaining the sunset shot of the Main Cuillin I really wanted. I can honestly say (without bragging!) that I must be the definitive expert on the best photogenic viewpoints of the Cuillin.

Because of the very variable and unreliable weather a very flexible approach had to be adopted, with a Plan A, B, C, D etc. lined up for each day. For this reason I did much less camping in remote locations than for my previous books, preferring to 'walk' (or scramble) rapidly to the chosen viewpoint as dictated by the weather. This made for many long and arduous days, often requiring a descent in fading light or complete darkness. Serious stuff! I did, however, have two bivouacs on the Main Ridge itself: one superb one on Gars-bheinn, and one truly atrocious one in a gale on the summit of Sgurr Dubh na Da Bheinn. I'd gone up there in the hope of moody dawn shots of Sgurr Alasdair, but I'd obviously made an unduly optimistic assessment of the forecast. I baled out at 4.30 in the morning and made a tricky descent over the Sgumain Stone Shoot in dense cloud and driving rain.

After a good start, the summer was one of the worst for many years and, by the end of August, the photography for the book was seriously behind schedule. But at last, in September, everything seemed to come right in a superbly photogenic grand finale. In one magic week — one of the best I have ever spent in the mountains — I was able to achieve all my most long-cherished photographic projects: the Dubhs Ridge, the Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr nan Gillean, the Cioch, the Coire Lagan horseshoe, and perhaps best of all the Clach Glas-Blaven traverse. (All these, incidentally, are better climbs of their type — I would say, by a very long way — than anything else in the Britain; but they are all rather more than ‘scrambles’ and should only be tackled by experienced climbers.)

So I returned home somewhat battered but well satisfied, having gained summits on the main ridge on 64 occasions, and with only the remaining two ‘mountains’ of the writing and the designing to be tackled. A genuine 191,700 feet had been climbed and 115 rolls of medium format film shot. Or, as I say in the book, I could perhaps express this in more revealing liquid terms e.g. so many gallons of petrol, beer and whisky consumed, but on second thoughts I think I’ll keep that as classified information.

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