

RELATIVITY

(OR BIG BOOT ADVENTURES FOR EXPERIENCED CLIMBERS)

Ian Wyatt writes...

A great mountain adventure: what images does this phrase conjure up for you? A perfect white peak in the Alps or the Himalaya? A huge rock wall in some remote part of South America or Baffin Island? Or a gnarly, near-white-out, fight in a gale on Cairngorm? Or perhaps some other romantic image of mountain adventurism? How about a dark, dank, dreary-looking day on Tryfan, Scafell or the Ben? Could that be what you picture? Probably not, but I want to try to convince you that a day

out on a wet mountain climb is a great opportunity for a brilliant adventure.

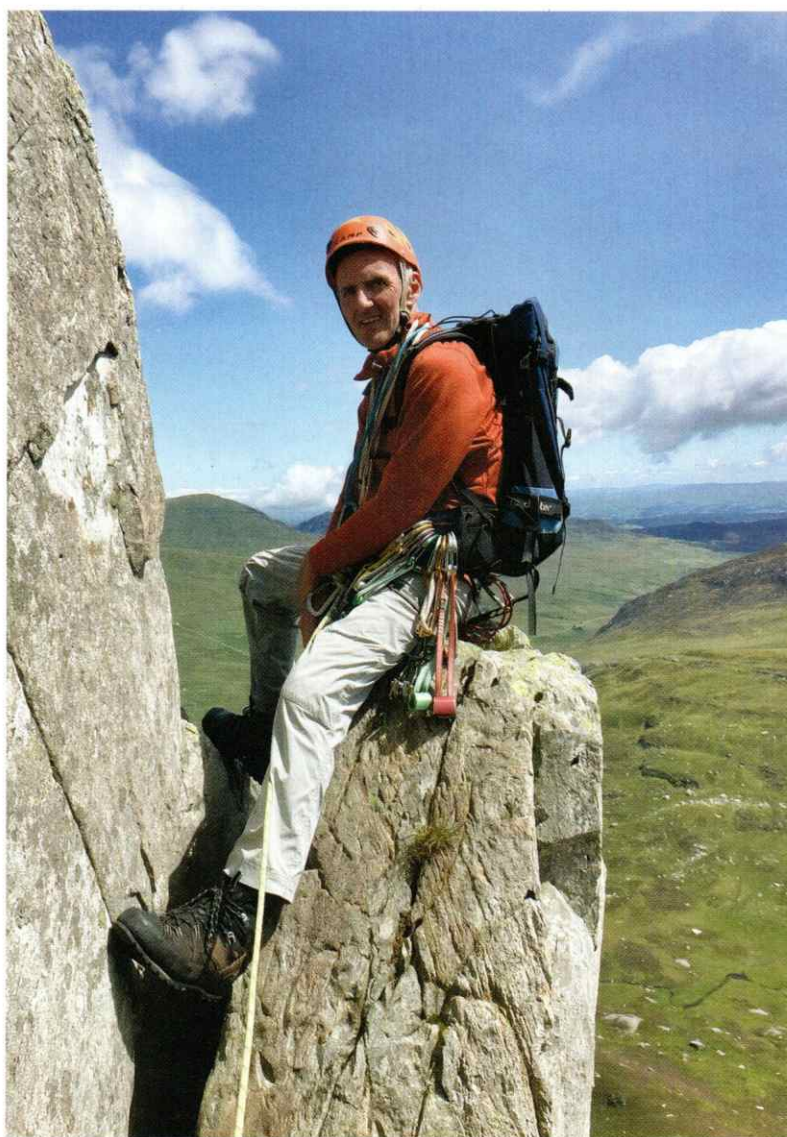
As the warm-ish, hopefully, dry weather of late summer/early autumn gives way to wetter and windier days, quality days out on rock become more difficult to find. You might not have done all your target routes for the year, maybe you're still struggling to link the last section on your project but you begin hearing the remorseless *tick-tock, tick-tock* of each passing day as the good weather opportunities shrink. In fact, if looked at

across a week, you might find that you've started spending more time squinting at a weather app than actually moving on rock. It's that time of year when it's too warm and wet for the winter warriors with their sharpened claws; too damp and smeggy for the rock, indeed some sport climbers might have already retired to the wall and gym and, of course, being a climber you don't really want to go walking, so what to do?

One of the things I've noticed about a lot of climbers is that as they progress upwards through the grades they tend not to go back down the grade ladder to visit the very many classic lines that they feel they've 'outgrown', unless forced to by injury, life event lay off or assisting a newer climber. When did you last hear of an HVS-E? leader climbing a Diff just for the pleasure of moving on rock? I put it to you that it doesn't have to be this way and you don't have to become house-bound in the autumn; there is a great source of adventure sitting waiting for you on our modest mountains at modest grades. You only have to listen to the call of the mountains.

Trawl through *Classic Rock* and you'll find that north Wales, the Lakes and Scotland are littered with fabulous routes in the Diff to Severe range which, on a normal warm summer's day, a hardened climber might not give a second glance to as there are obviously also many fantastic mountain routes at the grades she or he wants to explore and on which to push themselves. But when the temperatures dip below double digits and the forecast is less than marginal maybe it is time to hit the hills? Shift your focus on to adventure, effort, reconfiguring your skill set for a good mountaineering day. In other words, the sort of day when you could ascend a great historical route, then go on to the top of a Glyder or a Pike for a full mountain tick. The kind of day that might look something like this.

Park up: great there's hardly anyone else here and it's not raining, just a bit breezy. Sort out the gear, reducing the rack to only the most frequently used and favourite nuts, cams and wires (go on admit it, you have a favourite piece of gear) but you take extra slings because



Big boots and all. John Russell on pitch 3 of *Overlapping Ridge Route* (VD/S) on East Buttress of Tryfan, Ogwen Valley, north Wales. Photo: Ian Wyatt

mountain routes always eat slings. One rope, no chalk bag, no rock shoes, split the gear between you and 'wow, this 'sack is light'. By now it is actually raining, so waterproofs on rather than in the 'sack and on go the Name-Your-Brand B2 boots or even stiff walking boots.

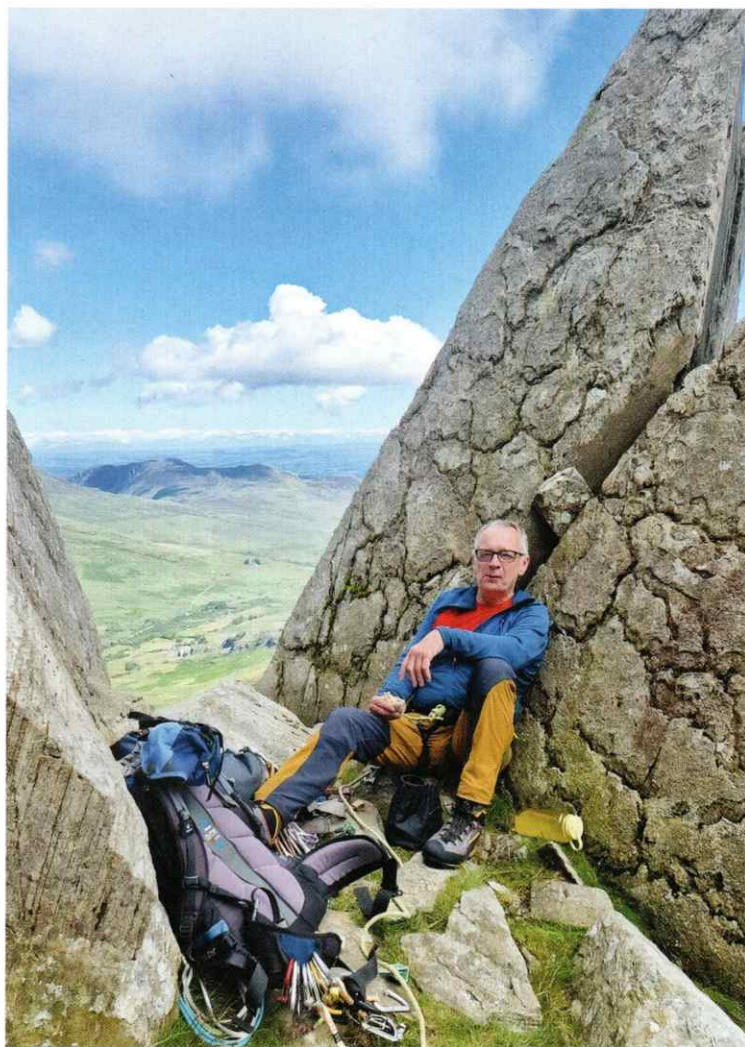
Of course, you lose the path on the way up to Heather Terrace and feeling brutalised by the bracken bash you've lost so much fluid you start worrying if you've brought enough water. After some wandering about you manage to find, what you hope is the start of your chosen route, it's quite hard to tell in the clag. After a bite to eat, harness on, gear sorted, tied in and feeling ready to go with all the brio of an E-Something leader to charge off up your V Diff.

Whoaaa! Your feet are not the balletically clad, sticky, scampering feet you're used to; these clunky, plodding boots have to be placed with thought and surprising precision. There is friction but you have to work for it. By the second or third foothold, you find a whole new respect for this grade that you have long since forgotten. In fairly short order you've been confronted by the obvious, big boots are not rock shoes, the rock is at best only damp, you're wearing loads of clothing and a rucksack; everything feels harder than expected.

By now you have stopped thinking of this V Diff as *only* V Diff and gained a new respect for the rock, the route and the grade. You're now really focusing on placing your feet, picking out footholds that have a bit of an edge, your hands are exploring widely not just making a fingertip search for crimps.

After the first or second piece of gear you're relaxing, tuning into the style, using all the skills and knowledge you have but in a slightly different way, such as seeing if that crack is wide enough to take a boot so you can stand comfortably. You've stopped noticing the trickle of water down your sleeve and yet another spike for a sling runner. At the belay, as you bring up your partner, you take in the situation; the *hrap, hrap* of an invisible raven echoes around the hillside, you get an occasional glimpse of the valley below, your partner is still hidden by the mist. Thirty metres up or 300m up, you can't tell but you're certain there is no one else on the mountain.

After another pitch there may be a big ledge or a grassy terrace, an excellent lunch spot. Over a casual butty you're extolling the virtues of the quality of the climbing, musing on the skills and fearlessness of the early pioneers that put the route up; feeling fabulously alive in a world that is elemental, essential, deeply sensory and as far from daily life



Ian Wyatt taking lunch below pitch 4 of *Overlapping Ridge Route* (VD/S) on East Buttress of Tryfan, Ogwen Valley, north Wales. Photo: John Russell

as one can be. A couple more pitches and you reach the top of the climb but not the end of your day, having come this far, of course, you continue to the summit. Visibility is now very poor so it's out with map and compass to find the descent path. Back at the car, a knackered drowned rat, you change into dry clothes and this becomes one of the best adventures on rock you've had in years.

Of course, it's not always sweetness and light like this. I don't mind admitting that in the past I have had to retreat from *Slab Route* (VD on Ogwen's Glyder Fach). It was raining much harder than we anticipated and the gully at the end of the rake on pitch 2 was a vertical river, necessitating reversing back to the belayer and abseiling off. On another occasion the crack on *Bowfell Buttress* (classic HS on Bowfell in the Lakes) was so green and slimy it was impossible to make upward progress, so I used some nuts for aid.

I mention these incidents, not by way of very public confessional, but to illustrate that climbing routes in these conditions requires not just climbing skills

but also improvisational problem-solving and the need to make mountaineering decisions. It's also worth noting that these retreats and digressions are all part of the adventure, there are no failures. I should also add that, there is no rule stating you must wait for a grim day to get out on routes like this, they can be a huge pleasure on dry sunny days. Though I suspect some early 20th Century pioneers might have considered the use of sunshine tantamount to cheating.

There are a huge number of fabulous mountain routes that offer a great opportunity for you to climb on rock long into the autumn where you have to adapt your skills to meet the conditions and style of ascent (big boots). So, reset your expectations and enjoy a brilliant mountaineering experience that brings together your rock-climbing and navigation skills; go out and get in touch with the elements. Guidebook route grades are conditions and style dependent and, like much in life, are relative so pack away your grade ego, get out in sub-optimal conditions and have a great adventure. ■