

THE FORTNIGHTLY FAFF

The Periodical Journal of the Mercian Mountaineering Club

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SPORT CLIMBING IN LEONIDIO

Bye-bye Kalymnos, hello peace & tranquility

A DOUBLE DOSE OF MOROCCO

Malcolm Imhoff and Harry Conway report

HUT-TO-HUT IN NORWAY

Vicki Moody bags step count personal best

SNAKES & LADDERS

Sketchy scrambling on Welsh slate

MEETS, MEETS, MEETS

Photos from our meets calendar



A word from the editor

Following on from my article titled Snake & Ladder in the April 2015 issue (the one featuring Roland on the cover), Anna goes one better with Snakes & Ladders - succeeding where I failed (oh in so many ways I failed, ripping my lovely new down jacket on a rusty nail, stepping in human faeces in a dark tunnel, climbing a single ladder, and making just one abseil...oh the horror!). As well as that article about climbing (if that is the right word) in the Llanberris slate mines there are a pair of articles about Morocco, and smattering of other bits and pieces. We have a story of sport climbing from Leonidio in Greece, showing that Greece has more to offer than just the crowds of Kalymnos, and a tale of hut-to-hut trekking in Norway whilst en route to a Mercian wedding. With Simon and Jody getting married, the number of wedded couples who met in the Mercian's goes up by another notch.

As it has been a good many month since the last issue of The Faff there is no shortage of photos from the various meets that we've had, I've enjoyed pulling them all together and reminiscing. I hope you enjoy it too.

The articles are presented chronologically, I think.

Stew.



LEONIDIO

by Stewart Moody

Vicki and I have made a week of springtime hot rock a regular event in our climbing calendar. Last year we visited Mallorca and the year before that Sicilly. For 2019 we plumped for Leonidio. You might not have heard of it, but Leonidio is a small coastal town nestled in a picturesque valley 3 hours south-west of Athens. Much has been said in the media about Leonidio; “the new Kalymnos”, “the up and coming climbing destination in Europe”, you get the gist. I’m not one for hype, but I like trying new things, so with Luke Perry in tow the three of us hopped on a flight to Greece.

About 8 hours later I parked the hire car outside an apartment I’d booked on Airbnb. To say we were mighty pleased with the luxury in which we found ourselves would be an understatement; three bedrooms, two bathrooms, lounge, kitchen, private gated parking, nicely made beds, fluffy towels, and not one, but two balconies. Our only gripe was the absence of a kettle. Heathens!

Having unloaded the car we strolled across the bridge and into town to find a beer and some dinner. The town itself is strung out along a main street; lined by little shops, very narrow, and a nightmare to drive through. A few rustic café bars play the National Geographic channel by day and the football at night on big screens where the local menfolk seem to gather. There’s a tiny petrol station, a small supermarket (think 3 checkouts and you get the idea) a few greengrocers, and two cake shops that double up as ice cream parlours round off the facilities.

We came upon a small traditional looking restaurant with a large beer fridge out the front. It also appeared to be the only restaurant in town so there was very little debate. Friendly staff served good food and offered free desert. With full bellies we went for a walk.



The author Lowering off from
Tufattanglo (6b+) at Mars



Set back from the road near the top of town is the Panjeka Cooperative, the climbers haunt that has live music on a Saturday and serves cold beer, good coffee, cakes and all kinds of healthy food staples. We quickly settled upon Mamos as our beer of choice for the trip. It's a lovely little place with a good vibe and I don't think a day went by that we didn't pop in for a drink.

Cometh the morning, cometh the climbing. We opted for the imposing red wall high above town. A steep 25-minute slog brought us to the foot of the Kokkinovrachos sector where we bagged our first routes in the blazing sunshine whilst wondering why we'd bothered hauling hats and down jackets up with us. The views across Leonidio, and out to the coast were first rate and the day ended, as they all did, with a routine of beer-shower-beer-dinner-beer-bed.

On our second night we learned there are actually four or five places for dinner; our traditional restaurant from the night before, another homely place that was cunningly disguised as a ramshackle residential property but was in fact an absolute delight (complete with very affectionate cat), a modern Italian joint serving huge pizzas, and a couple of café/bars that serves souvlaki.

It was unanimously agreed that one of the best crags of the whole trip was Berliner Mauer, which we visited on the third day. It is home to Berlin Graffiti (6b), a route that looked like it would suit my style of climbing. It features 25m of slightly overhanging rock and lots of big chalked up holds, the sorts of holds that you can see coming long before you reach them.

Berlin Graffiti is just one of many great routes at Berliner Mauer graded between 6a+ and 6b+ and would you believe it, we had the crag to ourselves all day. I couldn't believe our luck. Nor could Luke for that matter, for every time he looked at the 7a he wanted to lead he'd promptly excuse himself and vanish into the bushes for a nervous crag poo without fear of being spotted.

The following day we walked through charming flower strewn hillsides to a sector called Mars. We warmed up on a 6b; not ideal but the easiest route at the crag. Rumour had it that it was soft for the grade and was really a 6a+. Luke went first and didn't make it look at all easy. Taking his shoes off at the base of the route he said "Bloody hell, I'd say the route merits a plus in the grade, but it's not a 6a+". It was not long after I'd suffered a head on collision with the crux at the 5th bolt that it dawned on Vic, who was studying the guide, that we'd misread the bolts and were in fact climbing Spiders From Mars (6b+).

I'll remember it as the hardest warm up I've ever done. Unsurprisingly Vic declined to second it, so I stripped the gear on my way down. After the 'warm up' we moved on to the meat of the crag, a striking swathe of yellow, orange and grey tufas and stalactites. On first inspection you'd be forgiven for thinking it would be the preserve of the climbing elite, but nay, there is a pair of incredible overhanging 6b+ jug ladders with massively friendly bolting. I finished each with a racing heart and a dry mouth. I clipped the chains and lowered off, swinging into space with a large grin on my face, I can't recommend these routes highly enough.

[Above] Luke climbing at Kokkinovrachos high above Leonidio. [Below] Smiles all round at Berliner Mauer as Luke prepares to launch himself up Berlin Graffiti (6b).



Each night, true to form we returned to Panjika. On the fifth night Luke and Vicki forced me into playing a game of Catan; a personal low point of the trip. The only thing those 68 minutes had going for them was that local dogs are free to come and go at Panjika, some letting themselves in and out using the door handle. They are a friendly bunch and seemed to enjoy a stroke or ear rub from disinterested board gamers like myself.

Our last evening saw the heavens open. A mizzle at first, turned into what we in England would call rain, thence to what a Scot would call proper rain, and in the end it all got a little bit biblical. After a few hours, just as we were perusing the dinner menu, the whole town was plunged into darkness. Power was restored a few moments later to rapturous applause, and then failed again. Outside a generator coughed into life, the lights came back on, and we understood that blackout are not rare in Leonidio. My immediate concern was the long-term implications of the

power cut on the temperature of Panjika's stock of Mamos. Heaven forbid, we might have to drink warm beer! Stepping outside into the darkness the town was quiet save for the hammering rain. We dashed to Panjika where scattered candles afforded the only light, and a chap was playing the bongos with considerable aplomb. Clearly board games were off the agenda, which pleased me no end. We relieved their fridge of a few bottles of Mamos (still ice cold I'm pleased to report) and chattered for an hour or two until we tore ourselves away for the last time.

The rain continued through the night and into the next day, the day of our departure. The rain did not relent nor did the power come back on. Our planned drive back to Athens would take us via Sparta for a spot of culture, but it was scuppered by the mountain road being impassable 40km inland. Oh how we wished they put the "Road Closed" sign at the 1km marker rather than the 39km

marker, we'd have saved ourselves a lot of hairpins and a very tricky reversing maneuver. We returned to Leonidio, had lunch, and then drove back to Athens via the coast road and Argos where there was a rather nice ancient theatre for the culture tick, and thence onto Athens for our return flight.



Vic pulling hard on in the tufa paradise that is Mars.



Luke climbing at
Berliner Mauer.

Weekend Warriors

David Simmonite, Naomi Simmonite and Vicki Moody walking into the Llanberis slate quarries for an afternoon of chilly but atmospheric sport and trad climbing.

Photo : STEWART MOODY





RHYDD DDU

Easter 2019

4 days of blazing sunshine over the Easter weekend and a hut meet centred around the 40th birthday shenanigans of our beloved general secretary, Vicki Moody, who desperately wanted an 80s themed party. I'll leave it there as a picture speaks 1,000 words.



Huw 'double parked' Davies



The birthday girl and her fella



Some very fine 80s fashion statements



Cheese board!



Andy Armstrong playing twister like a boss whilst Sarah Liaght looks on with an "I wish it was a game of Catan" look.



The candle we light each at Easter to remember our friend Pete.



Vicki and Vijay at Tremadog



Fun and games in the garden.



A photo included because it is in such high demand, here's Adam Butler on one of several routes climbed over Easter.

Walk 24 miles in a day?

There's No Way I'll do That!

A tale of hut-to-hut trekking by Vicki Moody

I've never dreaded a holiday before but I was dreading this one. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I didn't want to go and celebrate with ex-Mercians Jodie and Simon at their wedding but I hadn't expected to spend a week slogging my guts out to get there.

In my head we were going to Norway for a long weekend: we'd see a bit of Bergen, have a leisurely drive over to the wedding venue, celebrate, party and return home nursing our hangovers. The problem was that I wasn't in charge of the planning. It started off with Stewart suggesting we go out for a few extra days to see more of country while we were over there: all good. Then Karl got involved... suddenly I knew I'd have to pack my head torch.

My long tourist weekend had suddenly morphed into five days of hut to hut trekking and unless I fancied flying independently and driving myself to the wedding there was nothing I could do about it.

As anyone who has ever been on holiday with me, or even out walking for the day with me, will know that I can't pack light. In my head, I'd been packing lots of pretty clothes, some reading books, lots of shoes etc but now I had to rethink. Now I had to pack for hut to hut walking in the dregs of Norway's winter.

Simon had helpfully directed us to a website that provided snow cover details for all of Norway. There was still going to be extensive snow on the ground on many of the areas that the lads had been looking at for possible venues. I got straight on to the Norwegian Trekking Association to see if we could come up with an alternative. The very helpful chap (whose name it transpires wasn't Best) suggested a circular route around a couple of lakes for which he assured me we wouldn't need ice axe or crampons. It sounded ideal: especially as I had already identified the fact that we could cut out half of the route if need be. (Well, to be honest, I never expected the lads to do that but I did think it might be handy for Lucy and I to have an escape route.) So, with the route sorted I started to write my packing list...

... which Stewart instantly started critiquing and striking things off. (Some of which I snuck back into the bag when we actually got round to packing. ☺)



In the end my pack weighed about 13kg which was about 10kg less than Karl's who had decided that due to the extortionate cost of food in Norway that he would carry 1 tonne of homemade flapjack with him around the route. (Obviously we offered to help carry some of the weight... in our stomachs.)

Having spent a lovely first night staying with Jodie and Simon at their place, and enjoying a delightful breakfast in the beautiful sunshine overlooking the water, we set off for the start of the trek.

The scenery in Norway is stunning and with Lucy blasting our 'What Does the Fox Say?' spirits were high as we reached the start of the trek.

The path was boggy, tussocky and uneven but we had reached the hut before we knew it. Excellent. Or not. Apparently that was not to be our hut. Instead we walked further and as it got dark we arrived at a hut that was freezing cold and very basic. Except that it wasn't, as it turned out that was the best equipped hut that we stayed at. Little was I to know on that first night that water taps and indoor toilets were a luxury.

Because of the late night that we'd had (it was about 11pm by the time we finally got to bed having cooked and got some warmth into the hut) we had a leisurely morning and didn't set off walking until about 10.30am. And so began Hell Day.

To be clear, it didn't begin as hellish. It was a nice morning (it was t-shirt weather!) and we soon reached another hut. However, because the going seemed to be good and the weather had been forecast to get worse later on in the week, it was decided to push on through to the next hut to allow for shorter days towards the end of the trek.

It wasn't long before we started to see snow and it was clear that not only was there a lot more snow around than anticipated but also a lot more water. Norwegian maps show two types of river crossings: summer and winter. Simon had informed us that in summer, wire bridges are often installed to help crossings. However, we were early in the season so it was unlikely that these would be in place. We would therefore have to rely on the winter crossings which are pretty much places where you can cross where the rivers are shallow enough to be frozen so that you can walk right over them. Fine in the middle of winter but not ideal in a May which seemed to be a hybrid of the two seasons.

Reaching the river crossing it became apparent that we weren't going to be able to get over it. Not only was it very wide but it was also deep and fairly fast moving. Stewart and Karl did a good amount of scuttling up and down the river bank trying to find somewhere to cross but in the end even they gave up. The only option seemed to be to follow the river up the broad valley, and circle around the inconveniently large lake that it flowed from.

Until then we had been following the handy red painted Ts which could be found on rocks along the path and meant that we almost didn't need to use the map. Suddenly we were having to freestyle it across terrain which wasn't designed for

yomping. Our speed, which until then had been quite respectable, suddenly took a nose dive. The detour added an extra 4 miles and about 3 hours to the day. Fortunately in May, Norway has nearly 17 hours of daylight which was bloody lucky as we used it all up.

The sun had set by the time we got a glimpse of the hut and as a last sting in the tail it was all uphill. By this point I was going fairly slowly (although miraculously my spirits were still fairly high) but Stewart was desperate not to have to reach the hut by torch light and so he insisted on taking my pack off me. How he managed to climb that hill with two expedition packs I'll never know but he wouldn't give it me back so I had to just keep on trudging... after him. Yup, he still managed to go faster than me.

24 miles and 14 hours after we set off we eventually reached the hut just before midnight but still had to get water, heat the hut and eat before we could head to bed. Luckily the DNT huts come with fully stocked larders so it was simply a choice of deciding whether to have Sod or Bog for dinner. (Basically the choice comes down to do you want brown slop from a tin or white slop from a tin?) Rum laced hot chocolate followed the slop and then we all crashed into bed. (Not all in the same bed, clearly.)



Having learnt from our mistake the day before, we set off at a much more respectable time the following day which proved to be a good job as the weather came in and we were forced to have lunch in the bivy shelter. Miraculously those few minutes spent having lunch were the only time over the five days that I actually felt miserable due to the cold. If every day had been like that I would have turned round and walked out on day one.

The river crossings once more caught us out as the wide river we had to cross was melted but too deep to use the stepping stones. After the previous day's issues we decided we were just going to have to take the boots off and wade through this one. Luckily it wasn't too fast flowing and, unlike yesterday's river, you could see that the bottom was smooth and flat. Crossing a semi-frozen river barefooted is not an experience I ever wish to have to repeat. It was bloody Baltic!

By the time we reached the hut, the weather had really taken a turn for the worse and the wind was starting to pick up. This time, not only were the toilets outside but you had the choice of walking 10 minutes back down the hill to the river for water or digging snow to melt on the stove. However, as with each of the huts so far, we had the place to ourselves and by the time we had heated it up, it proved to be a very comfy place to spend the night.

Waking the next morning, you couldn't see anything out of the window. A snow storm had blown in overnight and we were in the middle of a whiteout! The wind was howling around the hut and even a trip to the toilet proved to be treacherous due to the amount of snow and ice covering the path. We weren't due to leave for about an hour so we started to get ready and have breakfast: which is easier said than done when you are trying to do the clasp on your bra or cook porridge with crossed fingers.

The finger crossing worked however and by the time we were due to leave the winds had died down and you could actually see where you were going. The difficulty now was that the heavy snowfall had left many of the T markers buried and so once more we were slowed down as we had to try and navigate without them.

The day saw us going over some of the most spectacular terrain with deep snow ravines and massive frozen lakes to cross.

Coming down a steep snow slope we hit another navigational issue. There should have been a path off to the right down by the start of the lake but there was just no sign of one. Cue another bit of scuttling around to try and track down a marker and eventually Lucy spotted one off to the right. It was clearly far too high up the valley and hillside to be the path we wanted but we figured it might meet up with our path further round. Only it turned out that it was our path.

What we hadn't taken into consideration was just how much the melted snow would change the lake levels in the summer. It was only when we were higher up and looked across the lake that we noticed the high water line of the rocks which was about 30 metres higher than the current water level. If you took that into consideration then our path was exactly where the map had shown it to be.



Whereas the rest of the trek had been straightforward walking, we now found ourselves scrambling across rocks and using a via ferrata style chain to guide us across the boulder field. The top had spectacular views across the lake but the weather was rapidly catching us up and so we only stopped for the briefest of lunches.

So far we had only come across one other person on our travels and that was a gentleman who was walking out of the first hut we passed on day one. Ever since that point, we hadn't seen a single other soul. However, our circular route had now brought us back to within striking distance of the road and it was also a bank holiday weekend in Norway so our solitude came to an end.



The Porridge Keller hut was by far the comfiest hut we stayed in. (It very much had the feel of a static caravan about it.) Had it been the height of summer then it would have been a fabulous place to stay as there was a big plateau of rock out the back door which led into the river and created a sort of natural swimming pool. As it was, it still had great views and a box full of games and books.

We got chatting to a Norwegian gent who was already there and settled in to enjoy an evening of cards, rum and good company.

The end was now in sight with only 8 miles back to the car. The idea of walking out the next day and heading back to the first hut we passed on the walk was mooted but, when we awoke to rain the next day, we decide to kick that idea in the teeth. Surely it would be much nicer to spend a day in a comfy hut in the warm than slog along, via a route we had already walked half of, just to get another hut tick? Fortunately for me, although not for him, Stewart's knees were playing him up and he voted for a day of rest. I mean, clearly I wanted to go on and walk 12 miles through the rain and bog to get to a hut that might have Fodd in the larder rather than Sod or Bog but unbelievably I was outvoted.

Karl and Lucy did venture out for what was advertised as a pootle, but turned out to be a slog, up the hill behind the hut but I played the dutiful wife and kept Stewart company as he rested his knees in front of the fire.

The following day it was just a simple task of walking back down the track to the car and scooting off to the wedding venue where we had an appointment with a hot tub at Haukeliseter.

On the way down the track we waved goodbye to our friendly Norwegian gent who cycled past us on his bike. Then we plodded, and looked out our watches, and plodded, and checked the watches again and plodded some more.

About halfway down the track we had to move in to allow a jeep heading up the road get passed us. It was our friendly Norwegian who had driven all the way back up the road to give us a lift! Thanks to his kindness, we were able to cut about 2 hours off the walk which meant that we arrived at the wedding venue in time to enjoy enormous pastries before donning swimwear to enjoy the hot tub and, in some cases, the frozen lake!

Haukeliseter is also a DNT trekking hut but a fully catered one which means that there was a hot tub and steam room as well as a bar and restaurant. After five days of living off tinned food the evening meal we had was just divine. Fresh vegetables, bread and fresh fruit. The evening was spent socialising with Jodie and Simon; Jules, Fabian and Adam who had been trekking in a different area of Norway, and Riggers who had arrived by bus earlier in the evening having somehow managed to blag himself a job in Norway on route.





The following day was the wedding and it was every bit as magical as we had expected. Jodie looked beautiful and I was particularly impressed by her hair and makeup which she had done herself and learnt off YouTube the day before! Simon looked very dapper, and toasty warm, in his tweed suit. Jodie by contrast looked positively frozen when we went outside for the photos but fashion has its price and their wedding photos of them out in the snow are just incredible. As far as I know she didn't contract pneumonia as a result of it so it was obviously worth it.

I'm not normally one to remember food at a wedding but then I don't normally have reindeer. Every dish was delicious and the accompanying entertainment came in the form of Jodie and Simon having to get up and kiss each time someone banged their glass. The kids present found this great fun and by the end of the meal (and a number of glasses of wine) I was certain that Jodie was going to trip over her long skirt whilst climbing onto the chair to kiss Simon and tumble to the floor but luckily it wasn't to be.



The evening ended with dancing and a live band. Fabian discovered a table of left over wine and strategically placed himself next to it. Yet somehow he still managed to not only do a 5km run in the morning but also take a plunge in the frozen lake. Perhaps he was still drunk...

After a leisurely breakfast and a farewell to Jodie and Simon it was time to pack up, throw walking boots in the boot of the car (or bin in Stewart's case) and head to the airport for home.

Having dreaded the holiday in the weeks leading up to it, it turned out to be one I will remember for a long time. The company was great, the scenery beautiful and I can't think of a better way to top it off than celebrating a wedding of two great friends. It was hard work but I surprised myself with my endurance, my tolerance of Sodd and my ability to pack fewer than 20 packets of tissues. Not sure I'll be making a habit of it though. 😊



P | H | O | T | O | F | A | F | F

photofaff by STEWART MOODY

There's nowt like a bit of shop faff, especially when you are in a foreign country and need to rely on the pictures to fathom the content and then stop for comedy photos when you spot tins of 'food' with humorous names. "What's that? The others are waiting the car for me. They'll just have to wait whilst I look for a can of Off". A solid 6/10 on the Faffometer.



Weekend Warriors

Karl Stewart and Lucy Anderson on a 5 day trek in Norway's Telemark region. Taken on the famous 14 hour 'hell day', this photo was snapped before the smiles turned to grimaces.

Photo : STEWART MOODY



MOURNE MOUNTAINS

June 2019

Sometime you can be forgiven for thinking things can be a bit 'samey'. Wales...again! The Lakes...again! Ireland...again! Hang-on, rewind. We never go to Ireland! It's true, despite it being a short(-ish) hop on the ferry from Liverpool we seldom visit the Emerald Isle. Well, your learned committee decided we'd change that, and so off we went. It wasn't all plain sailing, for the owner of the camp site was hospitalised when we arrived (how dare he) but we eventually got ourselves settled and began walking the Mourne Wall and ticking off all the peaks. No captions as the author wasn't there.





Weekend Warriors

Louise Bullock enjoying the view across the Chamonix Valley from the Grand Balcon Nord to the Aiguilles Rouge.

Photo : **STEWART MOODY**



TOUBKAL

words by Harry Conway, photos by Malcolm Imhoff

It is 03:15 on a cold and dark Saturday morning in Moseley. As I stand in the shadows, the soft patter of footsteps from late night revellers returning home is the only thing engaging my senses. What seems like hours pass (could have been mere minutes). My ears sense a much greater disturbance is coming. The sound at first is muffled. I can't distinguish at first between the beat of the music from the engine of the approaching car. The buildings to a crescendo of noise violating my ear drums. I keep my eyes fixed to the pavement. Bright LED lights swerve into the road. Then nothing... my senses shut down.

I am drawn back into the moment by the whirr of a car window rolling down, bringing with it the distinct sound of drum 'n' bass. My eyes begin to adjust and I bend down and peer inside. I can see a lady with a hood up in the passenger seat and what looks like the driver's seat reclined 80 degrees away from the steering wheel. Then she moves.... I panic beginning to step back... I then hear a gruff voice...

"Harry, you getting in or what? Throw your stuff in the boot..."

At this point I'm pulled out of my sleepy stupor and back into reality. The Mercian Morocco Trip had begun!

Following a haze of thoroughly uneventful travel the Mercian Mountaineering Mob arrived at our riad in Imlil. Commonly referred to as the 'Mob' within inner circles, but more widely known as 'Mmm' as people want what we have! We sat on the roof terrace in the sun and all enjoyed a cup of Moroccan 'Whisky', essentially sugary peppermint tea. A little while later we all sat down for dinner, which consisted of breads and lamb tagine, which we would grow (groan) accustomed too. We then retired to our rooms to get ready for starting our trek up Toubkal in the morning.

The following day marked the start of the much-anticipated Toubkal trek! Our first day consisted of an ascent up to 2,500 metres; a height gain of 900 metres from Imlil. Following a leisurely breakfast, some further bag faff and a photo opportunity of the Mob, we set off down the hill from our riad into Imlil to meet our guide Hussain. We purchased a few supplies, mainly tinned fish in some dodgy looking sauce and loaves of bread for 50 pence each! Anta amused us all by trying (or shall we say forcefully) having a scarf wrapped round her head by an over

enthusiastic scarf seller. When we had all finally finished laughing we realised that Hussain our guide had rather cunningly started us off on our trek.

Within minutes we entered the forest on the outskirts of Imlil and were greeted by a scene from The Jungle Book. It was harvesting season in the forest and all the farmers were sat amongst the trees, shaking them and bashing them with sticks. Their aim was to knock these curious looking fruits off the tree. After a few brief moments we realised that those fruits were walnuts! The farmer gave us a couple to eat and following a few childish jokes we cracked on with the walk.

Within a couple of hours of leaving Imlil we reached the highest point of our ascent for the day and saw this as a prime opportunity for lunch. We then set off for the refuge skirting around the mountain at a leisurely pace knowing that we would have our feet up in no time. By 15:30 we were all sat on the roof terrace soaking up the sunshine and the spectacular views of the terraced fields with some more Moroccan 'Whisky'.

On the second day our aim today was to reach the height of 3,600 metres and we set off early to achieve this by lunchtime. The rucksacks were weighing a little heavier on our backs this morning and it was a welcome sight to see a waterfall. We had a quick stop and yet another photo opportunity before climbing out of the valley basin. Once out of the valley, Hussain pointed to the saddle that we were going to ascend. The Mob were all rather enjoying our break when we heard 'Yala! Yala!' This was Hussain telling us to hurry up and get going, phrase that would stick with us throughout the remainder of our trip in Morocco.

Upon reaching the bottom of the saddle we all looked up and realised just how many switchbacks we would have to complete. Being honest with you, we spent hours on the switchbacks. I'm not sure if it was due to fatigue or the Mercian Mincing we seemed to have developed. However, when we reached the top we were all relieved and the view was exhilarating. We could see for miles around! At this point we had a welcome lunch break and we could really take in the views from 3,600 metres.

After lunch we began our descent to the second refuge Mouflon and during the descent we were able to see the summit of Toubkal!

The descent was rather uneventful apart from a few spectacular falls by some of the Mob slipping on the loose rock under our feet. The Mouflon refuge itself left a lot to be desired. The showers were dirty and dangerous, and the toilets generally unsanitary. Our third tagine of the holiday tasted lovely, but we didn't want to think about hygiene in the kitchen! Hussain joined us for dinner and Anta was quick to spot that he was wearing the same robe as the day before, which was bigger than his rucksack. Anta being Anta took him to task and after some rather mild interrogation he conceded that he had a mule! Fabian's renowned sonic boom made sure the whole room was aware that our guide was a slacker. Personally, I was so knackered I couldn't even muster the energy to care. We all retired to bed early for a 03:30 start for the summit of Toubkal.

Day three saw the final ascent of Toubkal required an 'Alpine start' and it is worth reporting that we lost one of the Mob. I decided to decline an attempt on the summit due to some rather intense heel pains. Therefore, I am left to tell you the story of the summit through Mercian Mob folklore.

The Mob were about to embark on what Huw terms an 'Epic'. The day consisted of 950 metres ascent followed by over 2500 metres of descent. Headtorches at the ready, they set off for the summit. I watched them weave their way up with other groups of summit toppers. Legend has it that the ascent was long and the path at times was just scree. The Mercians made it to the summit in under 3 hours. Once on the summit they we greeted with a vista across the high Atlas mountains. Fabian tended to his herd of adopted sheep, feeding them a delicacy of KP nuts. After the obligatory photos the Mob headed back to the Mouflon refuge. You may be wondering (or maybe you aren't) "what happened to Harry"...

I was rather Nestlé in my sleeping bag and enjoyed an After Eight start. Essentially, I read my book for 4 hours and observed the rather unsanitary conditions in the campsite until the Mob returned. Most looked shattered as they devoured lunch. Hussain on the other hand, looked relaxed and rather smug (probably because he has a mule, Toubkal's very own 4X4).

'Yala! Yala!'

So, begins the final stage of our Toubkal trek, our descent into Imilil. What ensued was a 6-hour blockbuster of the Mob Mincing off the mountain, with Huw periodically throwing in a pirouette to add flare to the proceedings. On one occasion his contribution was so well timed that the French lady in front of him was angry at his

rather forward proposition! Apart from amusing each other and fellow tourists the descent was long and rather painful. I think we were all glad to reach the valley and were looking forward to some Moroccan 'Whisky'. Back at the Riad we caught up with Beth and Vicky, whom had an action-packed couple of days with walks and mountain biking!

Toubkal reflects 1/3 of our Morocco trip and Malcolm has many stories to share of camel riding, luxury desert camping, and dangerous ambulance rides in Marrakech. We hope our stories will someday pass into folklore and encourage others to take up the challenge of Toubkal!



MOROCCO BOUND



Malcolm 'Ali Baba' Imhoff tells his story of the first Mercian trip to Morocco...

When this trip was suggested I signed up immediately, very keen to add to my collection of 4000 metre peaks. I'm not as fit as I was though and I knew it would be tough. I was also a bit worried when I learned that most of the others run marathons, go to the gym every day, and ride bikes up hills. I did walk up the stairs a few times with a rucksack full of water. There were eight of us, Vicky, who masterminded the operation, Sarah, Beth & Huw, Fabian, Harry, and Anta. Apart from Anta who arrived later that evening, we met at the airport and flew to Marrakech, where our transport was waiting to take us to our Riad in Imlil, and we met our guide Hussein.

Like Gaul, this meet was divided into three parts...

PART 1 - TOUBKAL

No rest for the wicked, next day we were walking. Well, six of us were, as Vicky and Beth decided they would rather sample the sights and night life in Imlil. We opted to spend three days and go the long way round to help us acclimatise to the altitude.

It was very hot, very long, and my rucksac, which I had pared down to the absolute minimum, was incredibly heavy. Mint tea at the alcohol-free Refuge Tamsoult was very welcome.

Day two was even harder as we had a long 5 hour climb up very steep endless zigzags to cross over the Adrar Aguelzim ridge, where a couple of enterprising locals had a camp fire and were selling Coke. After this there was a more gentle paths along the side of the valley to the alcohol-free Refuge Les Mouflons for a welcome rest.

Harry decided he wanted a lie in so now down to five we were up at 3.30 am and out in the pitch dark for the summit bid. I was struggling with the weight, but Fabian and Huw offered to carry some of my gear and water which made a big difference. I think they all wanted me to get to the top and their encouragement really helped. Hussein was very good too, and we had frequent photo stops (aka rest stops).

I was very slow but we weren't in a hurry, and to be up there as the sun rose on another beautiful sunny day, well, it's why we climb mountains.

There was great excitement as we reached the summit, 4167 metres, and we all got a burst of energy, running round taking lots of pictures and having a bite to eat.

The summit structure is quite unusual and Huw had to climb it. The views were superb, and I was elated, very tired but very happy.

We then had an eight hour trek all the way down to our alcohol-free Riad in Imlil, by which time I was dead on my feet and could hardly put one foot in front of the other. I may not be very fit, but I do have a lot of determination and will-power.

Now off to the Desert...

“Harry decided he wanted a lie in so now down to five we were up at 3.30 am and out in the pitch dark for the summit bid.”



PART 2 - THE DESERT

No rest for the wicked, we were picked up early next morning by our guide Barak (who immediately Christened me "Ali Baba" for some reason. We had a long drive to the desert, and on the way had a most interesting exploration of the impressive World Heritage Site of the Kasbah (fortress) of Ait Ben Addan. This has been the location for many well-known films such as "Gladiator". At our hotel the blokes shared a small room while the girls had what can only be described as a Palace!

Next day another long drive with a couple of stops, one for a short walk in the Dades Gorge, one for me to buy a scarf so I could look the part, and another at the Museum in Erfoud, the "City of Fossils", where we had a fascinating tour, before arriving at the hotel in Merzouga where I rested while everybody else got more exercise and went for a swim.

You were probably wondering when camels would make an appearance. This was one of the highlights of the trip. We drove out in jeeps to meet our camels. Sarah had warned me that camels are uncomfortable, sweaty, bad-tempered and not to wear anything that I wanted to wear again. Well, my camel was very gentle, docile, comfortable and not at all sweaty, obviously a lady. It was a wonderful and unique experience, meandering through the dunes of the Erg Chebbi and watching the sun go down. On the flat and going uphill the ride was very smooth. On the downhill stretches it was bone-shaking as camel's legs don't seem to bend. It was dark by the time we got to our desert camp, and mirabile dictu, what a surprise. Here in the middle of nowhere were tents the size of marquees, proper beds, electric lights, hot & cold running water and flush toilets! Amazing.

After a lovely meal we adjourned to the camp fire where our Berber hosts entertained us with their traditional songs, dances and drumming. Right up my street. Several of us had a go at banging the drums, and of course we were expected to reciprocate by singing at least one of our own national songs. Responsibility for that fell to me so we staggered through a few verses of "Ging Gang Goolie".

In the morning we all went up onto the dune to wait and watch for the sunrise, another magical occasion. Breakfast, and

then most of us opted to ride back on the camels, by which time we had become quite expert.

Then another very long drive back to Marrakech, lots of fun and games and entertainment in the car, to find our alcohol-free "Air B&B", tucked away down a maze of narrow cobbled streets some distance from where the car could stop. It was very nice, if a little strange, in that there was a hole in the roof and a swimming pool in the middle of the floor. Fortunately it didn't rain.

Now off to Marrakech...





PART 3 - MARRAKECH

This is where it all goes pear-shaped. The temperature in Marrakech had risen to 40°C, so unbearably hot. We had a lovely day getting lost and exploring the maze of underground souks. No booze shops at all in the Old City apparently. We spent a happy hour in the excellent recently refurbished Photography Museum, and then retreated to the air-conditioning of the B&B to recover. All apart from Huw who went out on a mission to find some beer. He came back empty-handed. Undeterred, he went out again with Fabian, the master navigator, outside the city walls, and as fortune would have it met an Australian guy who knew where you could get some of this illicit substance. They returned with two rucsacs full of beer and a few bottles of wine.

In the evening we walked into the main square, Pl Jemaa el Fna, a crowded, noisy, exciting place full of market stalls, music, clowns, snake charmers. Sarah declined to have a snake draped round her neck. It was round about this time I started to feel unwell.

I have a very hazy recollection of what happened next. In the middle of the night I had an attack of uncontrollable shivering, fever, sickness, diarrhoea, and disorientation. I managed to raise the alarm and with the help of Sarah the housekeeper they called for an ambulance. Now you will recall that vehicles cannot get to the B&B, so I had a hair-raising ride on the back of a motorbike at about 90 mph, clinging tightly to the paramedic, no helmet of course, along the narrow cobbled streets of Marrakech to where the ambulance was waiting to take me to the hospital, with Fabian, Huw and Harry & Sarah I think in hot pursuit. And guess what, nobody thought to get a photo of this! They put me on a drip, dosed me with antibiotics, and kept me in overnight. I am indebted to Fabian in particular for making several journeys to and from the hospital, helping me get out, finding a pharmacy that was open, paying my bills, getting taxis, and generally looking after me. Fabian you are a star and would make some lucky girl a very good husband.

Understandably the author didn't take many photos on this leg of the journey, so here are more from the desert...





SNAKES & LADDERS

by Anna Flemming

“Are you sure this is the way?”

We walk towards a sheer wall of slate.

“Pretty sure.”

At the bottom of the wall there are a few rocks. Between the rocks – a tiny black gap.

“We’ve got to drop down there?” I ask dubiously.

“Yep!”

Peering into the darkness, I make out a few stones. Some gravel. The drop is only a metre or so. Beyond that, everything is darkness.

I try to squeeze my torso in above the hole, so that my feet can drop down. I get stuck.

“You’ll have to take your rucksack off!”

“Oh yeah.”



I take my bag off and slide down the rock, belly on a boulder, back meeting the wall, legs reaching through the darkness, feet seeking solid ground. They find some stone and I slither down into the hole. Through the black, I see a small patch of light. We are inside a tunnel.

Ana drops the bags down then joins me. I guide her feet. Adam comes last.

We walk along the tunnel, following two lines of metal: old train tracks. The darkness deepens as I walk in further into the mountain. I tread carefully, avoiding pools of water, stepping around stones.

The circle of light gradually grows.

We emerge onto a slope of shattered rock. I step forward, feet sliding on loose slate. I see sky, scree, cliffs and terraces. It takes a moment for me to realise: we are in Australia, the quarry we had been climbing in earlier today.

We are following an unusual route around Llanberis slate quarries. Snakes and Ladders is named for the old quarry ladders and tunnels you follow through the workings, ascending hundreds of feet up quarry walls, then dropping down by scree, ladder or abseil into the next pit.

One section requires technical climbing. Inside California – a vast quarry pit – there is a steep slab with two huge chains running down the face. Adam leads up the chains, using slings and karabiners to protect himself as he climbs up into the tunnel above. I follow, trying out aid climbing for the first time. I hold two 120mm slings: one in each hand and slide my feet into the ends. Like a puppet on strings, my left hand pulls

up my left foot and I attach the karabiner to the chain in front of me. I stand on my left foot and raise my right hand, bringing the other foot up by placing the karabiner into a chain link slightly higher. Repeat. Lift, haul, clip, balance. It is hard work.

Snakes and Ladders might be considered a via Ferrata route, since there are pegs and ladders hammered into the walls to aid climbing on the steepest sections. However, Snakes and Ladders is missing a key attribute. In the Alps, via Ferrata routes are lined with cables that you can attach yourself to, protecting yourself from slips and falls. There are no safety lines here.

The quarries remind me of the Cuillin ridge on Skye: of epic scale and sharp rock; deadly drops and difficult navigation; an electrifying blend of risk, fun and adventure. Snakes and Ladders lies well within the great tradition of sketchy British scrambling.

We stand in a massive pit. If St Paul's was transplanted here, the cathedral would look like a village chapel. We leave through a tunnel and emerge into an even bigger space. The experience is repeated again and again. Pits drop down. Walls rear up. Terraces line slopes. It takes us three hours to move around the quarry workings. The scale is mind-blowing.

The old cast iron ladders are thick and rusted. Some ladders are fastened to the cliffs with iron bars. Others have chains and ropes for support. The roped ones wobble. Considerably. The ladders ascend and descend long, steep faces. Often, one ladder is not enough. In mid-air, you must step across onto the next ladder. On the first ladder, the move is reasonably

straightforward. However, the next time, the move is complicated.

The ladders are like crossed swords. I stand at the top of one ladder, underneath the one I need to switch onto. I must swing my whole body around and onto the face of this ladder, but I am already 10 metres above the ground. The task feels a little daunting. I reach my right hand around to grasp the new ladder and move my left foot to the edge of the rung. Then I reach my right leg out, twisting my foot onto the new ladder. I quickly pull the other half of my body over and regain balance, leaning into the ladder for a moment.

“Make sure you protect yourself on that move!” I call down to Ana and Adam. I do not tell them that this upper ladder – which stretches out into space – wobbles. Forewarned is not always forearmed.

Tracing the steps of quarry men around this blasted mountain, I become conscious of the huge work of the industrial revolution. Quarrying began here in 1787. At its peak in the 1800s, Dinorwic Quarry in Llanberis employed 3000 men and produced 100,000 tonnes of slate per year. Welsh slate was shipped out around the British Empire. The work was dangerous and demanding. Between 1822 and 1969, 362 men died at work. In 1875, at the nearby quarries at Blaenau Ffestiniog, the life expectancy of a quarryman was 38 years. Physical toil, inhaling slate dust, tolerating extreme temperatures underground, poor diet and poor living conditions all took their toll. The markets shifted and now that work happens elsewhere. The human cost of capitalist industry can be appalling.

The environmental costs are also clear. A whole mountainside has been excavated. For every tonne of slate removed, twenty tonnes of waste were left. When Dinorwic Quarry closed it was partly because of waste problems: the unsystematic approach to tips meant that dumps began to slide and fall into quarry workings. In 1969, the machinery was auctioned and the quarry shut. Some people dislike this industrial landscape. They see waste, ruin and devastated nature in the mounds of shattered slate. But I’ve always had an affection for old quarries. I like seeing the slow process of re-naturalisation. Heather and moss clump on ledges. Spiders crawl across slate slabs. Trees spring up: birch, rowan and willow. Inside the Lost World, ferns wave at the tunnel mouth. A raven barks, flying out from the cliffs. The brutal sounds of blasting have long gone. Water drips. Scree rattles. Climbers shout; voices boom and echo across the amphitheatre. High in the quarry, something cries. A child screaming for help? No – it’s not human. Could it be a goat? Strange place for a goat. Perhaps it’s a young bird of prey – a peregrine – calling for food.

Clambering through these vast quarry workings, I sense how the environment is slowly recovering from a huge geological event. Earlier this summer, in Iceland, I saw the power of geology to transform a landscape. On that strange and beautiful island, sheep pastures end abruptly where a wall of lava appears. Volcanic eruptions beneath ice-caps cause huge floods, pouring an incredible volume of debris out towards the sea, washing out roads and bridges, creating miles of flat delta where before there was only sea.

Earth is always moving.



This isn't the first rope faff that has appeared in this publication, and it sure as hell won't be the last. Adam Butler doing what he does best whilst Anna Flemming looks on from her grassy perch with an expression that is open to your interpretation. Maybe it is a look of admiration for Adam's rope work, or maybe she's wondering how it is she ended up wearing Huw's shorts. Either way, it's a quality bit of faff on a quality climb, Kirkus Route (VS 4c), in Snowdonia. Adam, we extend our compliments to you, sir. 10 out of 10.



VIJAY'S 50TH MEET

June 2019

Not since Kenny Rogers got the Sunday afternoon slot at Glastonbury in 2013 have tickets for an event been so eagerly anticipated. The promise of piles of top quality Indian cuisine on a summer hut booking in Cwn Dyli, the home of the original 'Kraken meet' in 2016, proved irresistible for many members. We came from far and wide to enjoy the mountains, the food, the board games, and of course the Kraken rum. As the editor was incapacitated due to overdoing it in Norway the week before all photos of this meet are indoors. Just look at that lovely food though! That's how the Merican's roll...





(L-R) Becky, Andy, Fabian, Joel, Vicky, Jane.

The guest of honour and the mountains of food. And that's just the starters.



The yellow team; (L-R) Becky, Vicki and Joel.



(L-R) Huw, Vijay, Lou.



Farewell to

THE WAGON & HORSES

On the 5th of September after many years of pint pulling, Derek sold the Wagon & Horses and retired. And so we waved a fond farewell to both Derek and Kirsty who had been welcoming to our club for more years than I can recall.

We began frequenting the Wagon & Horses on Thursday evenings after climbing when our previous pub, The Old Crown, got a bit too loud for our sensitive ears. That was back in 2009. We, and our library moved onto the Wagon & Horses where Derek let us use the pub for committee meetings, AGMs (EGMs, gulp!) and photo competitions. He often laid out a platter of sandwiches, pork pies and nibbles and if that wasn't enough of a draw, his cat Amos became a firm favourite with the members.

These photos were taken on the final Thursday that Derek was open for business where Derek was keen to buy each of a drink and we handed him and Kirsty with a few tokens of gratitude including a unique Mercian mug printed especially.

FF



THE GOWER

July 2019

The Gower meet hit an early hurdle. The camp site that can't be booked, and that doesn't need to be booked because it is never full was... well... it was full! So we scattered ourselves across a few local campsites and got together each morning to climb, walk, swim, eat ice cream, and drink beer on South Wales most splendid peninsula. This photo shows Vic heading down to Fall Bay near Rhosilli on Saturday morning for a spot of trad. After climbing we jumped into the sea that was seriously warm. We jumped into crashing waves, body surfed into shore and generally behaved like kids for 30 minutes.



(L-R) Adam, Sarah, Lou, Naomi, Dave, Stew enjoying drinks and ice cream after a day of climbing at Rhosilli and a swim in the incredibly (almost unbelievably) warm sea. Some say warmer than the Med on a good day!?



The delightful amble in to the Third Sister sport climbing venue.



(L-R) Sarah and Stew enjoying pizza and beer with sun, sea and sand at Rhosilli.



Vic topping out on South West Diedre (HVS 5a) at Fall Bay





Weekend Warriors

Adam Butler nearing the top of the gritstone classic Hargreave's Original (VS 4c) at Stanage Popular. Under the watchful eye of Naomi Simmonite, he made the top, and in doing so ticked off yet another of Ken Wilson's list of classic rock climbs.

Photo : STEWART MOODY



CAE'R FRAN

November 2019

A new hut for Mercians above Llanberris. The forecast was best described as 'poor' so having parked the cars in Nant Peris we did a mass ascent of the Glyders with the sole objective of having a few hours drinking time in the Pen Y Gwryd before getting the Sherpa bus back down the Pass. Vicki served up a fine meal of hut pie (it's like cottage pie, but has no meat), and on Sunday folk went their own ways to do their own things.



The summit of Glyder Fawr (or is it Glyder Fach?) on the Saturday. It went from t-shirts to, well, everything got pretty cold pretty fast once we got onto the summit plateau.



Joel doing what Joel so often does. On a side note the Mercians do not approve of Christmas decoration in November. Ever!



The Pen Y Gwryd, perhaps the best pub in Wales. Discuss.



All aboard the Sherpa bus back to Llanberris.



Becky crushing the table traverse.

HIKE | BIKE | CLIMB