



About the Author

Adrian is a mountain guide and photographer living on Skye. He has been climbing since the 1980s with a CV that includes Alpine north faces, big walls in Yosemite and first ascents on the White Cliffs of Dover.

After a BA in history from King's College London, Adrian devoted himself to climbing and photography. Jobs were often temporary and a means to finance climbing trips. His work in the outdoor industry included 12 years at Ogwen Cottage in Snowdonia, one of the few places in the UK to regularly take secondary school students multi-pitch climbing.

Adrian and his wife, Bridgette, live at the foot of the Cuillin and feel they are living their dream life. Together, they run a guiding and photography company, All Things Cuillin, and have set up the very popular Facebook group of the same name.

Skye's Cuillin Ridge Traverse

Strategies, advice, detailed topo
booklet and 10 classic scrambles

by Adrian Trendall

CICERONE

Juniper House, Murley Moss,
Oxenholme Road, Kendal, Cumbria LA9 7RL
www.cicerone.co.uk

© Adrian Trendall 2020
First edition 2020
ISBN: 978 1 78631 043 9



Printed in China on responsibly sourced paper on behalf of Latitude Press Ltd
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
All photographs are by the author unless otherwise stated.



Maps are reproduced with
permission from HARVEY Maps,
www.harveymaps.co.uk

Warning! Climbing and scrambling can be dangerous

Climbing and scrambling can be dangerous activities carrying a risk of personal injury or death. It should be undertaken only by those with a full understanding of the risks and with the training and experience to evaluate them. Mountaineers should be appropriately equipped for the routes undertaken. Whilst every care and effort has been taken in the preparation of this book, the user should be aware that conditions are highly variable and can change quickly. Holds may become loose or fall off, rockfall can affect the character of a route, and in winter, snow and avalanche conditions must be carefully considered. These can materially affect the seriousness of a scramble, tour or expedition.

Therefore, except for any liability which cannot be excluded by law, neither Cicerone nor the author accept liability for damage of any nature including damage to property, personal injury or death arising directly or indirectly from the information in this book.

Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1043/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, Cumbria, LA9 7RL, United Kingdom.

Register your book: To sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at www.cicerone.co.uk.

Contents

Location of practice routes	1
Map key	6
Overview map	7
INTRODUCTION	9
Preparation and training	12
Strategy and tactics	19
Gear	26
Navigation	34
Climbing, scrambling and ropework	36
Grades	42
Weather	42
Geology of the Black Cuillin	45
Logistics	49
Reasons for failure	52
Beyond the ridge	53
Using this guide	56
CLASSIC SCRAMBLES	57
Route 1 Round of Fionn Choire	59
Route 2 The Spur, Sgurr an Fheadain	64
Route 3 South South East Buttress, Sgurr na Stri	68
Route 4 Thuilm Ridge, Sgurr a' Mhadaidh	72
Route 5 South Ridge, Sgurr Coir' an Lochain	76
Route 6 The Dubh Ridge	79
Route 7 Round of Coire Lagan	85
Route 8 Pinnacle Ridge, Sgurr nan Gilleann	97
Route 9 Clach Glas – Bla Bheinn Traverse	104
Route 10 Central South Buttress, An Caisteal	113
THE CUILLIN TRAVERSE IN WINTER	117
Route 11 The winter traverse	122
Appendix A Summary of classic scrambles	138
Appendix B Further reading, webcams and accommodation	139






Front cover: Perfect weather for the Bad Step on Am Basteir



View to Cuillin Ridge from summit of Clach Glas (Classic scramble 9)



Symbols used on maps and topos

-  route
-  alternative route
-  start point
-  finish point
-  route direction
-  numbered waymark (main route)
-  numbered waymark (alt route)
-  numbered waymark (hidden from view)
-  abseil
-  bivi site
-  water
-  escape route



Descending from Sgurr nan Eag towards Caisteal a' Garbh-choire. Easier lines exist on scree to the left (Section 1)

Introduction

The very special brand of ridge scrambling found here can have few equals in the whole world.

Gordon Stainforth, author of *'The Cuillin'*

Skye's Cuillin Ridge has been described as 'the holy grail of British scrambling' (British Mountaineering Council) and 'the jewel in the crown of Scottish mountaineering' (Jamie Andrew – a climber, motivational speaker and quadruple amputee).

A well-known climbing venue since the late 1890s, people soon began to wonder if a traverse of the ridge was possible in a single outing. It wasn't until 10 June 1911 that Leslie Shadbolt and Alastair McLaren completed the first traverse of the Cuillin Ridge – and they did it in a day. Their time of 12 hours and 18 minutes from first to last summit is a time that many modern teams would be only too pleased with. Previously it had been thought impossible, that it would be 'a feat of the gods' and take perhaps three days or even longer.

Shadbolt referred to the traverse as 'a great day' and later recalled that 'we thought we might try the traverse of all the peaks, an expedition about which there had been a good deal of speculation'. Those first traversers were well ahead of their day with the route not being repeated until 1920. The route taken has become known as The Great Traverse and over the years the record has fallen to a remarkable 2 hours 59 minutes and 22 seconds. This speedy traverse was set by Finlay Wild, a runner and climber of repute.

If you are reading this, then the Cuillin Ridge probably needs no introduction but the statistics below flesh out the nature of the beast.

Traversing the ridge can be a delectable experience as much of it is on the cusp between climbing and walking thus allowing for fast, exhilarating

Section	Distance and ascent	Terrain	Time
Approach	7km and 900m of ascent	Rough walking	3 hours
Ridge	12km and 3000m of ascent	Scrambling to grade 3, technical climbing to Severe and 3 abseils or down climbs	10–15 hours
Walk out	6km and 900m of descent	300m of scrambling and rough walking	3 hours



Climbers ascending to N Top of Bidein (Section 8)

progress unimpeded by ropes or pitching. Much of the ridge is tinged with an air of seriousness where a slip could prove fatal, and the height gain alone puts it in the league of the North Face of the Eiger. But when you throw in the set piece technical climbs – such as the Inaccessible Pinnacle (In Pinn) and the Thearlaich Dubh Gap (T-D Gap) – several abseils and yet more scrambling, it adds up to a magical journey in sensational situations. The technical climbing grades might alarm walkers but shouldn't set off too many alarms for competent climbers.

It is no coincidence that the Cuillin Ridge is the first route in Ken Wilson's uber tick-list, coffee table book, *Classic Rock*. A ridge of 900m mountains rising straight out of the vibrant Hebridean seas, it has attracted climbers and walkers for generations. The 11 Munros, miles of knife-edge scrambling and

iconic climbs help explain its attraction as does the obvious linear nature of the challenge and the continuously interesting, high-quality scrambling and climbing.

Although a huge challenge, it is achievable by many climbers and here lies much of its appeal. The climbing may be long but it is never too hard or sustained. With preparation and practice, a helping of luck, a good level of fitness and the right mental attitude, the ridge is within the grasp of many climbers. For many, it is a dream route but with a little effort (well, quite a lot, actually) it is one that can become a reality. Although Alpine-like in length and quality, the ridge is surprisingly accessible and as such not too committing with many variations, bypasses and escape routes back to civilisation. Indeed, ease of escape helps to explain the high failure rate since it is all too

easy to throw in the towel at the first sign of difficulty and be back in the pub in a few hours.

For many climbers, traversing the ridge may well be their one and only visit to Skye but many return again and again to delve into the complexities of the ridge. The 'Tolkienesque' landscape with sharp ridges and towering cliffs, mist shrouded peaks and extinct volcanos is unique. Some people strike lucky and succeed in their first attempt but, for the majority, it requires the conjunction of the right partner, good weather, physical fitness and mental strength to produce a winning formula. Cuillin experts reckon that perhaps only 10% of climbers succeed on their first attempt.

The Cuillin Ridge seems to be a never-ending source of interest. In 2019, if you typed 'Cuillin Ridge' into

Google, you'd get 93,000 results; and if you searched UK Climbing's forums, you'd find more than 350 separate threads on the subject as people try to find answers to their questions about logistics, rope length and gear lists. Despite such a wealth of available information, until now there hasn't been a single universal source of information about the ridge. This guide collates the author's years of experience and information from numerous different sources in order to help bring the challenge of traversing the ridge within reach of many climbers, scramblers and walkers.

Shadbolt wrote an account for the Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal entitled *The Cuillin Main Ridge* and stated that 'in common with... most people who have climbed in the Cuillins (sic), I have always looked with



A classy descent of Pinnacle Ridge to top a perfect ridge in a day

longing eyes at the great stretch of narrow ridge and speculated on the possibility of making a continuous climb along it from end to end in one day'. Not everyone can, or will want to do it in one day, but, like Shadbolt, you 'can endeavour to translate the dreams of the winter fireside into the realms of accomplished action'.

Preparation and training

Being well prepared is a key ingredient of a successful traverse. Good planning and preparation will increase your chances exponentially.

Partner

Partner selection is crucial and any incompatibility will only be exacerbated during the stress and strain of a traverse. Not only will you spend a very long day, or two, together but the

pair of you should train together as a team, so compatibility is a prerequisite. Choose a partner with similar levels of fitness, determination and stamina to yourself – but don't overlook things like shared interests and a similar sense of humour. An ability to get along well with each other is the second most important thing after safety.

Pick your partner with care, rather than coercing a reluctant boyfriend or girlfriend, for example. Remember your life can, quite literally, be on the line with your choice of partner.

Play to each other's strengths, so if one of you is a much better climber then that person should lead all the technical rock pitches. Finishing the ridge is more important than being able to list the traverse as alternate leads in a logbook. Be prepared to help each other out and don't be too proud

to accept help. For example, if one of you is flagging, then the other can offer to carry both rope and rack.

Ability is not the be all and end all – climbers operating right at the limit of their ability have completed the ridge, having stacked the odds in their favour by researching the route and training hard etc. Conversely, top climbers have failed due to underestimating the undertaking.

Physical fitness

A high level of fitness alone won't guarantee success but it will improve your odds and enable you to make the most of any weather window.

Walking, cycling and running are all good for general fitness. Going to a wall or climbing hard outside won't necessarily help but the more grades that you have in hand, the better prepared you will be to effortlessly solo the easier parts of the ridge and cruise the technical pitches.

There is no substitute for sport-specific training so long scrambles and lower grade climbs, long, rough walks and the like will be brilliant practice. Consider link-ups of long easy climbs – choices abound in North Wales and the Lake District.

All training is best done carrying what you anticipate using on Skye. Thus, a fully loaded pack and your choice of footwear should be obligatory. Wear approach shoes and a pack when training at your local wall and concentrate on grades appropriate to the Cuillin. Getting the miles in is more important than flashing hard routes.

Make sure you train whatever the weather. Movement on damp or wet rock, navigation in poor visibility and setting up a bivi in the dark should all reap dividends in getting you ridge fit and ensuring these things become second nature. Think outside of the box and maximise what you have to hand. Your walk to work can be built into the training; wear a rucksack and balance along kerbstones or have a quick traverse of a stone wall. Or, walk up flights of stairs in your office rather than taking the lift. Sea defences and bouldery beaches provide good training opportunities.

Psychological fitness

Most teams will not only be physically exhausted by (or long before) the end of the ridge but also mentally drained. Lots of people after their first attempt on the ridge comment on the scale of the exposure – not just the steep cliffs and big drops involved but the continuous, unrelenting need to remain 100% switched on as you concentrate on the terrain. Mental resilience and a determination to continue is essential, especially on the second half of the ridge which can seem never-ending. You cannot simply plod on and push through regardless because you must stay alert and concentrate on every foot and handhold. Don't make the mistake of underestimating the mental pressure of constant scrambling in potentially dangerous situations for hour upon hour, especially as the time ticks by and the darkness draws ever closer.

Enjoying the relatively easy route across Collie's Ledge (Section 4)



With clean cut holds, The Spur on Sgurr an Fheadain is doable in the wet (Classic scramble 2)



Preparation and training

Become slick

Part of the US Navy SEALs' mantra is 'slow is smooth, smooth is fast', and this is what you need to aim towards. Your movement along the ridge needs to be smooth, an uninterrupted flow forwards. Haste has no place and will lead to mistakes and premature expenditure of energy. Practice pacing yourself and make every single action efficient. Learn from mistakes on your practice days out.

Here are a few hints on being slick:

- Have food and drink to hand in order to negate the need to stop and remove your pack then reverse the process. Keep food in your pockets, water in a bladder and a drinking tube carefully positioned so as to be accessible.
- Refine your clothing system so there is zero faffing with layers on/off/on. If conditions dictate then wear a hat and gloves then remove and put in pockets and vice versa.
- Start with the rack arranged and clipped to the leader's harness ready for the off. Put the rope in a stuff sac or stuffed in pack ready to deploy so as to reduce time wasted uncoiling it and the risk of tangles. Only use the rope when absolutely necessary. Nothing is going to consume time more than endless pitching or abseiling on terrain that can be scrambled up or down-climbed. The weaker climber can use a screwgate to clip into a figure of eight on a bight for speed and after any use of the rope the leader can just take in more coils once the knot has been freed from the screwgate.

- Have a map and guidebook in your pocket and readily accessible rather than in your pack. Map cases are a real faff and will definitely be a big no-no for climbing/scrambling.
- Get into the habit of saving energy. For example, contour everything from the big hills to the smallest rock traverse. Losing/gaining height is bad and requires an unnecessary expenditure of energy. Adopt the motorway mindset of maybe going a little further than if you were driving on A roads but the process is quicker and more efficient. Constantly scan slightly ahead and planning each foot placement and hand hold.
- Communicate with your partner and stay within sight of each other so the second doesn't have to make the same mistakes as the leader. Point out the easiest line to each other, warn about loose rocks and generally help and look after each other, especially as the day progresses and people tire.
- Get into the habit of overly loosening your pack straps as you remove them so they are easy to put back on later.
- Pack your rucksack so that anything needed during the day is easily accessible. Bivi and cooking gear can go at the bottom of your pack with items needed during the day close to the top.
- Wear clothing appropriate for the conditions and don't hesitate to shed layers to avoid overheating. Remember, if you can't be bothered then you probably should.

Classic scrambles

These 10 routes (ordered approximately by grade) range from little more than tough walks through hard scrambles and easier graded climbs. They provide a variety of grades and offer opportunities both to explore the Cuillin and retrace parts of the ridge. There are enough routes here for an extended trip to Skye and they provide both a chance to scope out the ridge for your traverse and a few routes for any spare time afterwards.

Many are great routes in their own right but most offer scope to explore parts of the ridge in preparation for a traverse. Thus the Dubh Ridge is a fantastic route, offers an alternative route up onto the ridge and could easily be combined with an exploration of the T-D Gap. Sgurr Thuilm and the NW Ridge of Sgurr a' Meadaidh can be done as a shortish trip or extended to explore the four tops of Mhadaidh and even to continue over Bidein. The routes can also give an indication of whether you are likely to achieve 'guidebook time' on the ridge traverse itself.

Some of the easier routes are good poor weather alternatives and all the routes provide fantastic views of the Cuillin, none more so than the diminutive summit of Sgurr na Stri.

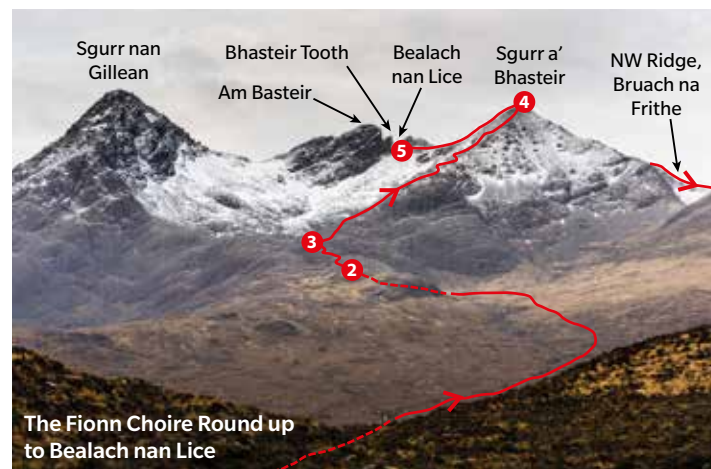
Route 1

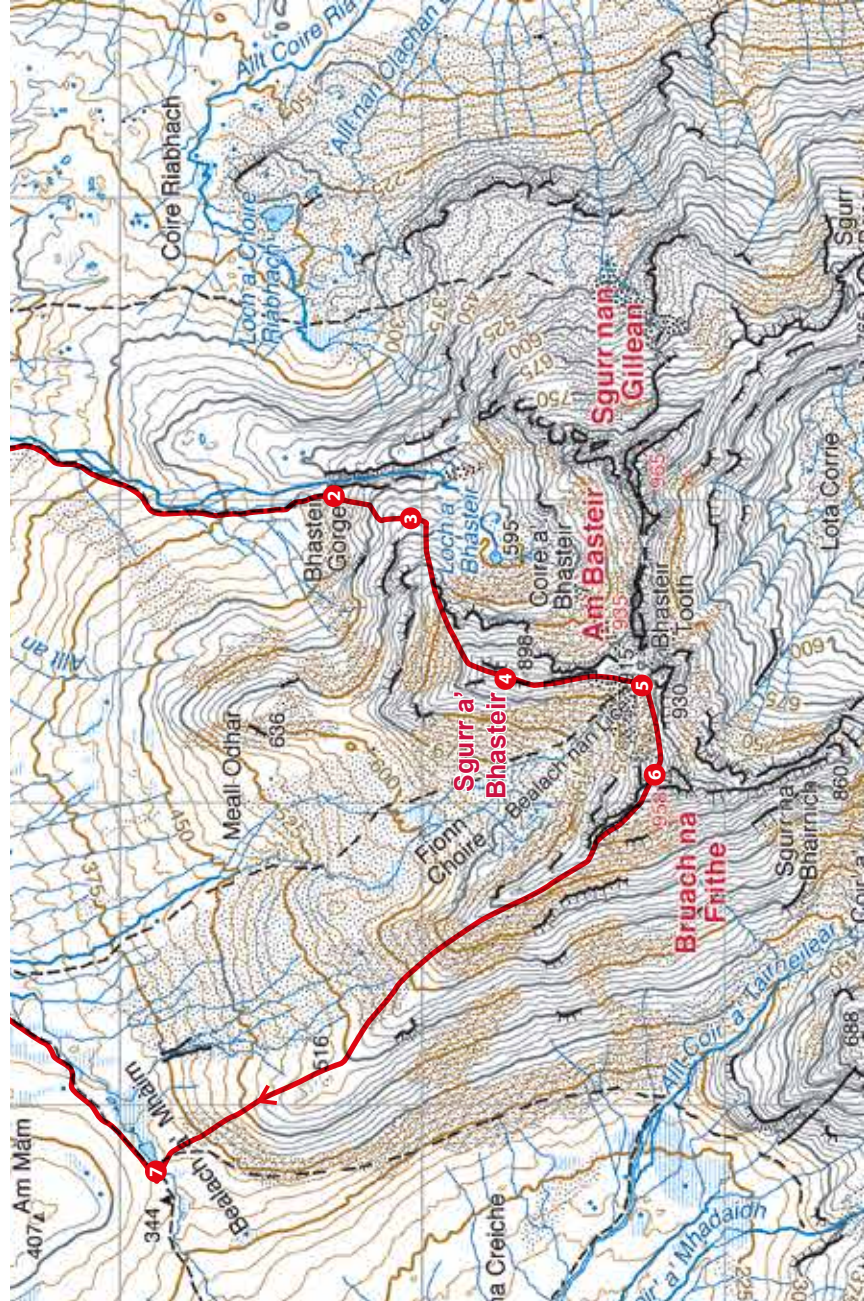
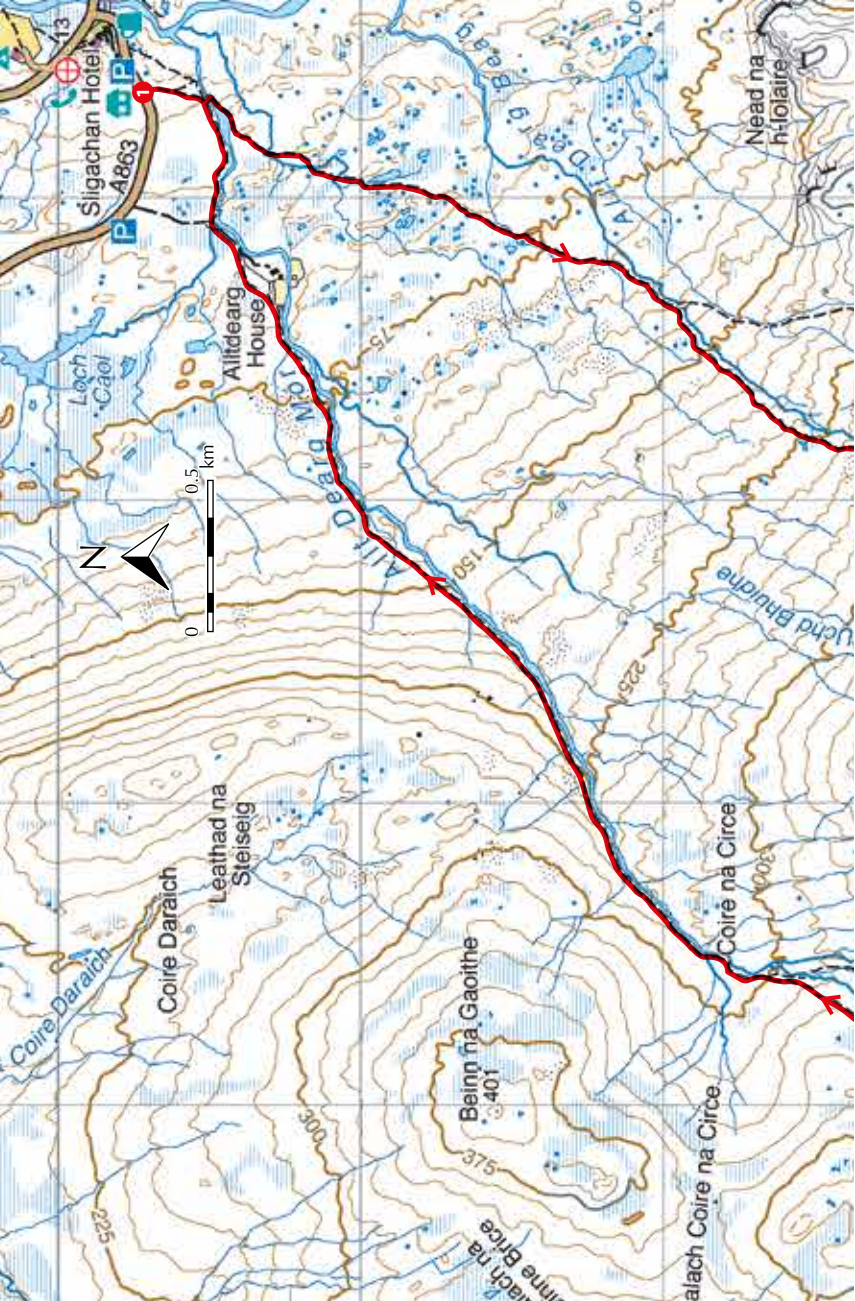
Round of Fionn Choire

Start	Park at the layby next to Skye Mountain Rescue Team's (MRT's) base (next door to the Sligachan Hotel)
Grade	1/2
Time	5–6hr
Altitude	Up to 958m (3145ft)
Aspect	Faces NW
Conditions	Fairly straightforward, being more of a walk than scramble, so a safe bet in less than ideal conditions.

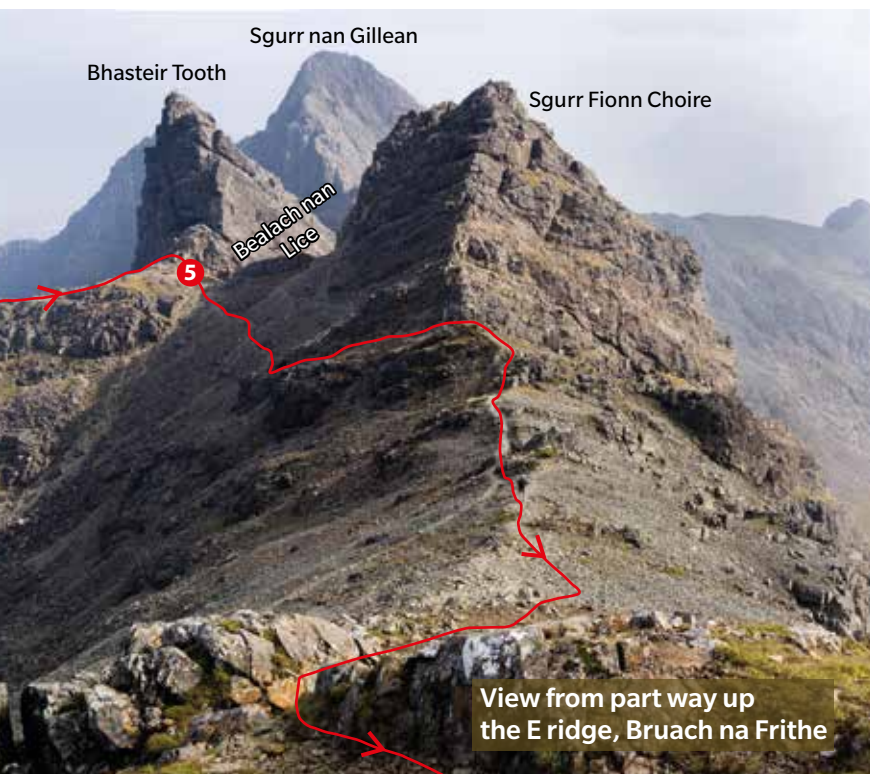
With fantastic views, this route provides a good introduction to the northern end of the ridge. It can easily be added to other routes, such as checking out Naismith's Route or Lota Coire Route on the Bhasteir Tooth.

- 1 Take the footpath on the opposite side of the road from the layby. Cross the first footbridge then ignore the second bridge and head right on the path along the river bank. Continue until below the entrance to the impressive **Bhasteir Gorge**.





- 2 Ascend scree and slabby rocks W of the gorge entrance following obvious signs of wear.
- 3 **NE ridge, Sgurr a' Bhasteir (1/2)**. Head up right, away from the gorge and follow the ridge. After some rough walking and easy scrambling, you will reach slabby rocks that lead to an obvious gully, which descends into **Coire a' Bhasteir** on the left. Continue to the summit of Sgurr a' Bhasteir.
- 4 From the summit, head S along a steep sided ridge with splendid views across to Sgurr nan Gillean, Pinnacle Ridge and **Am Basteir** on one side and Fionn Choire and Bruach na Frithe on the other. The ridge widens out and leads to **Bealach nan Lice** between Sgurr Fionn Choire and the **Bhasteir Tooth**.
- 5 From Bealach nan Lice, skirt below the rock of **Sgurr Fionn Choire** (or traverse it at 2/3) on a path and continue to reach the E ridge of Bruach na Frithe. Follow the ridge then head slightly left to reach the summit of Bruach na Frithe.



- 6 **NW ridge, Bruach na Frithe (2)**. This is another ridge with fine views to both sides. For a more interesting descent, seek out a more direct line on the crest but difficulties can be bypassed by scree and faint paths to the left. The ridge leads down to **Bealach a' Mhaim**.
- 7 Follow the path on the N bank of the Allt Dearg Mor back towards Sligachan. Once you're past Allt Dearg, (the very obvious white cottage), follow the track then continue along the riverbank back to the MRT layby.