



The Book of the Bivvy

Tips, stories and route ideas

by Ronald Turnbull

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Ronald Turnbull

When his antique Saunders Jetpacker went porous in 1996, Ronald Turnbull stopped bothering with a tent. He has made eight bivvybag crossings of Scotland coast-to-coast and slept on 36 Scottish summits, 46 English, four in Northern Ireland, seven in Wales and one on the Isle of Man. He writes regularly for *The Great Outdoors*, *Lakeland Walker* and *Trail* magazines and the UKHillwalking website.

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*To the man in Ruigh Aiteachain bothy who
asked: 'But what happens if it rains?' I'd
walked a long way that day, and it didn't
come out very lucidly. But the answer's
disarmingly simple, and he'll find it in
Chapter 8.*

Front cover:
Moorland bivvy below Beinn a' Ghlà, Atholl

Acknowledgements

My thanks to various companions (Oliver,
Colin, Virginia and Glyn) for confirming
that it's not just me and that the bag really
is for having fun in. Julian Miles carefully
explained just why I'd got so wet in Belfast
and gave useful advice on various technical
points. Don't waste their efforts. Find a
sunset summit somewhere and shake out
that bag.

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Safety note

A survival bag or bivvy bag, carried as an
emergency shelter, is a valuable safety aid.
However, when the bivvy bag is used in place
of a tent on trips through wild country, the
margin of safety is reduced. This practice is
only recommended to those with hillwalking
experience, who understand the use of map
and compass and how bad the weather
could get. The normal precaution of leaving
a timed route-plan with a responsible person
is even more important for bivvybag walkers.

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Nightfall, Helm Crag (Bivvy night 11)

Symbols used on route maps

	route		bothy
	start point		bivvy site
	finish point		summit
	start/finish point		building
	direction of route		



Bivvy on Middle Fell, Wasdale

Sunrise light on Knoydart, from a bivvy site on Sgùrr nan Coireachan



1 INTRODUCTION

How little you know of happiness, you comfortable people

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Ah, Knoydart! That remote peninsular is reached by no road, but by a long ride up the West Highland Railway and Bruce Watt's boat out of Mallaig. Leap onto the jetty at Inverie with a real feeling of anxiety and self-reliance. The boat won't be back for two days, and it's 30 miles to the bus stop.

Those miles aren't easy ones. Knoydart's Rough Bounds are well separated from the so-called Real World, concealed in mists and snowclouds, defended by midgets and the mysteries of the ferry timetable. Here the sea creeps deep into the hills, the hills drop steep into the sea – and 2.5m of rainwater per year is transferred from the one to the other.

Knoydart in the rain is where Hamish Brown came closest to abandoning his 'all the Munros' walk. Get lost in the mist and it's 600m down a vertical bog, and what you get at the bottom is a river in spate and no footbridge.

It's best, here, to expect anything at all in the way of weather. And when a surprising sun beats down out of a sky of blue – as it does, not infrequently at all, in the month of May – we were equipped to cope. In my sack was a small green Gore-Tex bag



supplied by an elderly but very lively member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. In Oliver's sack was a similar one, and in his head the route-plan for this very eventuality.

Sgùrr na Ciche. It's the hard heart of the Rough Bounds. Its rocky sides steeper as they rise, till its top contour-lines crowd so close that there isn't even space for a spot-height. By the side of Loch Nevis we stopped to brew a simple supper, and looked at the Ciche. Its western ridge started as a seaweedy spine rising out of the loch; indeed, its rocky outline could be seen plunging on downwards into the salt waters. Sun-heat beat back at us off the rock-spine, the warm air carried the aroma of the bog myrtle, and the bees were buzzing around in the heather. Not at all a night for the bothy.

And so we raced the setting sun up the three miles (and one vertical kilometre) of the ridge. All the way, the pointed summit stood like a beckoning finger against the sky. We scrambled on hands and knees up the final steep metres to reach the cairn in time for the last two minutes of the day. The sun went down behind the rim of Ladhar Bheinn like an egg-yolk falling into the blades of a liquidiser.

At this point we may calculate the altitude of Heaven as 1042m (3418ft). For on Ciche's summit, at sunset, it is surely within touching distance.

Two minutes down the eastern side we found, among all the bare schist, a grassy shelf sheltered by lumps of crag. Thirty kilometres away, Ben Nevis – that urban hill – crouched under the stars. All night long our noses poked into the night and were cooled and freshened by the breezes.

But by dawn those noses were damp ones. Grey rain had rolled in off the Atlantic. Tendrils of cloud swirled around our little hollow; we were annoying, soggy tealeaves

to be scoured out of its pristine sink. We bundled up the damp bags and dropped 250m to warm up, before breakfasting under a wet stone wall.

Bag for life

Back at the start of this century, enterprising gear firms were adapting the new breathable fabrics into sophisticated sacks for sleeping in. They had two obstacles to overcome. The first was their customer research department, which kept asking the customers questions like 'Would you like a zip-out midge membrane?' 'Would you like some hoops to hoop it up inside, and some little pegs to peg it out with?' And the second was a certain credibility barrier. Surely, nobody with any sense really wants to sleep in a plastic bag.

And so, if you wanted a simple green bag that didn't cost very much and didn't have fancy features, you applied to a man in Wales called Julian Miles. In a shed, with a sewing machine, Julian (his firm was Kathmandu Trekking) fulfilled the entire UK requirement for simple green bivvy bags without any fancy features.

Meanwhile those enterprising gear firms were also developing camming gadgets, and down-filled clothing, and much better climbing boots. With the result that big-wall

climbing, once reserved for a few fearsome blokes from the back streets of Sheffield (or Innsbruck if you happened to be Hermann Buhl), became a mildly popular form of fun. And when it came to sleeping out in the snow at the bottom of the Walker Spur, or on a minute stony ledge half-way up it, when offered hooped entrances and clever zips, the answer was 'Thank you, but no' – or an even more emphatic response than that.

So various manufacturers with much bigger sheds than Julian Miles started making straightforward bivvy bags at straightforward prices for people who like uncomplicated outdoor fun. And outdoor magazines started to write about them – possibly even nudged that way by the first edition of





Bedroom wallpaper: sunset light on Ben Venue, the Trossachs

this book back in 2001. In one respect, at least, I can claim to have had influence on the world: bivy is now spelled like a real word, with two Vs and a Y.

So where are they, all these bivy bags? For in all my years of informal slumber, apart from a couple of rock climbers outside a hut in the Spanish mountains, I've never seen anybody else asleep in a bag.

Is it just that the bivy is so discreet that we don't see it? A gentleman who didn't give his name spent four months in his one, watching a farmhouse in Kent where some thieves were preparing to steal the great De Beers diamond from the Millennium Dome. And just as I've not seen anybody else, it's likely the case that only one person – a dawn walker plus dog arriving at the summit of Ben More on Mull – has ever seen me.

As for the other half-million bivy bags manufactured by Britain's lively outdoor suppliers, perhaps all of them are sitting in attics, their nervous owners eyeing them every six months like divers on the top board and wondering, 'Do I quite dare? Or don't I?'

Top board – over the top – topping – there's a pun here, struggling with its zips and trying to emerge into the open air. So far, the bag has mostly been slept in by serious mountaineers, serious long-distance types, and of course the special forces. But even on a simple tropical beach it makes all the difference not to have the morning dew joining you in bed. Or you could take a bottle of whisky to the first flat place above the youth hostel and join Prince Charlie in the heather.

The modern lightweight tent has opened up the wilderness – but for an increasing number of people the lightweight tent is just a bit too civilised. Can you really experience nature's rawness from inside a zipped-up storm-flap? For those who want to bring a bit of old-fashioned pain and suffering back into the outdoor experience, the bivy bag is the place to be.

In a tent you have to unbag, boot up, and crawl all over a sleeping companion to see what the stars are up to. In a bivy, the stars are shining right down on your nose. When the moonlight falls onto a sea of cloud, and the Isle of Skye floats across the sea like a silver dream, do you really want to be zipped up under an orange dome, asleep? And when the wind howls in the heather and the rain gradually trickles in, you don't experience the full misery when you recline in waterproof tented splendour. If you like to travel a nice short distance with a comfortably heavy pack, and to spend the sunset hours sitting in a cramped space rehydrating little packets over a cooker, then what you want is a tent. Or perhaps a youth hostel, or hotel. But if you want to walk right across the Lakes in a weekend, or right across Scotland in a week – if you prefer a small portable rucksack with no oppressive luxuries (like inflatable sleeping mats, dry clothing, or cookers) to interfere between you and the mountain experience – then you want the little green bag.

Apart from anything else, a tent won't ever fit onto that ledge on Sgùrr na Ciche.

BIVVY NIGHT 1: Snowdon



Just below Snowdon summit

Tents are the indoors. And even if you had a tent up here, there'd only be one place wide enough to put it up – and it's a bit tricky pushing tent pegs into a station platform. But who wants to be zipped up indoors when there's a little gravel ledge right below Snowdon summit? Who wants to be tucked up inside a triangular synthetic bedroom as cloud rises slowly up the side of the mountain – cloud that's pale under the moonlight, and then bright orange under the rising sun. Below the toe-end of the bivy bag, Crib Goch sticking up like a shark in a custard-coloured sea.

We'd carried the bivy bags, and sleeping bags, over all the Welsh 3000s – messed around by torchlight on the flank of Crib y Ddysgl – just for this moment. As well as for the morning after: Y Lliwedd shrugging off its filmy negligee of overnight cloud, and at 5am the Brocken spectre striding in the air beside us all along the scrambly ridgeline.

The late breakfast at the Pen-y-Pass café shack was pretty good as well.



Any high-level day is improved by a high-level night: Hoy, Orkney Isles

2 PRIMITIVE BIVVY

Cold ground was my bed last night, and rock was my pillow too

Bob Marley, 'Talkin' Blues'

BIVVY NIGHT 2: Peigne and suffering

On the way up, we met two other British people coming down. 'Benighted: abseiled off. You'll see our rope hanging in the chimney.'

Silly Brits, don't understand Alpine climbing, always getting benighted. We told them we'd pick up their rope as we passed it and bring it back to the campsite that evening. Or that late afternoon – the Aiguille du Peigne is one of the littlest of the Chamonix Aiguilles, with good rock and at climbing Grade III (UK Diff) all the way.

The trouble with climbing guidebooks is that they're written by people who are very good at climbing. Our book was an English-language selection, and the English-language selectors had omitted the Ordinary Route up the Peigne in favour of this 'terribly easy but rather nice rock route'. But there were

600m of the 'terribly easy' rock. Which is fine if you consider UK Diff a scramble and climb it unroped. It's not fine if you consider UK Diff a climb.

As we went up we looked at our watches, looked at the rocks above, and became less and less British and more informally alpine in our climbing. We reached the previous people's jammed rope and removed it from the chimney. We got to the top of the climb and crossed onto the Ordinary Route. We abandoned all idea of the summit and set off down the Ordinary Route. It got darker.

The trouble with downhill rock climbing in the dark is that you can't distinguish the worn footholds, the trampled ledges, the turned-over screes of the correct line. So on a suitable rocky ledge we decided to stop and get benighted.

All night long we heard the meltwater dripping, so the temperature can't even have got down to freezing. And we were equipped. We'd read all about this in *The White Spider* and gone out to buy some sophisticated survival equipment. 'I would like,' I told them at Tiso's, 'a bivouac sack.'

They looked puzzled, then laughed. 'Ah – you mean a poly bag!' Surprisingly, for such an advanced bit of kit, the cost was only five shillings.

The five-shillingsworth was bright orange and rather thick. I wriggled into a cosy hole below some boulders. The other people's rope, coils opened out into a long figure-of-eight, made a bed that was almost comfortable. A barley-sugar sweet, placed in the downhill cheek, spread an illusory warmth – bad for the teeth but good for morale. I certainly slept for some of the time.

After we'd listened to about a hundred thousand drips, the dripping darkness gave way to a dripping grey half-light. When you know you're about to leave the bag and be even colder, it seems less uncomfortable. A good shiver warms you up and then you can doze a little. But then a strange whirr and sudden rattle from overhead...

We were directly underneath the Mont Blanc cable car. No more than 50m away in the grey air, well-fed people were passing through the sky in a warm plastic box. Their windows were steamed up: with any luck they couldn't see us.

We packed our bags and scurried down the mountain. In the meadows below, the first of the new day's climbers were heading for the Peigne. A pair with the patched-breeches look of the British were heading off towards the bottom of the 600m terribly easy rock climb...

Problems of the polybag

Today we've upgraded the name to 'survival bag', but the price is relatively unchanged at between £5 and Free With This Month's Issue. And there's no doubt that these things aid survival. Dumfriesshire, for example, has two more inhabitants than it would have were it not for the survival bag. An elderly neighbour suffered a mild heart attack on the Enterkin Pass and lay for five hours in a snowstorm. A much younger one fell while descending into Glen Shiel, broke both ankles and his jaw-bone – and nobody knew where he was except a friend who'd just that day emigrated to New Zealand. He lay in his bag for four days.

No piece of equipment does better in terms of lives saved per pound sterling, with the possible exception of bootlaces and other short lengths of string. But the survival bag means what it says. You wake up miserable, but alive.

Much of that misery is down to dampness. A medium-sized human, in the course of a night, emits about a pint of water. This pint (or half-litre, for a slightly smaller person who thinks in metric) condenses on the inside of the plastic. From there it gets into your hair, your clothes and your sleeping bag (if you're lucky enough to be in a sleeping bag). It gets in between the pages of this book: the later chapters will be largely concerned with that pint of water in the night.

The plastic sort of bag is like the western side of Scotland. It's warmer, but also wetter.

This book is about misery that's mixed in with pleasure, rather than taken straight; about self-indulgence rather than mere survival. However, all bivvy bags do have a secondary function as survival aids, and it's true that you can't have much either of fun or suffering if you died in Glen Shiel the previous winter.

For pure survival, there are various items of lightweight plastic or so-called 'space blankets'. These cost very little, weigh very little (about 100g) and are of very little use.

That's not the same as no use at all. After the London Marathon they gave us aluminised plastic wrappers with the sponsor's logo. Thus we became, among the streaked concrete of Waterloo Embankment, a fluttering blue-and-silver throng as we consumed an other-worldly sports drink which itself tasted strongly aluminised. The space blanket claims to conserve 90% of body heat. This is misleading. Heat is transferred by radiation, conduction and convection. When lying under a stone wall in a snowstorm, heat is lost by conduction (into the freezing ground below) and by convection (into the passing breeze above). Aluminised plastic reflects only radiant heat.

However, when strolling beside the Thames damp with sweat and wearing only your undies, the blue-and-silver wrapper is what you need over skimpy shorts and a Galloway sheep T-shirt.

This wrapper came free – I only had to run 26 miles to get it. And while it was of little use as camping kit, it was also of little weight. Which I thought could be of value;



so I took it on the Mountain Marathon. On these events a cooker is compulsory: so I also took along some delicious savoury rice. Alas! When Glyn unwrapped the cooker it was of a purely formal sort – small paraffin blocks, a stove like a dead spider sculpted out of rust, and a foil tub for a saucepan. The super-lightweight saucepan had been remarkable value: less than £2.50, with its first hot meal, plus beansprouts, included at no extra charge. Unfortunately, it had been on several mountain marathons already and was no longer rice-tight.

A saucepan liner cut from the London blanket turned out just the thing. It shrivelled above the soup-line, but held below. The moral? Anything's useful, so just take whatever weighs least...

However, for serious survival (which means survival of snowstorms) you need a serious survival bag, and it weighs 300g. This is thick enough to hold in heat as well as air, and stiff enough that the breeze won't mould it against your body. The books say you should bite a hole in the corner of it to breathe through and then enter it head first. This makes sense: warm air rises and stays in the bag. However, I've never been quite desperate enough to bite a hole in something that cost me five shillings.

Two people are not twice as warm as one in a bag, unless the bag's a very big one. If the bag gets tight it compresses your clothing and the bits of you pressing against the outside get very cold indeed. There are, however, group bags: these are specifically designed for several people to get miserable in together.

Plastic bag for pleasure purposes

Some of us are too mean to buy a proper bivvy bag, and some of us just like to see how much we can do without. I come into both categories. So here is the technique for primitive plastic travel.

If plastic bags get wet on the inside, the way to stay dry is to stay outside the bag. A foam mat is one of the things you probably didn't bring, and the double layer of plastic underneath is insulation of a sort as well as groundsheet.

When it starts to rain, you can postpone the damp by moving under a nearby tree. When the rain starts to drip through the leaves, it's just possible it may already have finished raining outside.

Otherwise, it's time to get into the bag. Position it with the feet end slightly uphill. This means that condensation in the bag has a chance to trickle out the entrance. It also means that raindrops on the outside will drip off the entrance rather than trickling back inside. If you hold the entrance well open, air can get in and evaporate some of the condensation.

You wake up moist but warm. It's the next night – the crawling back into a bag that's already damp – that's going to be really horrible. So the advice is not to do that next night but to head down off the hill to civilisation with its youth hostels and shops selling proper breathable bags.

However, it may not rain at all. In which case you simply keep going until you run out of muesli. You lie late to let the sun take the dew off the plastic, amble down to the village whose lamps had lightened your night-time. And discover that late though you lay, it's still two hours too early for the shops.

Polybag facts

The basic polythene survival bag should cost between £5 and nothing at all – they may be given away free with outdoor magazines. A fertiliser sack does the same job more cheaply, although the bedtime reading printed on the outside is less entertaining. The larger ones, designed to be carried by tractor rather than by hand, empty out to a good size; it's important to wash out all traces of the previous contents, as fertiliser damages the skin.

The more the bag weighs the more robust and effective it is – but the more it weighs, obviously. One at 250–300g is a good balance between heaviness and uselessness. It should be long enough to be able to get right inside with boots on and then fold down the end so as to let the rain drip – this means a bit over 2 metres. If planned for two, it should be big enough to hang loose around you rather than stretched tight about your bodies.

One night under the moon in a plastic bag should persuade you that you want more nights under the moon, but in something other than damp plastic. Rawhide? Potato sacks? Stout Harris tweed? In the next chapter we'll study various historic bivvy bags even less accommodating than polythene.

The Book of the Bivvy

They are the best of nights, they are the worst of nights...

Ronald Turnbull offers an informed but humorous insight into the world of the bivouac, combining accounts of bivvybag nights with practical tips about types of membrane, sites, techniques and minimalist kit.

Bivvyng offers a whole new level of immersion in the outdoors – as well as opening up new possibilities for lightweight long-distance trips. Ronald's honest and entertaining reflections on nights both pleasurable and less comfortable will inspire you to create bivvybag adventures of your own.

- stories of bivvy nights, both nice and nasty, and longer bivvy expeditions
- the history of the bivvy
- practical tips and guidance



'Quirky. Entertaining. Funny. Heart warming. Very well researched and stunningly presented.'

Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild 'Outdoor Book of the Year'

'Corking! This was a delight. In an age of glamping and easy travel, 'stress free' and 'without all the hassle', it was great to read someone eulogise what is uncomfortable and basic, but brim over with the beauty and the joy of it.'

Thomas Jones, reader



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