

September 2010 – UK Hillwalk

I've wanted to hillwalk (the UK folk's capability of having a more pleasing term for even the most monotonous items never ceases to amaze me) in the Scottish highlands ever since Hollywood brought the beauty of the mountains to me in the movie Rob Roy. I had planned a hike in the mountains long ago and the maps and printed out information had been rattling around in my daysack for way too long. After a week of work on an overseas assignment I was eager to be out in it instead of sticking around in the flat for the weekend.

Friday night I phoned Avis and made arrangements for a car hire for the weekend. "Do you have good maps that I can use?" I queried. Yes, we'll provide all the maps that you might need to get you to your destination they assured me. An early night Friday had me up and ready on Saturday and walking a mile or so through town to get to the Avis location. On the way, a friend rang and asked if there was room in the car for a navigator. I was very happy to have company knowing a bit about the difficulty of navigating the UK road system. I promised to pick him up at his stoop in 10 minutes.

The car provided was great. A nice black VW Golf TDI. TDI means that it has a turbo diesel engine, known for extremely good fuel economy with a fair amount of power to get up the hills. I grabbed the maps, thanked the clerk and set off on my way.

Now I have to preface the next part with a comment that my friend's flat was one short block away on a parallel street. The problem is that the Scottish road department had deemed it necessary to make these two roadways run parallel with no adjoining roads for the length of the



island. Never was the term "you can't get there from here" more true. I am comfortable with creative truth but will assure you that it is no lie that I circled Edinburgh trying to find a way to the flat for more than 30 minutes. I could see the street, could see the back of the apartment building, but could not drive there. Finally I gave my friend a ring and asked if they could meet me at a street with I knew I could drive to. The meeting was made and we set off shortly thereafter.

The trip up to the mountainous part of the country was incredible. Castles and stone houses, cathedrals and stone towers, in various states of repair or disrepair dotted the hillsides. In fact, the scenery was so fetching that we drove clean past our turnoff and found ourselves well north before realizing our error. It was then that I began to have doubts about my navigator. I stopped into a shop and got into a very nice conversation about many topics with the storekeeper before being pointed in the proper direction

to Ardvorlich, the trailhead to my days walk. I jumped back in to the cool little car and drove only 2 or 3 hundred meters in the wrong lane before realizing my error and swerving into the correct – left lane.

I should add that I learned another reason for loving my little vw car. As happened many times during the drive, I would choose to start off in 3rd gear instead of first on mistake. Stalling the car was made much less stressful because the car would automatically start itself after being stalled!!! I wondered if this was a feature for idiotic tourists who are not used to shifting a car with their left hand. In any case, I loved it and came to rely on this wonderful feature for getting me out of a situation where impatient drivers would be honking and raising their fists at me.

I later learned that the idiotic tourist feature is actually an economy setting for European cars which allows the driver to engage the clutch and put the shift into neutral at a stop light which kills the engine. Engaging the clutch and putting the car in gear automatically starts the engine – thus allowing for the engine to be shut off at all traffic stops, helping with fuel economy. Brilliant.

The trip back down the road in the direction we'd come brought us to the turnoff to a very tiny single lane road along the south bank of Loch Earn. Thankfully the road had a few wider spots to allow oncoming cars enough room to scrape by. Had the vw been another couple inches wider, I'm certain I would have knocked several side rearview mirrors off of the oncoming vehicles.



We reached the trailhead which was actually the property of the Vorlich family and had been for a LONG time. That family has allowed trekking across their property with the understanding that folks won't disrupt any of the livestock, leave rubbish, or stray from the trail. A wonderful concept that we yanks seem to have trouble with all too often. The family house was a couple of hundred years old but beautifully kept. From the house the trek steepened and my hiking partner almost immediately

began to ask questions about how much further and will it be this steep the rest of the way. I sensed difficulty coming. We had a nice chat about the fact that there was no ego attached to not making the summit and that this was supposed to be a nice day out and not a struggle....and, did he want to stop now?

My friend continued for awhile longer before agreeing that he would head back to the car and wait for me. Would I be back down soon? I chuckled and informed him that it would likely be 3-4 hours and to feel free to explore the area until I got back down.

The rest of the walk was amazing. I was quietly grateful at the chance to do the walk alone as there was no need for conversation and I could concentrate on nothing but the beauty around me and the well trodden path up the mountain ridge. The colors of the trees higher on the shoulder of the mountain were just beginning to turn to a bright crimson. A good sized brook fell down the slope just beside the path for much of the



way. I stopped on the ridge, just before the final steep climb to the summit, to have some late lunch. The view back over the loch and the surrounding mountains was stunning and it was the best pb&j sandwich I've had in some time.



After the rest I resumed the walk to the top and was rewarded with an amazing panoramic view of the mountains around ben vorlich. A very cold wind blew across the narrow summit ridge and I quickly donned long pants and my rain parka. Didn't spend long on top as the sun had made up its mind to start sinking and the thought of driving back to Edinburgh in the dark didn't really suit me.

On arrival back at the location where we'd left the car I was happy to find my trekking partner alive and well. The drive back to the city was great with a stop at a pub for a nice warm soup and a pint. Once home, a shower felt very nice and the bed even better.

All the best,

Brent