

# Roaming Into the New Year

A Scottish Adventure



Padraig Croke  
*Trial by Fire*







We all get the adventure guilt. We scroll social media and see the people we follow scaling mountains in Peru or canoeing the lakes and rivers of Alaska, while we sit on our couch after dinner on a Wednesday evening... wondering where our next trip is going to come from. It happens to us all, and the reality is that you can't always be on an adventure somewhere. We have to work, pay our bills, feed our families, and that's the reality for most people.

So when and where can we get our adventures in? I would argue that it doesn't always have to be a trip to Sweden or an Expedition through the rainforest. For most people, micro adventures are the way to get the fix. Simple things like getting up early on a Sunday morning to get a coffee and some peace time in the woods. Or a night hike on a Thursday evening instead of sitting in watching tv. It doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg either, with plane tickets and guided tours. If you are living in the United Kingdom, or, like myself, in the Republic of Ireland, there are a wealth of amazing places available to us. Where there's a will, there's a way. The effort simply has to be put in. But no more effort than say, getting yourself to the gym three mornings a week, or sticking to that new diet plan. It's about creating habit forming routines that allow for sacrosanct

time in the week assigned to getting outside. I struggle and juggle my time to get adventures in also. So when I realised that, over the Christmas holidays, I had two whole weeks off work, my mind turned to adventure opportunities.

One dark Friday evening in October I was sharing an after work pint in Dublin with my good friend Brian, whom I went to school with. Brian is that friend we all have. The guy with itchy feet who's been travelling and moving around the world at such a pace that when I text him, I'm not quite sure what time of the day or night it might be where he is. Brian has a skill I am envious of, and that is to somehow find the time and the money to get adventures in. He's lived everywhere from Cambodia to New York, and takes it all in his stride. On this evening, while I complained to him about this very thing... not being able to get adventures in, Brian suggested to me that we should, over the Christmas holiday, rather than sit eating mince pies and wondering what day of the week it is, take 5 days and do a road trip. I jumped at the opportunity, and a quick Google over our beers led to a simple plan formulating. A few days after Christmas, we would drive from Ireland to Scotland with a ferry crossing, and see in the new year on a mountain in the highlands somewhere, before driving home on New Year's Day to be at our desks the

following morning. Easy! Actually, it really was just that easy. I had a niggle that we wouldn't be able to pull it off for some reason or another, probably because of money. In reality, after the cost of ferry tickets and some fuel expenses, we managed to do it all for next to nominal costs. So this is our microadventure. Roaming the breathtaking landscapes of Scotland.

#### Right to Roam

The freedom to roam, or "everyman's right", is the general public's right to access certain public or privately owned land, lakes, and rivers for recreation and exercise. The right is sometimes called the right of public access to the wilderness or the "right to roam". This right is not universal however. Some countries have more progressive roaming laws than others. Most of the Nordic countries, namely Norway, Sweden and Finland, as well as some Eastern European countries like Latvia and Estonia hold the benchmark for these laws, marrying it to long-standing and deeply embedded parts of their countries ancient history. Most of these countries have written roaming rights into law simply as a formality, to support what had already been such ingrained aspects of their culture. In Scotland The Land Reform Act of 2003 (which came into force in 2005) gave everyone rights of access

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over land and on lakes, rivers and all inland water in the country. You can exercise access rights for recreational purposes, for educational purposes, and for some commercial purposes. There is no definition of recreational purposes, but the Scottish Outdoor Access Code suggests a range of countryside activities, including cycling, horse riding and wild camping. You can exercise access rights at any time but you should take special care not to disturb local residents when close to property after dark.

This law means that we can wild camp, hike, walk and cycle across the entirety of the countries land, within reason, such as avoiding people's gardens and fenced off property; which is entirely reasonable. A couple of years ago, when I learned of this law being an element of Scotland's culture, it enamoured me to the idea of someday visiting this beautiful country and rambling or camping my way through their national parks. An expedition that would of course take a lot of planning and time to get right. But then, on top of this, I heard about their mountain bothys, and my mind was set on it. Their network of mountain shelters, lovingly and respectfully maintained by all who use them, meant that my buddy and I could travel across the country without ever having to worry about finding somewhere to stay, should we choose not to wild camp in the hills.



#### Day 1

On December 27th, still bleary eyed from the family festivities, we set off in the car, a trusty Fiat Panda, with the back seats filled with more gear than I would care to tell you about here. It was a real "kitchen sink" job, with all the necessary what-ifs packed, along with our overnight gear, should we choose to wild camp. I was anticipating very cold weather, having consulted a friend Jamie of Howl Bushcraft who is familiar with the Scottish winters. He informed me of times he's spent up there where friends had forgotten to pack enough warm clothes and had almost lost toes! In my main kit (a large Savotta Jakkari) I had my winter sleep system, consisting of my Carinthia Defence 4 sleeping bag, my British Army bivi, thermarest and a foil grabber blanket as a ground sheet. My shelter would be a Tschum 1-person shelter, capable of keeping a small fire under it, should the need arise. Along with these I had extra baselayers, my Buffalo jacket, a Gransfors hatchet, a Silky saw and a Gerberg. Fire kit, a Helikon Tex poncho, two small gas canisters and pocket stove, my Eagle kettle and lastly, my Grayl bottle, which came in very handy walking on the trails.

Our ferry departed Larne in Northern Ireland at 8pm, which, by our calculations would mean we'd hit Scottish shores by 10.30, with

enough evening time to get us to our first destination of our trip. A 40 minute drive to Galloway Forest Park and on to The White Laggan Bothy in the center of the park. We arrived in Scotland safe and sound and excitedly drove off the ferry and headed for our first stop. On the back country roads the weather started to turn slightly. Although not nearly as cold as we had anticipated, it was nonetheless a blustery enough night. Not one you would camp in if given the option. After stopping for fuel and gas station sandwiches we got into the park about an hour later at roughly midnight.

The maps led us up and up into the hills, mostly on loosely graveled forest roads. The mist and fog had rolled in by now and it was getting quite late. Eventually, out of the darkness came a locked gate... our first hurdle, literally speaking. We had not anticipated this and got out of the car to investigate. The bothy we were trying to reach was still over 2 miles away according to the map, and even if we followed it, we had no idea if the bothy would be visible in the dark and the fog. After a little deliberation we decided to risk it. A 2.2 mile hike should take us roughly an hour in this weather and terrain with our packs we figured. We would bring our shelter systems, just in case we couldn't find it, and if it came to it, we could always just make our way back to



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the car. We hastily packed, saddled up and got the head torches on. I had not planned for a hike that night, and against my gut, I decided not to change out of my jeans. Into the mist, somewhat blind, we started. The hike was mid level strenuous, with the path very clearly climbing high into the mountains. But our spirits were high and we kept a good pace for the first 2 miles. By then, we had broken the tree line and were both wet and muddy. Honestly, I was starting to get a little worried that we wouldn’t find it, and I could feel how exposed we were up here. The ground was boggy and finding a place to stay should we not find the bothy would be very challenging. But before too long, with some backtracking and muddy tramping, out of the darkness, perched lonely under a towering hill we saw it. The White Laggan Bothy.

#### The Mountain Bothy Association

The Mountain Bothy Association was founded by Bernard Heath in 1965 when he first organised the restoration of a ruined farmhouse at Tunskeen in Galloway Forest Park as an unlocked shelter. His aim was "To maintain simple unlocked shelters in remote mountain country for the use of hillwalkers, climbers and other genuine outdoor enthusiasts who love the wild and lonely places". In 1975 the MBA became a registered charity,

and as of April 2018, the MBA had a membership of around 4,300 people and looked after 104 bothies and two emergency mountain shelters.

The etymology of the word bothy is uncertain. However some suggestions include a relation to both "hut" as in Irish bothán and Scottish Gaelic bothan or bothag. The bothy’s seem to be quite ingrained into Scottish culture. The mention of staying in them to locals in pubs or cafes seldom received more than the bat of an eyelid when we were asked what we were doing in Scotland during our travels. They are normal! Of course people want to hike and stay in the highlands. Why would they not? The right to roam is well and truly alive in people’s hearts there, and frankly it’s beautiful to see. Coming from a country with arguably some of the meanest access laws in Europe, with farmers and landowners fencing and wiring off everything in sight back home, it made me wonder why this respect for roaming could not be the case everywhere.

#### The White Laggan Bothy

White Laggan cottage was part of the Kirroughtrie estate in 1799. The estate belonged to one Patrick Heron and his father. The census of 1851 shows White Laggan occupied by a shepherd, Alexander Logan, and his family. Records show a Logan family connection at





White Laggan through to 1864, thereafter, the cottage was converted into a working place and sleeping quarters for cooks and servants who were employed to cater for the estates shooting and fishing parties. The guests were accommodated in another, prefabricated, lodge built at the front of the cottage. This later building was subsequently removed and White Laggan further converted and adapted to accommodate both guests and servants. It's probable that the guests were accommodated in the main part of the cottage where today only foundations remain with the servants confined to the end which is now the bothy.'

We walked up to the red wooden door and tested it. Open. Head torches on, we entered a room which was clearly a sleeping quarters. Bunk beds with solid plywood bottoms for putting our sleeping bags on, and in the next room a simple farmhouse layout with a small wood burning stove on the back wall, and along the walls simple wooden planks served as seats. There was also a table and a kitchen area with some miscellaneous items people had left. Matches, a bottle of cider and various utensils.

We quickly made ourselves at home, lighting any tea lights we found, and unpacked. The next step was to get the fire going. A tin shed beside the bothy revealed a saw horse and some small pieces of pine. Not nearly enough to get a decent fire going. This was the first lesson. Bothys don't keep a stock of firewood, and if you want a fire, you must carry your own wood in. So we took what we could and processed down the thicker pieces so they could be usable in the tiny stove. We did get the fire going, more for light and atmosphere, than for heat, but we nonetheless attempted to dry our clothes over the clothes horse suspended over the stove. We ate some bread and tuna, took some notes from the day and organised our kit before opting for sleeping in the main room on the floor. Day one had gone swimmingly... and my drenched jeans were the proof.

#### Day 2

We got up around 8am the next morning, and got our packs together. It was only in the cold morning light that the truly stunning surroundings of where we were revealed themselves. Behind the bothy, misty hills peppered with pine trees offered an awe inspiring view, and below, Loch Dee offered a staggering vista. What a place to wake up! I often think about this when I'm on a trip. Where had I woken up the morning before?... where would I be a week from now? I can guarantee that neither of those places were like what I was seeing right now. Taking stock and

<sup>1</sup> [www.mountainbothies.org.uk](http://www.mountainbothies.org.uk)







appreciating that moment filled me with a deep sense of calm and adventure simultaneously.

We walked back to the car at a comfortable pace, stopping to take photos and appreciate the views. We got back to the car and had a coffee on the gas stove before setting off around midday. Our next destination would be Loch Lomond, a three hour drive from our current location.

Through the stunning highlands we drove, stopping for fuel and supplies every now and then. We stuck to the A83, which offers some of the most dramatic views the highlands have to offer. Everything from rolling hills, lakeside villages, cliffside roadways and pine forest on each side. This was the first full day seeing Scotland in the daylight, and it did not disappoint. By the time we parked the car up it was about 4pm and we were quickly losing light. We knew it would be another night hike this evening, trying to find the bothy in the dark. We parked our car on a gravel car park off the side of the road in a place called Butterbridge. Tonight we were determined to be more prepared than the night before. I chose not to carry my shelter system or any extra clothing or tools, which made my pack significantly lighter than the first evening. Abyssinia Bothy is situated 2 miles up a private estate track. It is thought to have been built in the 1800s and was occupied as a shepherd's

cottage until it was abandoned after the First World War. It was restored as a bothy in 2017.

Compared to the night before, this was a much easier walk, with very few inclines. The path took us along a track that seemed to be used for cattle, judging by the churning of the ground and the gates we had to pass through a few times. Alongside the path a small river runs and acted as our handrail all the way to the bothy. Water seems to be abundant everywhere in the highlands. This proved to be very useful, as it meant that we never had to carry water. 1 litre of water weighs 1kg, and on these walks, we had to make our packs as light as possible. The beauty of the bothy system means that as a hiker, you really don't need to carry anything but the essentials. I had my Grayl water purifier with me and I was able to stop whenever necessary to filter just enough water to hydrate before moving on.

In the dark we had to make a small crossing over this water. An attempt to remove my boots and step into it proved not to be a good option. I would easily lose my footing and fall, and both the water and the weather was cold enough for me to conclude that this would not be ideal! Eventually we found a tiny island to hop onto and over, taking turns to chuck our packs to each other. After this brief roadblock

we walked up the small footpath and into our second home for the night.

Abyssinia bothy felt a lot more modern than the shelter we stayed in the first night, and the 2017 renovations were apparent. A small hallway at the front door divided two large rooms. To the right a sleeping quarters similar in style to White Laggan. To the left, a communal area with a park bench and table, another large table and in the back corner, a stainless steel surface lined the wall for food prep. Beside the stove was a series of shelves which contained books, matches and a single can of cheap beer. We decided to split the beer as a celebration. We made food, lit the fire and sat in front of it listening to music and cheerfully bantered before turning in. Brian chose to sleep in the main room and I took the sleeping quarters.

At about 11pm, out of the wild weather outside, we were jumped awake by a loud disturbance. I was greeted by a loud Scottish voice and a head torch in my face. "Are you the only one here!?" Startled, I shielded my eyes and confirmed that we were. The faceless voice made its way into the next room and muffled voices confirmed that it was two people. A man in his mid 50's and his son of about my age. They had been walking all day and had made their way to this bothy. Brian grabbed his stuff and joined me



in the sleeping quarters while these two made themselves some food and crashed in the main room.

### Day 3

The next morning we awoke early again, and as quietly as we could, gathered our belongings from the main room where the pair were sleeping. They got up shortly afterwards. When we were packed we went and gathered water from the river and made some coffee. Chatting to the man and his son, it turned out he was celebrating his 55th birthday. We spoke to him about the bothy's and our travels. There was a Rangers vs Celtic match on that day. "Everyone will be in the pubs today watching the match. But I'd rather be out here with my son, appreciating what's important in life". I tended to agree with him. We were half way through our Scottish adventure at this stage, and we were well and truly synced into our routine. Drive, resupply, eat, find out where our next destination would be for the night. Back on the A82 we set off about 10.30am. We were heading towards the lovely town of Glencoe, and on to our next bothy, called Duror. This one proved to be our favourite of all the bothy's and would end up being the last one we stayed in.

Glencoe is a sleepy little mountain village, that feels more like somewhere you'd expect to find in Scandinavia. Here we bought more supplies from a tiny garage that seemed to stock everything from toys to tools and everything in between. We bought towels (something we hadn't thought to pack) food for the night and a couple of bags of firewood that we would carry with us that night. We were very far north now, close to Ben Nevis.

At 14.30 we arrived at the foot of the forest where the Duror bothy was hidden. The walk was the shortest, but proved to be the most strenuous. A steep incline of about a mile hike through a forest path which led steadily upwards, before breaking the tree line where Duror was perched. The old house is surrounded by echoey mountains and lush pine forest as far as the eye can see. This was the first time we had arrived in daylight, and we gathered what wood we could find.

### Glen Duror Bothy

The bothy was the birthplace of James Stewart (James of the Glen) who was hung at Cnap a'Chaolais near Ballachulish in 1752 for the murder of Colin Campbell (the Red Fox), an official of the British Government- a murder that he did not commit. This event formed the basis of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *Kidnapped*.<sup>2</sup> It turned out that we wouldn't have needed to

carry the wood we bought, as we were surrounded by plenty of deadfall in the woods around us, and we amassed a solid supply of material that would easily see us through the night. Duror is a single room with the walls lined with candle holders. There is a stove in the far left end of the room and a sleeping quarters of a simple raised platform of plywood large enough to sleep about three people on the other end. A wooden table in the center of the room, a small shelving unit and a large wooden bench and chair beside the stove were the only things in this bothy. It had a great vibe to it. We opted to risk a dip in the stream outside the house to wash, using the towels we had purchased in Glencoe to dry off. The water was truly freezing, but was refreshing, having not showered since the beginning of our trip. Taking turns holding the head torch and averting your sight while the other washed their delicates, after five minutes we scurried ourselves back inside. We spent the night in front of the fire warming up before hitting the sleeping bags around midnight.

### Day 4

At 10am we left Glen Duror Bothy and headed for Fort William. We stopped here and had some coffee in a local shop while we decided where to head next. It seemed like going through the





Cairngorms and onto a bothy called Ryvoan in the heart of the park would be our next destination. However, when we got the Cairngorms we were surprised by just how busy this park was. Every couple of miles there was a camp or caravan park, and the pathways were rammed with walkers and tourists. Perhaps this was not a good call after all. The entrance to the walk where the bothy lay was filled with people, and we concluded that this bothy was very likely going to be fully occupied tonight. The day was getting late by now, and the thought of trying to find an alternative camp tonight was demoralising. On top of this, we were getting a little cranky from the days of hiking and lack of showering.

Reluctantly, we decided to reconsolidate. There was a town called Granton on Spey 40 minutes drive away, and we made the call to book a cheap hotel to have dinner and a beer, shower and reorganise our kit. This actually proved to be a good call. We refreshed before heading out for a stroll in the town that night. Another Google search revealed that this town had about three pubs, one of which was called The Craig Bar. Rating highly on trip advisor due to an apparently eccentric owner, we decided to head for it.

"I hate the Welsh" the elderly English pub owner exclaimed jokingly at us when he heard our Irish accents. Carpeted floors and walls filled



with military memorabilia and paintings of war planes, the pub, it turned out, was the bottom floor of this man's house. We chose to sit in the corner with our pints, feeling truly out of place in this zany pub. "Right, that's enough for tonight", the pub owner said, and promptly locked the front door and drew the curtains. "No one else is getting in here tonight." Bemused by what was going on, us and the other four people in the bar exchanged looks together. Before long, two dogs and a wife came down from the stairs in the middle of the room, and Brian ended up playing fetch with the dogs favourite toys. "I told you not to throw it! He won't leave you alone now." Where had we found ourselves? We hastily shoveled the remainder of our ales before opting for a quick getaway. Before heading back to our hotel we stopped at a local fish and chip shop to try some haggis, which turned out to be absolutely delicious. Granton on Spey proved to be quite a worthwhile diversion on our journey.

#### Day 5: New Years Eve

That morning we checked out and had breakfast in a local cafe, while we decided what our next plan of action would be. We decided to return to the bothy site from the day before and investigate. It turned out to be even busier than the day before, and upon arriving at the gate there

was a couple of guys unpacking their car that were clearly out for more than a day hike. "Are you guys bothying tonight?" I asked. Yes they were in fact heading for the same bothy we had planned on going to, and the guy told me that he had been there the previous New Years Eve and it was very busy. Seeing in the new year in a bothy seemed to be a popular endeavor.

We decided that the best plan of action would be to return to the bothy we had stayed a couple of nights before. It was, after all, our favorite spot of the trip so far. So on we drove, passing around the famous Loch Ness. The day had been clear and calm and the evening drive was one of the most memorable moments of the trip. The dusk sky driving around Loch Ness was a brilliant orange and purple, and as the sun went down the colours only got more intense. What a way to spend New Years Eve, I thought. This was how you were supposed to spend your time. On the road with a good friend taking in this amazing country. Tomorrow night I would be back home, and I felt the trip coming to an end.

It was dark by the time we got back to the car park of Duror. There was a large camper van and a car already there, which could mean only one thing. There were already people in the bothy. With this in mind, we opted to pack our shelter systems. If it was occupied, we would



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stay in the forest beside the bothy. Having done the walk already a few days before, we had noted some perfect camping spots along the path, so finding somewhere wouldn't be a problem. A clear night revealed an amazing display of stars above us as we walked in the dark with our head torches. Our spirits were high and we were looking forward to seeing in the new year in style. Before long, up ahead of us we saw the glow of other head torches. A couple on the trail ahead of us were heading for the same spot. By the time we caught up with them we were outside the bothy. It was indeed full, judging by the glow of candlelight through the windows outside. Not to worry... we walked back down the trail slightly and found an ideal spot just off the path.

We set up our tarps, gathered some wood and lit ourselves a big fire. By midnight we had full bellies, we were warm from the fire, and the still night proved to be extremely pleasant for sleeping. We shared a small bottle of whiskey and wished each other a Happy New Year and laughed into the night before turning in about 1am. All in all, a successful trip!

#### Reflection

We set off early the next day and got our ferry home. I arrived at my front door around midnight, exhausted, yet exhilarated by what we had just achieved. We drove almost 1700 miles over the course of the trip, all done with very little spending and armed with nothing more than a thirst for adventure and a back seat full of kit.

The next day I was indeed sitting at my desk at work. Rather than feeling lethargic and slow,

like many of my co-workers, who had sleepily gotten themselves out of bed that morning, I was pumped. The journey I had just taken was still whirling around in my head and it would be a couple of days before I really took stock of what we had achieved. I believe that all it takes to get adventure in, is a little bit of risk, a little bit of cash, and a little bit of uncertainty. Albeit not the most exotic of adventures, it was nonetheless one of the most memorable, and I know I will treasure those memories for many years to come. When I sat down to write this article, I was aware that I didn't want it to feel like just a series of diary entries, but a story of how this trip truly felt.

I wonder if the smaller details I try to describe here are of any interest to the reader, or did you have to be there to fully appreciate them? The reality is, that by and large, nothing of huge significance happened on this trip. The days were calm, and full of banter and laughter. Of trying to pronounce the names of the towns in a Scottish accent as we passed the signposts. Of in-jokes that make no sense to other people. Of picking what songs to listen to on the road. These are the things you tend to remember afterwards. On many of the trips I took in 2019, I often found that what seemed like the little, insignificant things at the time, stuck with me, and became the big things. I believe the point of this article is just that. Life is not always about scaling mountains in Peru... Sometimes it's about having a beer in a strange pub in a town you didn't even know existed the day before. The micro adventures within the micro adventure.

