

THE SEAM, THE SEAM

By Roger Webb

THE SEAM IS A modest route in a modest corrie with a striking line and marvellous climbing. It is a dichotomy of a route or perhaps it is the epitome of Scottish Winter, to misquote Marko Prezelj 'small route, big adventure'.

Anyway it saw me off for a decade or two.

I first went to Sneachda at New Year in 1982. We had been dossing under a bridge in Aviemore, wandered in and climbed The Runnel. We didn't bother looking at Fiacail buttress as there was nothing in the guidebook. I forgot about it and sought out bigger things further away. Others were more perceptive, amongst them James Grosset and John Lyall who at New Year 1986 climbed The Seam.

The eighties and the nineties passed as did my youth, short days became more attractive and one day Fiona and I found ourselves on Invernookie. The plan had been good, start late to avoid the queues. The plan failed because others had the same plan so I was slowly freezing on the second belay. I waited and watched in mute jealousy as a young boy cruised up to a belay on my right, produced a large duvet jacket and settled down in comfort to bring up his friend. Only then did I properly notice the immaculate line above him. His friend came up, took the lead then swarmed, edged and stylishly grovelled past chockstones, clipping threads, thwacking turf and placing immaculate runners. The route had everything, I was smitten. It was The Seam.

The way ahead cleared and with a new ambition I set off up the current one. My right crampon promptly disintegrated and I hopped my way to the top. This juxtaposition set the tone for years ahead.

Each winter I made arrangements to get The Seam done. It never happened. Sometimes I never got past the front door. The phone would ring, 'can't make it the children are ill', 'Mr Webb one of your clients is in custody...', that kind of thing. Twice we got past the front door to find the A9 blocked by accidents at Slochd, once the ski road was blocked, occasionally the Sirens of Aviemore with proper coffee and cake were too tempting. Time rolled by, straight axes changed to curved, leashes went the way of dinosaurs, people had whole climbing careers, I still hadn't done the Seam.

On rare occasions we made it to the car park, but these days you can't escape the mobile phone. The school called to say my daughter was ill, James Edwards's boys' school called, Gary Kinsey's boy's school called, I started to get paranoid. Deviously Will Wilkinson, Andy Wardle and I went in pretending to do Stirling Bomber and definitely not The Seam as well. We did the former but there was an accident nearby and we got diverted. I went back with James, he turned green on the walk in and revisited his breakfast, we went home. Paranoia stepped up. The Seam invaded my sleep. I left one morning with Gary, Aviemore had a strange seventies feel about it, the NAAFI from Osnabrück had replaced the petrol station,

the streets were full of squaddies, something wasn't right. At the ski car park an officer warned us not to go further. We ignored him. The weather was good, the sky blue and the crags were white, so were the ski equipped troops of the 3rd Soviet Shock Army that blocked our way. Gary remarked that this was unusual. Somewhere a siren wailed, I woke up. Not good. I still hadn't done The Seam.

I couldn't even do it in my dreams.

I revisited the diversion tactic, and stacked the deck by recruiting Murdoch Jamieson. A man with six grades in hand should do the trick. We snuck in with an approach from above, abseiling to belay below the main pitch. Murdoch to lead Watch Out, me to do The Seam. Murdoch cruised his route but I couldn't understand the sudden outbreak of cursing as he finished. After a brutal lesson in the disparity between his skills and mine I got the answer, the abseil gear and Murdoch's spare gloves had gone. I still hadn't done The Seam.

Years passed. In late 2016 Gary was brave enough to try again. As in the dream the sky was blue and the crag was white, everything was perfect right up to the point when Gary stepped on ground that wasn't. I turned to see him swim a stroke or two before heaving himself onto ground that was. He was soaked, I was cruel. Ambition drove me on to the foot of The Seam and to the queue waiting there. These kinder, gentler souls offered to let us go first but by now Gary was chattering, I took pity, shamed by their looks of reproach. I still hadn't done The Seam.

Gary moved to New Zealand.

I sought inspiration, hippy stuff, karma, anything. Foreign intervention was a path worth trying. The French wanted to go at night as they were too busy doing grade 7s in the day. The Americans only did good weather which was unlikely. The answer should have been obvious, German efficiency, and by happy chance it arrived.

In 2017 the SMC dinner was in Carrbridge and Henning Wackerhage, SMC member, possibly the keenest German Scottish winter climber there has ever been, was coming across from Munich for the event. A mutual friend asked if I was free to climb with Henning. His fate and route choice were sealed in an instant.

We spoke on the phone, he came straight to the point. 'You wish to climb the Seam?' I hadn't realised that my absurd saga was public knowledge in Germany. I pretended to consider the question and, after the kind of pause the other person doesn't notice, admitted it.

The morning of 2nd December we arrived in the Coire Cas car park. No one was ill. There were no phone calls from school as during this epic my daughter had finished primary school, secondary school, a year out and was now in second year at university. There were no crashes. The 3rd Soviet Shock Army had gone home and the Germans were on my side which, as events were to show, was a very good thing.

Conditions were not ideal, poor visibility, damp air, fresh snow and a biting wind. On the plus side my companion was. Henning turned out to be about 6'4"

of super fit canned morale, apparently impervious to doubt, cold or my whingeing. He strode into the corrie, I trotted behind. At the rescue box after a dispiriting flounder through the boulders we, or rather Henning, assessed the situation. I cowered in its lee while Henning surveyed the scene. The coffee shop was insinuating itself into my mind when Henning stated 'We do the Seam'. A small spark of spirit left in me agreed with him and followed on as he set off into the blank cloud. The rest of me had no choice but to go as well.

The angle steepened, ice became more apparent. We stopped to put on more clothes and crampons. The wind was wicked, powering down in random directions and unexpected gusts. A gust hit my freshly opened rucksack. In a moment my crampons were gone, my gloves, helmet and gear strewn down the slope. I looked up, the cloud cleared and The Seam leered at me. My spirit flickered and died. That was it, enough was enough, too much wasted life, I was off. I looked up at Henning with defeat in my face. He didn't notice but walked down gathering my possessions. I joined him.

At the bottom of the slope we found my crampons, turned and set off up again.

There was now no way I wasn't going to do it.

Despite the delay we were still first to the route. Henning with great generosity declined to lead any of it. The big pitch when it came was worth the wait. I swarmed and edged, stylishly grovelled past chockstones, clipped threads, thwacked turf and placed immaculate runners. I took my time, I saw Fiona shivering on the belay, James and Will constant in their enthusiasm, Andy's calm common sense, Gary dripping wet, Murdoch ranting at fate, Henning's imperturbability and thought of all the good times this ridiculous obsession had given me, the laughter, black humour and unadulterated fun. I wished all were still alive to share it. Pausing below the final moves, I thought once more of Will and James, then pulled through to the cheers of none, placed a nut, clipped a thread, and turned to shout to Henning, 'Belayed!'

At the SMC dinner that evening I was the satisfied one. I have done harder routes, longer routes, newer routes and more remote routes but for simple pleasure no better route. The line is immaculate, the moves robust but as I slowly drank too much I realised the old truth, it isn't what you do, it's who you do it with that counts. I had been more lucky than I deserved with all my companions and I thank them all.