

TRAVEL
DRY SLOPE SKIING

The bright side of the moon

SHIFT WORKER ALAN ROWAN, 59, A HILL WALKER WITH AN UNUSUAL PASSION TALKS ABOUT HIS LOVE OF MIDNIGHT MOUNTAINEERING



WHEN I got up there at about 2am it was almost light. I was near Spean Bridge to climb the two peaks called the Eassins. I got out of the car and started going up the slope. As I rose the light rose with me. It was as if the day was coming alive. I got to the top of the first hill and the mist was lifting to show the second one. It was so beautiful.

That was the first time I went moonwalking. It was a totally new experience. The idea was that you got up there to sit and have your breakfast with the sunrise. Just sitting there, the only person there, at five in the morning is an amazing feeling.

The next time I went out wasn't

quite so good. It was a horrible day. It was the complete flip side. I was out in mist all the time. I ended up going off course and not doing what I wanted to do. Who knows, if it had been the other way round and I had done this one first I might never have done any more.

There is a beautiful one called Seana Bhrainigh, east of Tillicoultry which means "the old slope". That was such a stunning walk because you pass through so many different types of terrain. When I got to the top it was probably the brightest morning I had ever seen. It was almost washed out. I was sitting having my breakfast and there were these goats, wild goats came up trying to get a wee bit of my food. They weren't frightened at all. It was surreal.

There have been a few strange moments. I always think that at that

time in the morning your mind is in a different place. Your body thinks it should be sleeping, your mind thinks you should be sleeping. Sometimes, if it's almost like sleepwalking especially if it's hard going up the way. You do have little doubts about things that wouldn't bother you in the day.

For instance, at that time in the morning you get a lot of inversions. That's when all the cloud is below you and you end up above the cloud so all the peaks look like shark fins sticking out of the water. If you're going from one peak to the next you can't actually see the ground beneath you. You can only see cloud. I've thought once or twice, "what if there is no ground there?". It is a strange feeling and it does play on your mind sometimes.

There was one time I drove four hours from work and I arrived at 4am

at a place called Achanshellach, west of Inverness. I was going to do two hills but when I got there I decided I was so tired that I would have a little nap in the car for an hour or so. When I woke up I was freezing. I had woken up with a start as if something was bothering me all of a sudden. I looked out at the two hills and it was like there was a storm coming. They looked almost evil.

Whether I had been having a nightmare or something, it looked terrifying. I had never had that feeling before, a really, really bad feeling. I sat there for another half hour or so debating. All the hills were streaked with snow, they looked dark, a storm looked like coming in and I had a bad feeling. I got in the car and drove four hours back to Glasgow, so there you have an eight-hour round trip to sleep at the side of the road.

I was based in Glasgow during the week while my wife was back home in Carmouille with the kids. She never knew I was climbing at night. She knew I climbed hills but I didn't ever say when I was doing it. She would just worry and wouldn't get good night's sleep if she knew what I was doing so I didn't tell her. There have been a few rows about it since she's read my book though.

Going up mountains any time in Scotland can be dangerous, in winter more so. I wouldn't recommend moonwalking. I not saying everybody should be going out doing this. When you go up at night you really need to know what you are doing.

I have done survival courses, done winter skills courses, done all the navigational skills courses. I basically know what I am doing and the

accidents I have had, funny enough, have been during the day. When I'm going up at night I am always well prepared. Someone knows where I am, my route is worked out. I know what I'm going to do and I don't take chances. It's as simple as that.

I don't do it so much now because I'm semi-retired. I don't need to go out at night but I did a few last year. I went out in winter on Schiehallion (northwest of Perth) with a BBC film crew and it reminded me why I should be doing this more. It's a different experience.

Alan Rowan's book, Moonwalker (BackPage Press, £9.99), covers his first round of Munros between 1994 and 2000. He runs a blog of his more recent adventures at www.munromoonwalker.com

Interview by Stephen Bark

The moon over Ben A'Gha
Photograph: Alan Rowan

"Your body thinks it should be sleeping, your mind thinks you should be sleeping. Sometimes, it's almost like sleepwalking.."



5 OTHER THINGS TO DO AT NIGHT

- Gallop Forest Parks:** One of only three Dark Sky Parks in Europe, the Scottish Dark Sky Observatory, near Dalwhinnie, offers the chance to gaze up at the stars. scottishdarkskyobservatory.co.uk
- Ardenbury Centre:** North of Dumfries, the centre offers nighttime hiking in the forest. They also teach survival skills and natural history, such as the local Pipistrelle bats, on the hike. ardenburycentre.org.uk
- Edinburgh Ghost Tours:** In the city's Old Town, there are lots of different tours on offer. You might even meet a real ghost. goscotlandtours.com
- The Northern Lights:** Also known as the Aurora Borealis, they can be seen anywhere in Scotland but the best places to see them are around the Caithness coast and the Orkney Isles in the winter. visitscotland.com/about/nature/photography/northernlights
- Highland Safaris:** Offer the chance to see rare Scottish wildlife, including badgers and hares, on their dawn and dusk tours. highlandsafaris.net

