

Pabbay May 2008 – the official meet report!

Pabbay lies at the southern extremity of the Western isles, just south of Barra, and ranks as one of the finest climbing venues in the UK. Acres of immaculate weathered Lewisian gneiss, remoteness, difficulty of access and abundant wildlife all combine to make a visit to Pabbay a truly memorable experience.

The island was inhabited until around 1912, with a population of 26 in the 1880's, but a fishing disaster which led to the deaths of most of the male population on the island (and one visitor) meant that life on the island became untenable.

The LMC trip took place over the Spring Bank holiday 2008. The party of aspirant hermits consisted of David and Richard Toon, Mark Gray, Will Wheale, Sarah Medcalf and Andy Bond – a combination of youth, experience, ready wit and culinary expertise all vital for a successful climbing trip. Added to this, Richard and Dave brought unparalleled fishing skills which helped in supplementing our dwindling supplies of fresh food at the end of the week!

Travel was via Tyndrum on Friday night, the Oban-Barra ferry on Saturday afternoon and finally the 'Boy James' fishing charter boat. This left Castlebay in glorious evening sunshine, landing us on Pabbay at around 10pm on Saturday night. The Boy James is skippered by Donald - friendly, relaxed and completely at home guiding his small charter boat around the smaller outlying Hebridean islands south of Barra and Vatersay.



Boat out to Pabbay

Because mobile phone reception is virtually non-existent a satellite phone or marine band VHF radio is fairly essential in case of emergency. Our radio was loaned for the week by the ever helpful Donald.

The landing place is a natural channel carved into the bedrock just to the south of Bagh Ban (white bay). The bay is bounded by a sheltered curve of dazzling white sands and its turquoise waters were more reminiscent of Mediterranean seas. The sheltered camping spot is just above the beach, next to the former settlement.

With over a dozen different crags on the island there is much to offer a party of varying abilities. Sunday dawned with fine weather, which was to stay with us for the whole week apart from a short spell of rain midweek. Dave and Richard climbed the striking line taken by Prophecy of Drowning (E2 5c), next to the Great Arch, whilst the rest of the team warmed up on the east face of Small Buoys Geo. Probably the best route there is Designer Rib (HVS 5a) which all four of us climbed after a number of quality warm up routes.

On Monday and Tuesday the team crossed the island en masse to the Banded Geo and (Dave and Richard) the Pink Wall recess. Access to the Banded Geo requires an abseil approach to a hanging stance perched above the lapping sea, however, is worth the effort as the crag boasts a number of fantastic routes from HVS upwards. The party variously ascended Spring Squill (E1 5b and 4*!), Endolphin Rush (E4 5c), Corncrake Corner (HVS), Spooky Pillar (HVS) and Oh No, Norman's in Reverse (HVS). The last of these takes a seemingly improbable and bold line up steep rock but with abundant good holds, characteristic of the best routes on Pabbay. The fine weather continued unabated, necessitating extensive sunbathing in a suntrap at the top of the crag!



Andy Bond at Banded Geo

The Pink Wall recess, visited by Dave and Richard, is approached via a 70m free hanging abseil, the 100m static ab rope coming in handy again! Here they settled on U-Ei, a 110 metre 3* route (E2 5b, 5a, 5b) one of several three star routes which adorn this fine crag.

The frenetic climbing activity was interspersed with frequent diversions which included cooking gourmet 3 course meals (Will and Mark mainly, but with help from others), fishing (Dave and Richard), Kite flying (Dave) and explosive bonfires on the beach (all apart from Richard – too busy fishing!). Beach combing and early morning bathing were also popular pastimes as the fine weather continued.

Wildlife on the Island is abundant with huge numbers of nesting seabirds including Auks, Shags, Cormorants, Skuas, Kittiwakes and Fulmars and some rare ground nesting birds. We were also privileged to see, almost daily, a pair of huge soaring white tailed Sea Eagles, re-introduced to the Hebrides in the 1970's.

Wednesday saw the team re-united for a trip over to Hoofers Geo. This is a fine crag with a number of excellent and easily accessible single pitch routes. This was really the only day we suffered any bad weather. After a couple of routes, one of the best being Hoofers Route (E1 5b and 3*), the threatening skies came closer and it started to rain. We scuttled back to the campsite and Will and Mark quickly erected a tarp rain shelter which we shared with the midges whilst the next gourmet meal was prepared.



Sarah Medcalf at Hoofers Geo

Thursday dawned fine again and Dave and Richard headed to the Big Bloc Sloch and Lifeline (E3 5c) before heading back to complete some unfinished business on Sugar Cane (E4 6a) at Hoofers Geo. Andy, Will, Mark and Sarah headed to the exposed Headwall above the Great Arch. The Great Arch is one of the showpiece cliffs on the island reaching a height of 100m and with a colossal roof spanning the upper right side which is taken by To Be Continued E7 7a! We gave the Great Arch a wide berth.

The Headwall team climbed Geniestreich (S), Orang Utang Claus (S) and the fine Chilly Dick (VS 5a), which Mark led in composed style. Later the team headed over to the blustery Allanish Peninsula to finish in the evening sun on Wee Free, Corncrake chorus and 15 Minutes of Fun. The last of these takes an exposed arête at HVS 5a, a phenomenal position above the white and blue rising swell of the Atlantic.

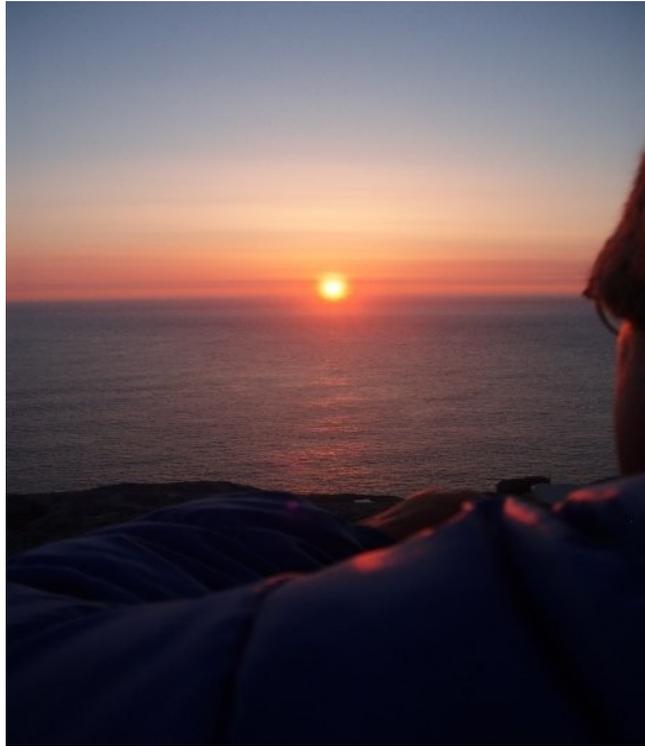
Friday was the last full day on the island. Dave and Richard took the opportunity to visit the Main Cliff West and by design or accident climbed what was almost certainly a new line later named Hell Eagle (E3 5c) and described afterwards as 'characterful' by Dave! The route name refers to a very close encounter with a particularly rare bird of prey! The rest of the team went over to the Poop Deck to climb Human Cargo (HS 4b), one of a number of confident leads by Sarah, Wetter than a Day at the Beach (E1 5b) and Illegal Alien (HVS 5a) a striking 3* crack route.



David Toon - Hell Eagle

That evening most of the team headed to one of the Island's summits to witness the dramatic sun set over the distant Atlantic. Just another fantastic moment as we watched the dying rays of the sun dip below the far horizon.

Saturday was our last day on the island. It had been a week to savour. For some it had been something close to a spiritual experience! - calm, peaceful,



Sunset

harmonious, excellent climbing, good food and sustained good weather enjoyed in a dramatic coastal setting, all combining to leave a feeling of deep relaxation at the end of the week.



David Toon - Ethics Police



Andy Bond - Ethics Police

Roshinish Wall overlooks the bay and was the venue for the last day. Again, there are a range of routes at all grades, the best probably being Ticks Too (VS 4c) and The Ethics Police (E3 5c) which Dave soloed in style as the cameras snapped below. More sunbathing, then Donald collected us for the return trip. On Barra we enjoyed (!) a sociable evening in the Castlebay Hotel before heading home via the Calmac ferry and Oban.

Andy Bond



The Great Arch