

# Reaching for the skies – at high speed

**THE EU elections were looming, and it was time to figure out how to establish ourselves with the electorate. Sure, we had the most progressive policies on animal issues, as well as supporting other socially and environmentally responsible policies.**

Perhaps our key goal is the establishment of a basic national health-care system for animals, partly through increased funding of existing charities and veterinary practices.

However, voters are bored by political debates, and turned off by the sleaze in which so many politicians seem mired today. It was time for a change. But what?

Then it hit me: why not challenge the leaders of other political parties to a race? After all, political leaders should be able to prove their fitness to lead – literally! It would need to be a really hard race, requiring good planning, endurance and teamwork: attributes anyone wishing to run the country should be able to demonstrate!

Unfortunately, this is the point where self-interest began to creep in, subverting my otherwise noble ideals. It so happens that I'm addicted to mountains.

Accordingly, I sent out a media release inviting the Tory, Labour and Lib Dem leaders to join me in completing the famous "Three Peaks Challenge". Participants must climb the highest mountains in Scotland, England and Wales, within the same 24-hour period! The fastest wins.

## Let the winner rule...

Perhaps, I thought, we could simply let the winner rule the country. It would save an awful lot of administrative bother, not to mention a staggering amount of money! And, hopefully, for once the voters would truly enjoy an election.

I duly began my training, whilst hopefully awaiting a response from the other political parties. I recruited two friends to join our all-vegan team, along

with a super vegan cook, and a driver, so that we could sleep comfortably whilst driving between mountain peaks. I also asked our supporters to sponsor us. Funds would be used to fund leaflets for our EU election campaign.

The winter weather was still very cold, for this exile from the sunny beaches of Australia. For the first time in my life I was forced to buy lycra tights to run in, and would speedily exit my clinic past my sniggering nurses to pound the pavement during lunch. I learnt to loathe the stepper at my gym. I never dreamed just how exhausting that fiendish instrument of torture really was! But my fitness and, hopefully, climbing endurance, slowly and tortuously improved, as I waited vainly for a response from the other political parties.

## Last-minute cancellation

At last, the big day loomed! The gleaming new nine-seater from the hire company appeared roomy and comfortable for five people and gear, lifting our spirits, which had been dampened by the last-minute cancellation of our driver.

We were to face a dangerously tiring high-speed drive through the night, between the mountains of England and Scotland.

Not on our first night, though. Our youth hostel in Wales near Mt Snowdon was clean and modern, and nestled into a hillside above a picturesque valley. We arrived late, but the warden thoughtfully left the code for the combination lock stuck to the door.

Given the cold overnight we could hardly begrudge the local homeless man who subsequently took up residence on our warm kitchen floor, sometime during the small hours of the morning.

A short drive the next day took us to the base of Mt Snowdon. This gateway to Wales' highest peak resembled rush hour in the London underground, and so our van dropped us in the "loading zone" without further ado, and speedily departed. At 1.02 pm on Saturday 2nd May, full of enthusiasm, we joined what appeared to be most of Wales in a race for the summit.

We passed stunning alpine lakes, on which legend has it that the fallen King Arthur was taken away in a boat by the

Ladies of the Lake to his eternal rest.

Apparently his knights still lie sleeping in a cave thereabouts, awaiting the call to rise and ride forth once more to the defence of the realm. We spied the entrances of passing caves hopefully, but sadly lacked the time to search for them.

The summit cairn resembled a seething human anthill, which we had to queue to mount. It was appropriately freezing, and the café with its wonderful selection of hot drinks was, of course, closed for repairs. At least no one appeared to be having a heart attack nearby, this time. Out of three previous trips I had twice seen such unlucky victims near this summit, and the subsequent helicopter rescues.

We raced back down the mountain, finishing in precisely three hours, and hit the road exactly seven minutes later. A desperate drive to Scafell Pike followed, punctuated by the occasional heated argument with "Jessie", our Tom Tom sat nav device. However, her insistence that we follow a tiny, winding road into a remote part of the Lake District soon delivered us into a wildly beautiful sunset.

## Sane climbers leaving

Shortly afterwards Jessie successfully led us to England's highest peak, and we commenced our climb at 8.20 pm. The last sane climbers appeared to be leaving with the light, casting concerned looks in our direction as they hurried by. We pressed on toward the upper slopes, which were by then blissfully deserted.

Disturbingly, however, thick cloud was descending onto the rocky summit plateau. We resisted turning on our head torches until the last dregs of daylight disappeared, well after 10 pm. The murk scattered our torch beams in all directions, wiping out the subtle contrasts that had previously distinguished the trail from the



*Just one-step back ... Andrew Knight on the Mt Snowdon trail.*

surrounding gloom.

We barely found the bitterly cold summit cairn. After the obligatory photo, and check of the thermometer, which confirmed our literally frozen status, we began our return as rapidly as we could walk or, in one painful case, awkwardly limp.

As we descended a steep, featureless slope of rocky scree, however, the feeling grew within me that something wasn't right. The trail was almost invisible in any case, but the rocks nevertheless seemed a bit too undisturbed.

## Navigation failure

After a huddled conference we decided to backtrack. By descending in a different direction, we blundered across the true trail, narrowly escaping an exhausting, freezing night wandering around the mountain. Still disorientated, we eventually emerged from the cloud, half a mountain-length from where I thought we were!

And I was the navigator ... my tiring teammates by then having given up. The sound of rushing water from the stream leading back to the van was gloriously welcome, and we reached the vehicle just after midnight, departing five minutes later.

In complete darkness we passed some of Scotland's most beautiful wilderness scenery, during our drive to Ben Nevis. Spectacular lochs, peaks and moorland swept mysteriously by, their presence revealed only on Jessie's glowing screen. I struggled to stay awake at the wheel, exhaustion and the unaccustomed warmth of the vehicle



*Snow good up here – the roped party on Ben Nevis.*

Andrew Knight, BVMS, MRCVS, based in London, is the president of Animals Count, a political party for people and animals. His subversion of noble political ideals by mountaineering misadventures in no way reflects on the policies of Animals Count.

jointly conspiring against me. At last my two hours was done, and I managed to snatch some 45 minutes of broken sleep whilst another climber took the wheel.

We arrived at Ben Nevis and set off into light drizzle, at 5.38 am. Once again we ascended into cloud, which was not entirely a bad thing, as it allowed me to tell my trusting teammates the summit was very close – at least five times.

However, we were shocked to discover ever deepening snow, accompanied by an intermittent but rising blizzard, as we climbed ever higher. A fully roped party of climbers descending past us, festooned with snow and ice, should have given us pause for thought, but we had come too far to turn back.

One more summit and we were all free to collapse. And sleep. For a very long time. And so we struggled on.

**Fading visibility**

The visibility progressively faded, and the wind chill temperature dropped so far below freezing we dared not remove hands from gloves to check our thermometer.

It became difficult to see from one rock cairn to the next, and we resorted to following footprints in the snow, which were becoming rapidly buried.

About that time I realised that choosing to ascend without a GPS may not have been my brightest moment.

About an hour after the summit was due, a terrifying cliff edge suddenly appeared out of the fog. Deep snowy cornices teetered over vertical drops, that dropped precipitously into icy depths unknown. This was, however, a sure sign that the summit was close! Heartened, we struggled on, and some 15 minutes later, the summit cairn appeared!

We were shocked to see that the ruined stone huts from the ancient summit metrological observation station were more than half buried under the snow, even though it was May.

As we struggled to descend an icy slope backwards, facing away from the hail being driven horizontally into our faces, a solo climber who had joined our party for safety commented helpfully that an expected cold front appeared to have arrived early.

Apparently, however, it was just the mountain doing what mountains like to do, because we later emerged from the cloud into bright sunshine, and peaceful, flower-filled meadows, filled with happy, unsuspecting hikers on their way upwards.

We tried to warn those with dogs or small children, struggling to penetrate

the hardy Scottish mindset. Hopefully the ever-deepening snow would succeed, where reason could not.

We finished our challenge at 12.27pm on 3rd May, in 23 hours 25 minutes. We had walked, run and painfully limped some 25 miles, climbed around 10,000 feet, and endured a hair-raising drive of nearly 500 miles, averaging less than two hours sleep.

A short drive to a nearby hostel was followed by luxuriously long showers, an exhausted nap for the whole team, and sinful amounts of food – in that order.

**Superior prowess**

So what did our novel political initiative achieve? I believe we clearly demonstrated mountaineering prowess superior to the other political parties, none of which showed up. I'm not sure how much it moved the voters, but I, for one, enjoyed it far more than any political debate I can recall. We raised nearly £1,300 to support our campaign, and have memories of an adventure that will last for our lifetimes.

We minimised our environmental impacts by using mountain paths, and purchasing a resource conservation portfolio at [www.CarbonNeutral.co.uk](http://www.CarbonNeutral.co.uk) (no sponsorship funds were used). Additionally, our meals and equipment



*Mission accomplished – the author in peak condition.*

were entirely vegan! Why is that important? Because animal agriculture is one of the largest contributors to global warming, producing more greenhouse gases than the entire transport sector combined.

Would I do it all again? Most definitely! In fact, I've just signed onto an expedition to climb Mt Blanc, Europe's highest mountain. I don't know anything about crampons, ice-axes or crevasse rescue yet, but with navigation skills such as mine I should be fine.

Representatives from other political parties are, as always, very welcome to join me.

# Water damage? No, leaky pipes



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