

**THE 321 CHALLENGE
ENGLAND'S HIGHEST MOUNTAINS**

3 Mountains 2 Asthmatics 1 Weekend

A while back my sister Natalie had a violent asthma attack and thanks wholly to the efforts of the staff at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford she is alive and very much kicking nowadays. Following her remarkable recovery we wanted a way of saying thank you to the Churchill staff so we decided to climb England's three highest mountains to raise sponsorship money. As I write this the total is approaching £1400, so we are overwhelmed by the interest that people have been showing!

We set up camp near Keswick, pitching 2 small dome tents for the weekend right in the heart of the prettiest and most dramatic scenery in England. Our third (and smallest) mountain Skiddaw soared above our camp site as a constant reminder of what lies ahead. Individually these mountains are climbed on nice days by families with children and dogs, but fewer people attempt all 3 in a single weekend during stormy weather- in fact one hiker I spoke to said this was more of a thrill than the better known ('British') 3 Peaks Challenge which includes Ben Nevis and Snowdon. I am a big chap, and so my main concern was the pressure on my legs coming down the mountains; going up isn't too bad so long as you have a constant supply of energy.

We set out in gorgeous sunshine on the morning of the first climb, driving over the impossibly steep Hardknott Pass to get to the head of Wastwater. We took some photos of Scafell Pike rising dramatically above the lake, which was to be our challenge on this day. After changing into our walking gear, putting on our rucksacs and adjusting our walking poles we set off, up the valley of Brown Tongue, the lake slowly disappearing below us. As we got higher we could see the Isle of Man, Scotland and Sellafield power station on the coast. Higher still we saw RAF planes flying well below us, and the view just got better and better. After lunch at Lingmell Col we made the last effort for the top - a scramble through loose igneous rock to a man-made summit commanding a view "down" on England! There was no wind, and it wasn't very cold. In fact it was just a pity that the whole weekend wasn't going to be like this really. As we stood on the summit cairn, a fast prop plane circled the mountain below us, flipping over and diving around, playing a kind of dare-devil game with the mountains peaks below us, it was quite a sight. The trip down was uneventful, although we could by now see the weather closing around the tops of the mountain behind us, so our timing was very lucky indeed.

Getting up the next morning was difficult although by now our parents had arrived in the Lake District to support us. Today was the Helvellyn climb - Helvellyn is not like Scafell Pike, it is a different beast entirely - not as high but involves more scrambling. After the long walk up the eastern valley we got to Red Tarn, a high altitude lake at the foot of the imposing peak of Helvellyn itself - the top of the mountain was in swirling cloud and today it looked very menacing. We climbed up the path to the Swirral edge, where the path suddenly disappears and is replaced by a steep and sharp rocky ascent, walking is replaced with climbing and we were now in thick cloud. I realised Natalie was not with me any more - she had taken a detour and was approaching the vertical face of the mountain whereas I was on the edge itself - I had to keep shouting across to her to guide her back to the edge, but neither of us knew the relative height or location of the other. After a few minutes she suddenly appeared on a ridge just below me and I was relieved! We got to the top where it was quite cold and today there were no views, we just sat in the shelter with the other hikers and then descended the same route. On the way back we had a quick scramble up CatsyCam, a subsidiary peak which gave us a tremendous view for miles right

across to the Yorkshire Dales and added a crafty fourth mountain to the challenge. CatsyCam has a small, pointed summit and today it was just below the cloud level, looking back from here Helvellyn just looked like a big black wall rising into the clouds. At the bottom we went straight to the pub for a liquid "de-brief", then met up with mum and dad. Helvellyn took about the same amount of time as Scafell Pike.

Skiddaw is only just over 3000ft, and is the smallest of the mountains. It is a relatively quick and easy (3-4 hour) walk for anyone who wants to climb a high Lakeland mountain to get a fantastic view over the whole national park. Mum was originally going to join us on Skiddaw - and we liked the idea of having another family member with us to help celebrate. By now we were tired and our walking clothes were very dirty, so we were in no hurry, although I didn't want to miss the Grand Prix on the telly later if possible!

We drove up to the Latrigg car park at the start of the climb and it was clear to see that this wasn't going to be very easy today. It was cold, wet and very windy, and this was just at the bottom. Looking about halfway up you could see dark cloud swirling around the mountain, so in the end Natalie and I we were going to attempt this alone after all as mum had no protection from these kind of elements. We started up the path and I think our joints were already creaking but we wore full wet-weather and thermal walking gear so we were prepared for almost anything. The commanding view over Keswick and Derwentwater rapidly disappeared from our view after a short time, being replaced by thick cloud, cold gusty wind and rain. The path levelled off for about 30 minutes, which gave us the opportunity for a rest. Hikers coming the other way warned us that we were actually on the sheltered side of the mountain and that the winds at the top were blowing around 70mph, so we prepared ourselves for the worst, and when we got to the summit ridge it really hit us! The wind was relentless and at a couple of points we were blown sideways by very strong gusts. At the summit we sat in the small open shelter with some other hikers and had a celebration involving a can of Stella Artois to mark the occasion. Unfortunately the can was bulging due to the slight change in pressure and it burst open very easily as I accidentally dropped it on the rocky ground; this was probably the biggest disappointment of the weekend! As we made our way back down the wind dropped, the sun came out and the fields (which were still a couple of thousand feet below us) looked like the patchwork quilt they do when you are flying in a plane. Mum and dad greeted us at the bottom, and we were back just in time for some hunch, and of course, the motor racing on the telly!



Hedley enjoys a drink on the way down

If you have broadband and want the best pictures from the weekend email Hedley at: hedley.thorne@talk21.com

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HEDLEY THORNE