

Island Fling

My "Island Adventure" 2010

*Traditional rock & sports climber, **Jessica McCaskey** (aged 17 years) describes her trip to the Isle of Lewis this summer. Her intention was to climb on the awesome and somewhat scary Screaming Geo and make a repeat of the spectacular route, Prozac Link (E4) that traverses the lip of a huge sea cave. However, the weather had other ideas...*



Photo: Jessica on a MCoFS REALsport session at Benny Beg

May was a very busy month, I finished 3rd placed at the Scottish Youth Climbing Championship (SYCC) at the Edinburgh International Climbing Arena at Ratho before setting off on a climbing trip to the Isle of Lewis:

Day 1 – 19th May

Accompanied by a support crew, coach and climbing partner Martin, my Dad Les, brother Paul and friend Brian I ensconced in Ullapool on the evening of the 19th of May and prepared for an early morning crossing to Stornaway.

Day 2 – 20th May

The ferry journey proved to be enjoyable, spoiled only by the arrival of rain as soon as we saw land which also happened to be our destination, the Isle of Lewis. Undaunted the team checked into the Heb Hostel accommodation and set off to the first climbing of the trip.

The main obstacle to overcome during this trip would be the weather. We had checked the forecasts before we left and as much as we could on the road in order to plan our climbing locations.

The venue was **Beinn na Berie** which being non tidal was a good choice for a half day visit.

Our approach delivered us our first view of one of the many outstanding beaches we were to visit during our stay. At **Beinn na Berie** I got stuck in to a climb right on my limit, the holds were damp and it rained lightly on and off for the duration of the climbing. This was an ideal opportunity to use my recently purchased skinny ropes and belay devices. The support crew enjoyed a period of spectating, beach combing and beer drinking.

I managed to get half way before retiring, giving Martin a chance. He gave it his best shot and almost succeeded when a piece of protection failed spectacularly leaving him dangling two feet above the ledge. I managed to use my experience and quick thinking to hold this fall (with new equipment), bearing in mind the 5 stone weight difference everyone was rather impressed as this could have ended our trip. We then headed back to base camp and a hearty Indian restaurant meal was enjoyed by all.



Photo above: the immaculate gneiss of Beinn na Berie

Day 3 – 21st May

Today's location was the stunning **Dalbeg Bay** and although it rained off and on, this day was to prove to be the saving grace of the trip. With support crew and cameras at the ready, half mile across the bay, the climbers got in position. Whilst rain fell (on our side of the bay, enough so to put off most climbers) the sun shone for the spectators on the other. Martin quickly disappeared down the abseil and thereby committed the team to an attempt.

The chosen climb was *Neptune E2 5c* (commonly considered to be in the 'Top 5' single-pitch climbs in Scotland). The following hour saw myself struggle mentally and physically to ascend the outstanding wall (all skill and determination was needed) and finishing in the heavy rain. By the time Martin swam to the top my upturned helmet was half full with water.

It was a soggy but happy duo that returned to the team bus. Back to base camp and a sit-in hostel meal of pizza, garlic bread and a few beers.

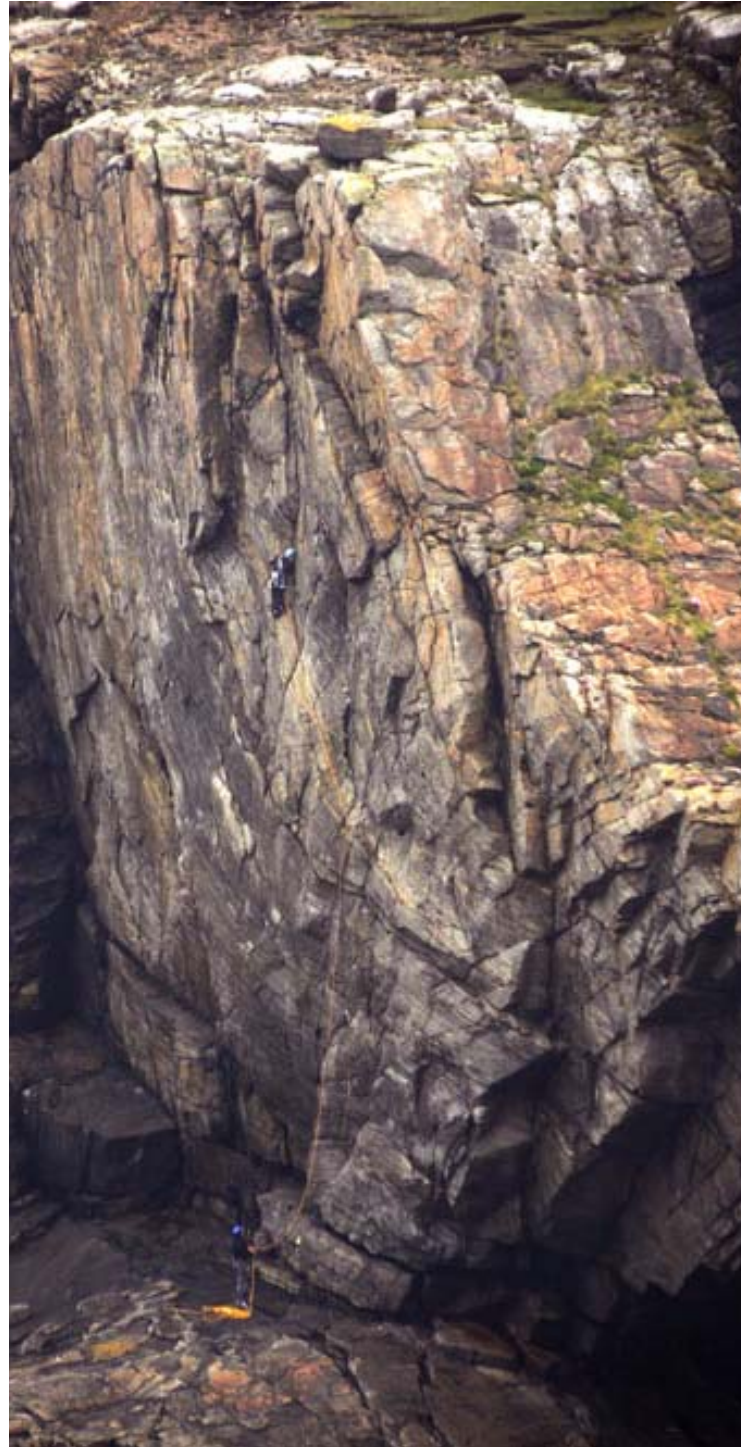


Photo: Jessica on Neptune (E2 5c) in the wet!

Day 4 – 22nd May

After heavy overnight rain we abseiled onto a cliff north of **Dalbeg Bay**, the previous day's site, while the rest of Britain was in sweltering in the first heat wave of the year, fleeces were worn to protect against the chill! We just climbed out as everything was wet.



Photo: The Stunning Dalbeg Bay

The support crew took advantage of the sun to visit the standing stones at Callanish followed by four hours traversing a local bay and an out of this world beach and a barbeque was enjoyed whilst they watched a number of surfers brave the cold waters (we were attempting to climb in the mist you can see in the background in the photo!) Back to base for a meal and a beer.

Day 5 – 23rd May

Painted Wall was another outstanding venue that was unclimbable and dangerously wet and although it had the shortest approach on the island, the team stumbled about like gorillas in the mist for considerably long time in order to do some sight-seeing inland.

Day 6

Predictably, the sun rose like a phoenix from the flames on our departure day but all agreed that a memorable and entertaining trip was had. Other than the climbing there were highlights such as Brian's illicit liaison with a female scarecrow and surviving the famous Clachan Bar (twice) in Stornaway (thanks to cousin Harry) and a visit to a traditional restored Blackhouse

We returned on the ferry that evening and drove back to Edinburgh, all tired, but with a lot to chat about.

After the Storm – the rest of the Summer

Back on the mainland I have since enjoyed some of the summer's good weather. In a rare June weekend I visited Creag an Dubh Loch in the Cairngorms. This rarely in condition cliff is Britain's largest continuous rock face, being 1000 feet high and one mile long.

To get there involved a three hour uphill slog with a monstrous rucksack getting to sleep in a tent at 4am. A further one hour walk through the boulder field saw us manage to 'top out' on what was to be my most demanding traditional rock so far.

In an attempt to avoid the west coast mides I later visited Glen Clova in the southern Cairngorms on three occasions. This coincided with a good weather spell and resulted in 24 good routes completed. Undoubtedly the best route was *Red Wall*, a contender for Scotlands best E1.

With a poor forecast all over Britain we headed south to find dry rock and I ventured to the Peak District for the first time to sample the delights of gods own rock – Grit stone. On what proved to be a wet weekend I still managed to climb *Right Unconquerable*, probably the most iconic route in the area. Not bad for my first route on what is a specialised rock type which demands its own style, not favoured by all. After I and the rock had dried out I dispatched the technically sterner test of *Left Unconquerable*.

Competitions

I returned to competition climbing on the 24th July at Ratho to take part in British Open Youth Competition sharing a three-way tie for 6th place in the final which was dominated by a strong French Team, proving again that I can still compete at the highest level of sports climbing whilst concentrating on my main passion of traditional mountain rock climbing.

Thanks

I would like to thank all my sponsors for there valued support, which I very much appreciate and hope to keep you all on board. Structural Design Consultant Paul Thomson, Cairns Castle Construction, Stephen McCaskey and Boswall Drive Post Office. Special thanks to Martin my climbing partner and coach.



Photo: Jessica at Creag an Dubh Loch

The 'Long Isle' Climbing Facts

Harris and Lewis together are the most northerly of the western isles and comprises (from a climbers point of view) one of the most eponymous rocks to climb on - Lewisian gneiss.

When weathered this rock provides some of the finest climbing in the country, not to mention by far the oldest at around 2900 million years. For those with a spirit of adventure the lengthy and expensive journey to the **Outer Hebrides** should be well rewarded.

However, one must be prepared for the Atlantic and the weather to decide whether and where to climb. With this in mind climbers need to be flexible in objective, splitting their time between beautiful west coast sea cliffs and the mountains of North Harris.

In Harris, the most famous **Sron Ulladale** presents the steepest and most impressive cliff in **Great Britain**. By contrast the sea cliffs on the west coast were developed as bad weather alternatives to the mountains, where, situated between some of the best beaches on the planet, are a collection of Geo's (inlets or zawns). These are now famed in their own right for their excellent climbing.

Typically climbers must abseil towards the foot of their chosen route, generally with a mix of trepidation and commitment once the abseil rope has been dispensed with!

Guidebooks:

Scottish Climbs Vol 2 by Gary Latter (Pesda press) 2009

Climbing in Scotland by Kevin Howett (Constable) 2001 update

Skye and the Hebrides Climbers Guide Vol 2 (SMC) 1996

Jessica:

- Has been climbing for 11 years.
- Started climbing aged 8yr at Alien Rock, Edinburgh.
- Competed at the MCofS Youth Climbing Series.
- Competed at the British Lead Championships 2007 & 2008.
- 4th at the British Youth Team Trials 2008.
- British Team Aspirant Member 2008.
- Started climbing outside on the MCofS REALrock 2006
- Climbs E3+ outdoors.



Photo: At Dunkeld on a REALrock session