

FROM DESK TILL DAWN

# climbing and rowing in the highlands

In the shadow of Scotland's most daunting peak, Charlie Norton powers across legendary waters and scales notorious climbing trails – to find a private balcony with one of Britain's most staggering views



From top: Coire Leis cairn on Ben Nevis, built to act as a navigation marker. The team at the summit of Ben Nevis

**D**eep in the heart of the Scottish Highlands, at the western end of The Grampians, the ancient monster that is Ben Nevis looms over the perennial enigma that is Loch Ness. I had never quite appreciated the proximity of Britain's most notorious lake to its most menacing mountain. But thanks to the pioneering minds at an adventure travel company called Momentum Adventure, I'm about to go on a double-pronged weekend ploughing down the Loch with the transatlantic record rower Charlie Pitcher, followed by an extreme hike up the north face of Ben Nevis led by climber Mark Diggins. The summer weather may be well on its way to mild, but up there a minor gale can wreak havoc like a highland lynx in a henhouse. So it's all about meticulous

preparation to make sure the adventure doesn't become a survival story.

## FRIDAY 1700

Unfortunately the convenience of Gatwick Airport has enabled me to work on through all of Friday afternoon; but I'm eventually ensconced and sipping tea on the early-evening Inverness flight.

## 1900

Momentum's cheery Charlie Pitcher himself is at the airport to collect me, and soon we're arrowing our way up to Fort William in a Range Rover 4x4. On the right, the Moray Firth stretches on and on; ahead, the skies are clearing in defiance of the gloomy weather predictions. Pitcher was the youngest crew member in the Americas Cup, holds the world record for rowing across the Atlantic solo, and is an accomplished ultra-runner. On the drive I learn he's an accomplished raconteur and bon vivant too.

## 2200

It's not quite twilight when we reach our HQ: Inverloch Castle Hotel, nestled in the foothills of Ben Nevis. The lawns are bordered with rhododendrons, and the kilted staff imbue the hotel with a timeless Scottish charm. By the lawn is our rowing boat, a Harker's Yard gig from The Pioneer Sailing Trust, built to the lines of the original tenders used by the North Sea pilot boats in the past century, with four fixed seats and four oars for the Momentum team – steered by a cox, as Pitcher tells us in his masterclass on







rowing on rough open water. We just have time to sample a few pints of local ale and a bowl of Cullen skink – fish chowder soup – down at the Ben Nevis Inn before crashing out.

#### SATURDAY 0730

We drive to the southeastern edge of Loch Ness, an utterly unsullied spot in a farmer's field not far from Fort Augustus; I spy a trout leaping out of the lake, as if posing for a Highland Spring shoot.

#### 0930

We're a team of five (with a transatlantic Pitcher engine to fall back on as needed). As we steer out with the oars, it takes us a while to get a rhythm – we're on fixed seats ("trickier", Pitcher notes), with bars to hold our feet in place. Pitcher is coxing to start us off, and I'm at stroke, trying to predict if everyone is in harmony without sinking my oar in too deep.

#### 1100

We finally begin to get our rhythm as we listen to tales of adventure from Pitcher. "It took around 1m strokes to row across the Atlantic," he says; my arms started to burn around 20, so I concentrate on spotting wild goats and eagles. A menacing Nessie below or no, there can't be many better ways to see Loch Ness. We glide by an old man and his dog in a small rowing boat, who have likely done this fishing trip a thousand times.

#### 1300

We break for lunch in the middle of the Loch, re-enacting Pitcher's mid-Atlantic ritual of boiling water on a stove and mixing a (surprisingly palatable) freeze-dried meal of spaghetti bolognese. An uninvited slanting rain soon joins us and sends us back to the oars to get warm.

#### 1400

The elements really pick up as we make the return row – I take a blast of rain to my face. We row hard, and go nowhere. We row a little harder; after 10 minutes I look up over the Loch – Urquhart Castle, very faint on the far side, is still parallel with us. Mildly perturbed, like swimmers going backwards in a rip tide, we dig deep and keep up the intensity. After a solid 20 minutes of straining the sinews and blasting the water, the breath is tearing through us. Suddenly we're moving faster, coming into calmer water, and a real



sight of shore. We've rowed over 14km, and covered a large portion of Loch Ness.

#### 1600

Matthew Robertson, Momentum's founder, who is rowing with us, is in an ebullient mood. He strips off, beats his chest and charges into the depths of Loch Ness just as the sun reappears. The rest of us follow, those of us who'd managed to catch our breath losing it anew with a shock in the freezing water.

#### 1830

Back at Inverlochy we enjoy a glass of organic Côte de Beaune Villages over a pep talk from Momentum's international mountain guide Mark Diggins. We're instructed to wear helmets and harnesses as a precaution on the steep hike up the north face of Ben Nevis tomorrow.

#### 2000

It's into the dining room for a spread fit for a laird: silky smoked salmon, watercress mousse with apple and horseradish, haggis, a rack of Perthshire lamb and creamy Cranachan for dessert. The row, the fresh air, the icy water, the banquet – I hardly needed the wine to send me to sleep like a sledgehammer.

#### SUNDAY 0630

Knowing the weather is likely to be clear in the morning, we rise early and groggily fuel up on coffee, fruit and toast.

#### 0730

The midges are swarming in full force; my plan to wear shorts is aborted when I am



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attacked like fresh meat. I'm forced into the unfortunate luminous trousers I have brought as emergency waterproofs; they look well set to disrupt the photography.

#### 0800

We park at the bottom of the north face. The midges dissipate when we start moving, and I can finally concentrate on my gorgeous surroundings. It's genuinely awe-inspiring to see the snow glinting though the pines in the sun above us.

#### 0900

The route up the valley is cool and relatively easy-going; we have time to look up and above us at the climbing routes that were a seminal training ground for some of the world's greatest mountaineers. Many of these highly technical expeditions were pioneered by the legendary Harold Raeburn in the early 20th century. As we pass a small waterfall in the Red Burn, Diggins spins tale after intrepid tale of avalanches and survival; it's a mountain with an illustrious history.

#### 1130

We traverse our first patch of snow, which feels like mountaineering for a moment. Then we put our harnesses on and start in earnest. There's a very steep ascent up and around the northeast buttress. We tread our route with extreme care; I cannot work out how we will possibly get up there, but every time we zigzag it somehow becomes possible to clamber up the path a bit higher. We scramble over some large boulders, and then we're there on the ridge – the Carn Mor Dearg Arete. It feels like a private balcony giving onto one of Britain's most staggering views.

#### 1230

As lunch spots go, this is hard to top. We munch our smoked salmon sandwiches and take in the view: the morphing billowy white clouds have formed an exact

Clockwise from far left: the team rowing across Loch Ness, and raising their oars at the end of the row. Momentum Adventure guide Mark Diggins instructs the team during the steep climb to the crest of the Carn Mor Dearg Arete

line over the peaks of The Grampians; the dark pelt of highland grass runs from the earth up into snowy rivets, with the blue of Coire Leis to the right.

#### 1400

The last grind to the summit is treacherous underfoot. A mass of jagged little rocks are strewn in the way, but we dig in, most of us now tired enough to stumble. But then we're there, on the snow-covered, collapsed volcano dome that is the top of Ben Nevis. Our peace is shattered by hundreds of tourists who ascended the Pony Track from Glen Nevis on the east side; but we pause to take summit photos, view the ruins of the old observatory, and admire the huge drops on either side.

#### 1500

We make the descent, trotting, sinking and sliding on the snow till we hit a rock path and test our quads on a long boggy route to the bottom.

#### 1800

Over dinner at the Ben Nevis Inn, the hair comes down a bit for a delicious and fairly hazy reminiscence of the past two days, before we hit the hay for an early flight back to London.

#### 0400

I'm arm-sore, leg-sore and head-sore as I clamber into the taxi back to Inverness, wincing slightly at a week's work ahead.

#### 0800

In a blink of an eye we're back at Gatwick. As the train trundles into central London, I consider that, politics aside, adventure-wise Scotland truly is another country. ✦



### FAST FACTS

Charlie Norton travelled as a guest of **Momentum Adventure** (01892-784 646; [www.momentumadventure.com](http://www.momentumadventure.com)), which offers this itinerary from £4,880 per person, based on a group of six, including transfers to the airport, three nights' accommodation at **Inverlochy Castle Hotel** (01397-702 177; [www.inverlochycastlehotel.com](http://www.inverlochycastlehotel.com)), all meals and drinks, rowing gig, and Momentum Adventure guide.