



On the summit of the Black Mountain - probably.

The Black Mountains They were white, what a con! Either that or we were lost and that was a strong possibility as during the first two miles we got lost five times. Only then did we get out the compass and discover we were walking south instead of north. In view of our total incompetence I thought we should sum up everything we learnt from the weekend and hopefully remember it before we are allowed out to play again.

Lets start with getting lost and general navigating.

As a team of RYA certified ocean navigators we were pretty USELESS. I think waiting until we are definitely lost before we got the compass out is not the way forward (or backward). A new approach is needed. Why don't we get the compass out first of all as a matter of principle - it will prove that we've got one if nothing else. Then we can orientate ourselves and set off in a confident stride in the approximate direction. A 2277m high volcano should show up as a feature on the map if we study the contours carefully.

We left behind those waterproof map cover things and the map was totally trashed after just a days walking. The problem with those things that hang around your head is that in a good blow they flap around and twist and choke you and then you can't breath and die. So they aren't ideal. But maybe some extra cord or velcro would sort it out. The GPS option becomes quite appealing because ironically they seem to be more waterproof. We might want to consider a well folded map in a proper plastic cover and a compass plus a hand held GPS. Battery life is an issue when it is cold and the weight of course.

Going orienteering seems like a good idea to hone our skills? We could improve our map reading and keep fit at the same time. We will probably come last but that wouldn't matter. Who's up for getting lost in the woods?

Dave Hollinger, our Chamonix Mountain Guide, is an international champion in orienteering. We can quiz him in Chamonix.

The Brecon Beacons Weekend of 4th and 5th December

Boots, Gaiters and Crampons

Charlotte and Jerry's boots were well broken in but John, Gudrun and mine were brand spanking new. John and I had Scarpa Mantas (B2) and they were a pleasure to wear. Gudrun had B1 boots and had no problems either. Lace tying is a bit of an art with the B2 boots. Mine need to be very tight to the halfway mark and secured then slightly less tight for the rest. Time needs to be spent making sure they are properly tied. There's more to it than just tying a bow. I'm not sure what socks everyone was wearing but mine were medium thickness merino wool and were comfy and warm. Gaiters are crucial in the deep snow. Mine don't fit my new boots very well so I will keep them for walking and get a larger pair for climbing. The crampon tore the sides of my gaiters to shreds but this was when we were walking down a narrow path. I think on open areas I could walk more like a duck and avoid this damage. John and I tried our crampons and found them very reassuring on a steep descent. John has Black Diamond and I have Grivel. They are a good tight fit. We are going to make a hypalon wrap for them as they are a bit lethal and hard to stuff away with all those prongs sticking out.



Rucksacks and Stuff

Our rucksacks are quite fiddly but we are gradually getting used to them. They are Osprey Variants in case anyone is interested which you probably aren't. I had a licourice disaster in mine which made everything sticky but did provide great rope grip. The ice axe really needs a cork on the top for when shopping in Mark and Spencers as I nearly killed at least one person. Mine rucksack seemed to be quite waterproof but I will definitely put everything in stuff bags. My issue was getting stuff out all the time. I like to plod on like a donkey and having to stop to get things out of a bag is not good. I am going to explore the idea of a small pouch on my front to hold a camera, chocolate, water, map and compass.

I also decided to take pretty much everything with me to Wales which involved an extra 59L Ortlieb bag. We must decide how we are going to carry all the extra gear to set up base camp as I don't think the 37L Variant is big enough. Our camping session in the Cheviots should resolve that one (timing TBC - check the website).

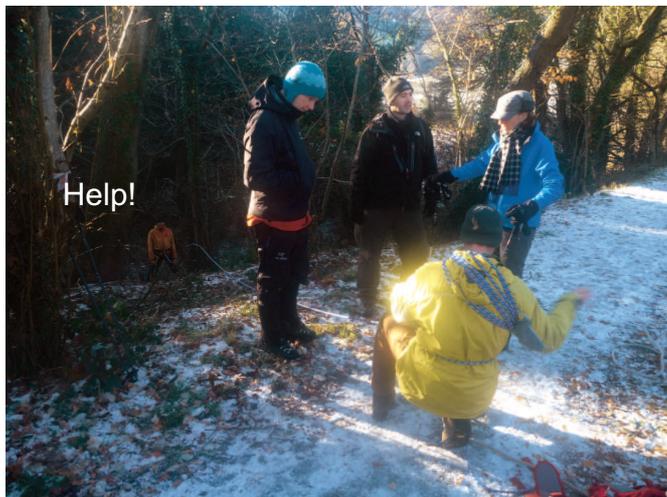
Clothing

John and I were Arctryxed up to the eyeballs. We should have had an armed escort as the value of our clothing would have made us prime targets for local thieves. But they were good, very good. I was cosy and dry and very happy. I was wearing two layers of merino and a Norwegian wool pullover on top and a pair of 260g merinos under my trousers. It worked OK for me. My mitts were fine but looked rather sad compared to the spectacular mitts that John was wearing. On the hat front I took my balaclava type hat which was stupid. I hated it before and I still hate it. Definitely not for me. I will buy a Gortex and merino peaked cap with ear flaps and try in in Chamonix.

Charlotte's man in Sweden said Mitts are the only way to go. We need to consider goggles and sunglasses.



Stop Press: Not only did I buy one but Charlotte bought me one for Christmas, so after three years of searching I've now got two!



Rope and toys

Tim showed us what to do if you are calmly walking along the Abergavenny Canal and suddenly you fall down a crevasse. The mountaineering method of rope coiling is a triumph and one that I shall certainly adopt. As I was actually down the crevasse drinking champagne I am not sure exactly how the final hauling technique was achieved so I am relying on Charlotte and John who were taking copious notes (I'm sure they were).

The Russian Titanium Ice Screw securing us to the frozen canal was impressive. D ball lock carabiners are universally hated by all mountaineers (ok Martin and Tim) so we shall avoid them and take screw-gates.

We must choose our Prussik cord with care. Maybe 5mm will work better. I am going to investigate some special Prussik cord as it is surprising how some don't seem to work. We had the same problem on the Haute Route (wow, that sounded rather professional, but don't be fooled).

I'm a bit of a fan of the Tibloc, we'll see if we can play with it in Chamonix.

The debate between nylon or dyneema slings shall roll on.

General Fitness

Pretty dam good all round I thought. We walked through thick snow from 0830 until 1800 with a short lunch stop and everyone was in remarkable order. It makes you wonder what Gudrun could get up to if she started training! Scary. I don't think we had a blister between us. The following day there were a few aches and pains but that is only to be expected.

Charlotte and I have started doing British Military Fitness sessions on Blackheath and they are pretty painful - especially the one when you lie on your back with your head and legs off the ground and do stomach crunching sit up type things. It's harder than it sounds. The sessions are strangely quite good fun which is perhaps a little bit worrying.

John is organising a half marathon on 27th December, I think, possibly?

Food

We had all sorts of food on the walk. The dips and bread sticks I bought at Paddington Station for Charlotte were universally mocked. Gudrun seemed to have enough food to cross an Icelandic Glacier. Flapjacks do seem to be the way forward. John thought of having them with varying ingredients so you can have energy boosting ones for climbing and plain nutritious ones for boring night watches. It would be good to get rid of plastic wrapping too.

Thanks to our hosts



Alex shows Charlotte the way up "the hill".

Alex, Tim, Megan and Hamish really looked after us. Tim was suffering badly from some dreaded lurgy but still managed to show us some great rope techniques along the canal and he kept on being cheery despite being in need of bed. Alex marched us up the hill behind their wonderful cottage and showed us their very special woodland. We were fed a great roast on Saturday evening and the fireplace is the biggest I've ever seen. Megan and Hamish were as charming as ever.



Alex and Tim's cottage had a really serious fire place to relax by.

Keep in touch

If you fancy joining us on one of our training sessions you would be very welcome. Long distance walks, long Sunday runs, swimming, British Military Fitness, maybe even orienteering or a triathlon? Everything is posted up on the website www.sumaraofweymouth.co.uk.

There is a code protected contact page so you can all keep in touch with each other. Please send me any extra information or corrections for the contact page. If you need the code just email me - alasdair@flints.co.uk.

.....and Happy Christmas to everyone!

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