

IRISH **Trekker**

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TREKKER NOTES

Welcome

A warm welcome to new member
Sandra Murphy

Bus Fares

Due to spiralling diesel costs, the bus fare has gone up to €18.

Memorial Walks on 19 July 2008

On Saturday, 19 July, there was an A walk and a C walk in the Glenmalure area, in memory of the six deceased members of the Trekkers:

- ❖ Joe English
- ❖ Jack Langan
- ❖ Charlie Ryan
- ❖ Eric Lindstrom
- ❖ Kieran Trant
- ❖ George Barry

The walks were followed by a gathering of Trekkers for a short period of reflection in Glenmalure.

The Swiss Connection

By Dick Ryan

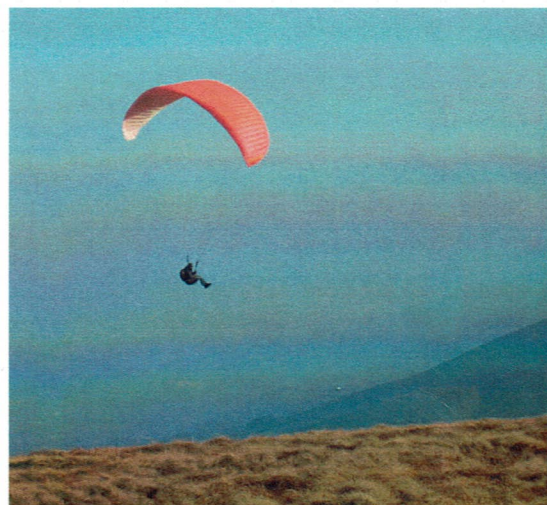
Have you ever wondered why Zeller's Pub in Lacken is so called? After a B walk led by Brendan Bracken in January, the owner of the pub told us the story.

Apparently, there has been a shebeen on the site since the 1600s. Fast forward to 1890 when a Swiss gentleman by the name of Zeller fell in love with a local girl, married her and bought the pub from his wife's family. Things don't come quite as easily as that in West Wicklow, however: Zeller had to sign a document stating that he would never go back to Switzerland! We know this because the family still have this document (and still own the pub). The Zellers' distant cousins still live in the same village from which Mr. Zeller came, on the Swiss-German border.

THANK YOU

A big thank you to everyone who contributed articles and photos.

Produced by:
**The Trekkers Mountaineering
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www.trekkers.ie**



CHAMONIX

By Gilbert Little

Trekkers are often heard arguing about which overseas trip in the past two years has been the best. I have stopped thinking this way because each place is unique and stands out in its own context. However, Chamonix in France stands out not just as a box to be ticked but as a place to which I will definitely return.



Chamonix is located in a deep valley surrounded by high snow-capped mountains. A local train runs through the valley making it easy to create a huge choice of starting and ending points. A wide range of trails (I brought back a booklet showing 183!) can be accessed by all grades of walkers who can take a spin on a cable car, walk along a spectacular ridge, have lunch in a mountain-top restaurant and have a leisurely return on the train system to the town.

Our programme of walks covered a range of exciting routes ending with a trophy walk on the slopes of Mount Blanc and giving us the chance to follow in the footsteps of Bill Hannon and appreciate the magnitude of what Bill had achieved. (see Bill's article on page 14)

Chamonix is a truly remarkable place but the trip was enhanced greatly by Marie's careful attention to detail in all our needs as well as Owen's encyclopaedic knowledge of the trails and his firm but parental leadership. Thank you for a great trip, Marie and Owen.





Trekking in the Himalayas

By Gaye Maguire

I'm one of the very lucky people who was able to take a sabbatical from work last year. For my sabbatical, the place I most wanted to visit was the Himalayas, and last October I finally found myself in Kathmandu, capital of Nepal.

What a city! I loved it and disliked it at the same time. It's teeming with people and full of pollution and smog. Cows sit on pavements and wander down roads – as sacred animals they can wander where they wish, and buses nearly crash to avoid them. After the bedlam of Kathmandu, it was a relief to head off to the mountains on my two planned treks.

Annapurna

I headed for Annapurna first. This was the area of Nepal that I really wanted to see - I had seen a photograph many years ago of mountains, paddy fields

and terraces which caught my imagination.

It's a beautifully lush part of the country and the mountains must be magnificent, though we didn't see any for the entire week. We had freak monsoon weather with torrential rain, so we only got fleeting but tantalising glimpses of the mountains around us.

Our accommodation went from being OK (slightly damp) to *al fresco* (massive holes in walls!) - and the loos (for all you loo people) were pretty bad. However, the food was divine - all organic and brought in from the fields each evening.

The mood among the group was dampened by the rains, as by the last day we realised that things weren't going to improve. In fact things got steadily worse as we got caught in landslides.

We returned to Pokhara where we were to end our trek, and on the day we were to leave there, got up at 4.30am to see the dawn over Annapurna. At last, we got the views of the mountains we had been waiting for, and it blew us all away. That dawn could not have been more perfect, and it negated all the disappointment of the previous week.

Everest

The next day I set off on the route to Everest Base Camp. I was going just over half way, to Tengboche, a Buddhist monastery.

We flew to the starting point of the trek, Lukla, in a 16-seater plane. This was one of the highlights of my trip - I had a full view of the tiny airstrip which looked to be about 500m long and ended in the side of a mountain! It was a hair-raising landing.

Thankfully the weather here was perfect as we headed off on our trek. The Everest route is more developed than the Annapurna route, and that has certain advantages (like no damp, less basic accommodation, and even bathrooms in the same building!). You can buy a Mars Bar anywhere and even Everest Beer.

There is absolutely no transport up here, and everything has to be carried up on someone's back. So, guys (and some women) passed us along the route carrying crates of beer, boxes of noodles, even huge wooden beams to build houses.

These people work so hard for the little they earn and it's a reminder of how accessible everything is for us. Ironically, I think

they have it sussed - they grow everything they need to eat, they recycle, they compost, have solar panels, they share and work together so much. It's a simple and ideal existence - in so many ways I envied them.

This route was a complete surprise to me - I thought it would be bare and barren. However, it was absolutely magnificent - green and lush, with an abundance of flowers & shrubs.

We finally reached our destination and spent the night trying to keep warm (difficult when we stargazers lay on the freezing cold ground, fascinated by the Milky Way, so clear above us). The next morning we were blown away by another perfect dawn and Everest in all her glory. I grabbed a seat, and a cup of tea and sat entranced for hours. The light and colours up that high are amazing and we were even treated to an avalanche on a mountain beside us. It was a spectacular sight.

I have to say that I was very happy to come home but it was a wonderful opportunity and I look forward in anticipation to my next sabbatical in 2022.



SAFETY AND TRAINING NEWS

By Pearse Connolly

Safety

To judge from the number of walking accidents among Club members in the past 25 years, it is evident that adherence to safety standards has been excellent. While recognising that two Club members had very serious accidents (thankfully both are back walking), our safety record is very good.

This safety success is mainly due to the interest and enthusiasm of leaders down the years who have refreshed and updated their safety skills. However, we must not take safety for granted and it is important for every trekker to be mindful of the dangers associated with hill walking and trekking.

Accidents

According to the experts, the most common accidents are lower limb injuries. So what are lower limb injuries? They can be classified as follows: injuries to the lower leg, injuries to the knee joint, a sprained or twisted ankle and fractures of the foot. While all these injuries are not life-threatening, they can mean much pain and suffering and can also mean that the casualty may be out of circulation for a considerable time.

Hill walking is a wonderful recreational activity but there are risks attached. These risks are caused mainly by three factors: weather, terrain and remoteness. Fortunately, within the Club all leaders come prepared for the above challenges.

Having the right gear/equipment is very important.

- ✓ First priority is good walking boots, preferably with ample ankle support.
- ✓ Always wear clothing suitable for the outdoors and get into the habit

of packing a spare warm jacket/jumper.

- ✓ Your rucksack should include a waterproof jacket and over-trousers; head gear and gloves are essential, irrespective of the weather on starting out.
- ✓ Joss Lynam regrets not using walking poles earlier in his walking career as, according to him, they lessen the wear and tear on lower limbs, particularly the knees, the joints of your legs and the lower back.
- ✓ Finally, full marks to whoever introduced the beneficial exercises taking place at the start and finish of most Saturday walks.



Navigation

The ability to navigate accurately and efficiently in all conditions, particularly low visibility and on all types of terrain, is the single most important skill a hillwalker or mountaineer can possess. There is no mystique about good navigation (although it does take a little practice) and there are currently many recognised high quality mountain skill courses which teach navigation in an easy to understand way, using qualified and experienced instructors. But not everyone wants to lead walks or become expert navigators and rightly so. Most Trekkers enjoy walking as a way to unwind, it's healthy and it brings you close to nature.

Tim Orr, when speaking at the Trekkers A.G.M., reminded people that having the ability to navigate, even to read a map confidently, added immensely to the enjoyment one got



from walking in the hills. To that end the Committee has provided basic navigation training to several Trekkers

who will in turn pass on their new-found skills to all interested Club

members. This informal approach is sure to attract interest and may be the platform for others to get started.

Enjoy the rest of our walks, home and abroad, during 2008 and make the most of the remainder of the year. Above all, keep safe and sound.

The Trekkers 25th Anniversary Party

By Brendan Bracken

*There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Trekkers finest had gathered then
Her beauty and her chivalry, and bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men.
A thousand hearts beat happily; and when
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes looked love to eyes which spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage bell;
But hush! hark! a deep sound strikes like a rising knell!*

*Did ye not hear it? -- No; 'twas but the wind,
Or the car rattling o'er the stony street;
On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined;
No sleep till morn, when youth and pleasure meet
To chase the glowing hours with flying feet.
But hark! -- that heavy sound breaks in once more,
As if the clouds its echo would repeat;
And nearer, clearer, deadlier than before;
Arm! arm! it is -- it is -- the cannon's opening roar!*

Actually it was Paddy with his Camcorder:

On 3rd November last, eighty four Trekkers and guests celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first walk undertaken by a group of friends, which in turn led to the formation of the Trekkers Mountaineering Club. The setting for the evening was Dun Laoghaire Golf Club. With a superb location, beautiful public rooms and fine dining it was an inspired choice. Take a bow, John.

We gathered first for drinks in a fine wood panelled bar where old acquaintances were renewed and the past and present talked about in the way that Trekkers always do. The

founding father of the Trekkers, Sean Trant, attended as did Ronnie O'Sullivan and Terry O'Brien both of whom were on that first walk. "Is it yourself...?", "what about that time in Kerry...", "remember when our first lady Trekker was invited along"... were some of the reminiscences that were being passed around the room. The sartorial elegance was a wonder to behold, especially when you are used to your walking companions being attired in fleece jackets and muddy boots; ball gowns, frills and flounces abounded and that was just the men!

Suitably fortified from the drinks reception, we sat down to a splendid dinner in a fine dining room where

both the conversation and the wine sparkled. After dinner, our Chairperson, Mary Murray, welcomed us all and in particular Sean Trant, the club's founder. Mary spoke about the wonderful spirit in the Trekkers and how as a club we continue to renew, grow and keep relevant to a growing membership and how the ethos created by Sean and the other early members continues to this day. She reminded us that we are not about numbers and that it was immensely gratifying to see how quickly people fit in, enjoy the craic on the walks and gel with the other members.

The highlight of the evening was a DVD produced by Paddy O'Duffy assisted by Roger Kirker and Brendan Bracken. Words cannot do justice to the quality of the forty-five minute production, which featured highlights from walks stretching from 1982 to our trip to the Cheviot Hills the week before the dinner. The backing music was a real coup de theatre. Sean Trant spoke of events around the formation of the Club, Mary Murray of more recent times. Social highlights with singin', dancin' and recitin' formed the centre part of the production and

provoked some hilarity and cat-calling. Our Munich based Trekker, Breda O'Hara, put it so well, when she wrote: *"...it was just superb - from the photography, the editing, the music and commentary perspective. It looked like a thoroughly professional job and I'm sure you must have put long hours and days into putting it together. The Trekkers are really lucky to have someone who takes such a great interest in documenting the Club outings...and in compiling them in such a manner so that they recapture the beauty, joy and fun we see and experience all around us on these trips..."*

The rest of the evening was given over to catching up with friends, reminiscing and partaking of certain refreshments. All too soon the evening drew to an end and the bus arrived to take us home.

Our thanks go to Mary and all her Committee for organising such a wonderful evening. A special word of thanks to Paddy for producing and indeed distributing such a wonderful record of our first twenty-five years. Here's to the fiftieth!



THE TREKKERS AS PILGRIMS

By Pearse Connolly



The 'Pilgrim's Rest', Mount Mellary Abbey conjures ideas of rest, peace and happiness and when Monty Tinsley suggested using it as a base camp for three days walking in May 2007, naturally there was a lot of interest.

First discovered by Brendan Bracken in December 2006, the Pilgrim's Rest is local to a number of good walking areas, the Knockmealdown Mountains, the Comeraghs and a few miles to the West, the Galtees. Monty suggested we 14 Trekkers arrive on Tuesday evening and in true Trekker style, we arrived just in time for dinner.

The walking kicked off the following morning. Monty had not only arranged a pleasant, gentle walk for all interested but had also arranged to meet up with Sean Walsh and his colleague from Waterford who would act as local guides.

The Glenary Walk, starting alongside the river of that name, took us very gradually up into the Comeragh foothills overlooking Clonmel. This was a most enjoyable 10k walk with many places of interest including The Deserted Village (the last inhabitants were the Ryan family who left in the 1960s); Pallisters Hunting Lodge, a

once very imposing house; Long Hill, commanding excellent views of the local countryside and the Holy Year Cross, which was erected in 1950.

Our walk at this stage began to loop around towards our car parking point and we finished off with a visit to Carey's Castle which was formerly known as Glenabbey House. Although in ruins, it still retains the main structure and is impressive. Once again, a very enjoyable day was rounded off with a very welcome dinner.

On Thursday, Monty had arranged walks for two teams. Team 1 was going to walk within the confines of the Glen of Aherlow. A glen not unlike Glenmalure, with many connections to the Nationalist movements in Ireland, from the Geraldines to the Fenians and later the Volunteers.

Team 2 was to ascend Galtybeg and Galtymore. An early start was the order of the day and six of us set out in two cars for a good day's walking.

The uphill walk into Galtybeg was pleasant enough and the track was easy enough to follow right up to the base of Galtybeg. Galtybeg, at 801m commands excellent views; the tiered



cliffs of vertical rock in the next corrie, that of Lough Diheen, are particularly impressive. A drop to the Col and then a steep climb to Galtymore, all 920m. The view from here is exceptionally wide, North and South towards the Plains of Tipperary and beyond. Two interesting points: (1) The summit of Galtymore is the highest point in the County of Limerick and (2) Galtymore is the one munro of the Galtees.

After a short break on the summit, we descended south easterly and in due course picked up our gravelly track and returned to our cars. A stop on the way home at the 'Cats' bar enabled us to retrace our achievements. Dinner that evening allowed both teams to impress each other with their day's exploits.

Our final day, Friday, was a real surprise. Firstly, Monty took us for a short stroll, about an hour along the Glenshalane River, crossing dubious wooden bridges, stepping over many fallen tree trunks, obviously left to rot, all adding to the luxuriant vegetation along the route.

On return to the 'Pilgrim's Rest', we had a light lunch, said our goodbyes to our hosts and set off for the final surprise – a trip on the Suir Valley Railway. The magic of rail's Golden Age has been brought to life at Kilmeadan, Co. Waterford. A heritage narrow gauge railway follows over 6k of the route of the abandoned Waterford-Dungarvan line. The track runs mostly along the picturesque banks of the River Suir, between Kilmeadan and Waterford, offering

panoramic views of the river, rolling farmland and mountains. Shame on the Trekkers who were reluctant to leave the train. Anyway, if you get the chance, take this trip.

From Kilmeadan we all headed home, everyone in agreement that this had been a very enjoyable few days.

POSTSCRIPT

Mount Mellary Abbey is located about 8k from Cappoquin, Co. Waterford. It is home to Cistercian Monks since 1832, they having been expelled from Mellary in France. Their new home in Ireland consisted of 500 acres of barren mountain land given to them by Sir Richard Keane.

The original number of monks who came was only 15 but by the end of the century numbers had grown to 150. To-day there are 34, the majority aged over 70 years. By sheer hard work, the monks reclaimed the poor land and set up farming on a large scale to become self-sufficient. Even to-day the monks have a dairy herd of 150 cows. The farm, however, is managed by locals.

The Cistercians are a contemplative Order and, not surprisingly, females could not stay within the Abbey precinct. Accommodation for women was available adjacent to the Abbey entrance in the building now called the 'Pilgrim's Rest'. The couple who now own this gem of a Hotel/Restaurant, operate what one can only describe as a very efficient, homely business. They obviously enjoy having groups like the Trekkers and I feel it will be a base camp for the Trekkers for many years to come.

My thanks to Monty Tinsley for historical data.

The Trekkers Take on Switzerland

By Dermot Murray



It has to be said that Orson Welles – when he made his speech in the 1949 film *The Third Man* – hadn't a notion what he was talking about. For those not familiar with the speech to which I am referring, I can summarise as follows: the nation of Switzerland has nothing going for it apart from the somewhat lowly honour that it gave to the world the cuckoo clock. What complete balderdash! And I believe that there are no fewer than twenty-nine other trekkers who will heartily agree.

Take the trains, for instance, a good starting point for my argument perhaps, as this was my first experience of Switzerland after we had passed (painlessly, I might add) through Geneva airport. These surged through the countryside with blissful smoothness, and I quickly discovered that they were always exactly where

they were supposed to be at any given moment, and that in terms of reliability they were on a par with gravity itself. This was proven to an extreme degree as we switched trains in Berne on our way to Kandersteg – the automatic doors closing literally seconds after the very last trekker had passed through them, and displaying timing so exquisite that it wouldn't have looked out of place in some fast-paced action movie. Indeed, the Swiss trains were to be the cornerstone of the whole trip – and all too often were the only means of getting from one area among the mountains to another.

Which brings me onto the landscape. As we wheeled our luggage through the village of Kandersteg on our arrival, the naked pinnacles on all sides seemed to be trying to outdo one another in looking as menacing as possible to us fearful newcomers.

Gashed precipices and notched ridges reached from vast mantles of green conifers. At one end of the valley, a cable car stretched up over these, and elsewhere zigzagging, vertiginous



roads and pathways endeavoured to conquer the immense slopes. Nonetheless, the aforementioned newcomers were eager to be released into this awe-inspiring domain.

During the more elevated stages of walks there were white-silver glaciers and barren areas of drably coloured rock-fragments – and accompanied, on one day at least, with the unnerving clamouring of thunder; while during the lower stages there were sun-dappled forest paths and the delightful (if a little surreal) experience of walking through fields of cows and the never-faltering chiming of their bells. Special mention must also be given to the water – whether it was rushing down the mountain sides in slate-grey torrents, or sitting in huge lakes whose glassy surfaces were disturbed only by youngsters skimming stones across them. And a facility the Trekkers were always happy to avail of were the “huts” or “huette”. It cannot be emphasised enough how wonderful it is to have more than just a feeling of accomplishment when one gets to the top of a mountain – whether it be a cool drink or an enormous cauldron of piping hot vegetable soup!

And Switzerland has more to offer than just its “natural” exhibits. A day of rain urged some of us to leave behind

the mountains and venture into the capital, Berne, where there was much to admire and enjoy. Most notably was the famous clock-tower (as one might expect, our guide had us there at precisely the right moment – that is, the ringing of the bells on the hour). Another day's sight-seeing brought us to the towns of Thun and Interlaken – and the lazy but fascinating paddle-steamer trip which carried us from one of these charming locations to the other.

And finally of course are the Swiss themselves. Throughout our holiday they proved to be at all times hospitable and warm, and they also commanded a somewhat enviable talent for alpenhorn-playing, yodelling, spoon-playing and (as we discovered to our dismay and embarrassment) pub quizzes.

And I don't on a single occasion remember seeing a cuckoo clock.



The Cheviot Hills

By Dick Ryan

First things first: it's pronounced "Cheeviot" – the first syllable rhyming with "cheese".

The Cheviot Hills are a range of beautiful rounded hills on the border between England and Scotland, roughly between Edinburgh and Newcastle. Brendan Bracken organised this very interesting trip for the holiday weekend at the end of October. We flew into Edinburgh and were brought by bus across the border to the small town of Wooler in Northumbria. The good folk in the Tankerville Arms, where we were staying, stayed up late to keep the bar open until we arrived, served us our night-caps and then went off to bed.

Our guide, Jon, who looked after us for the next two days and who had been a shepherd in a previous existence, was extremely knowledgeable about all aspects of the mountains, rural life in general and, as might be expected, sheep in particular. He pointed out the different breeds of sheep, including of course the Cheviots which are well-known in Ireland. What was very interesting for an Irish audience was his description of the land ownership system which, to our ears, seemed astonishingly archaic, even feudal. In this part of England, huge tracts of land are owned by large landlords or by limited companies. The land is rented out to tenant farmers who have security of tenure for only two generations or, in some cases, only for ten years. He was surprised when we told him that this system had been abandoned in Ireland over one hundred years ago.

To compensate for the lack of security, the landowner, not the farmer, is responsible for capital investment – and it shows. Fences are beautifully maintained, stone walls are in immaculate condition and farm gates are actually hinged to secure posts and swing freely without catching in anything! As Irish hill-walkers, we could only drool at the network of rights of way, bridle paths and permissive ways, all sign-posted and providing easy access to the mountains.



The Cheviots provide excellent walking country with rounded hills, covered with grass and heather, not unlike parts of the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains but without the woodland. Some areas of the mountains are managed for grouse-shooting. This entails clearing large squares of heather to allow the growth of grassy areas surrounded by heather – apparently ideal habitat for grouse. Small piles of grit are placed at intervals around the mountainside (and replenished regularly). The grit is taken by the grouse to help with their digestion.

Obviously, these birds have nothing to grouse about.

On our third and last day, Brendan himself led our walk, exploring an area nearer to Wooler and setting us up nicely for the return to Dublin late on the Monday evening.

Thank you, Brendan, for organising this weekend in wonderful walking country that is not well known to us.

The Great March

By Dermot Hurley

At our last AGM Brendan suggested that the A walk was perhaps a little easy and that some members would like something more challenging. And so, on the 29th March, Brendan led the first A+ walk. He was joined by ten trekkers and a guest, Dermot, a friend who was home on holidays from Canada. This is Dermot's unsolicited and unbiased account of the day. He hasn't signed on for the next A+ yet, but perhaps when the boots dry out.....

Up at 6am for a walk in the Wicklow mountains with Bracken and his bunch of ramblers. Quick walk to Grand Canal station and a 7.30 DART to Glenageary station. Wonderful to see the old train stations on the way, Lansdowne Road, Sandymount, Sydney Parade, Booterstown, Blackrock, Seapoint and Salthill, Dun Laoghaire, Sandycove, Glasthule and Glenageary. Minibus and Gerry there waiting to take us (the 12 apostles) to The Glen of Imaal in Wicklow, one and a half hours deep into the mountains past Knockanarrigan through Ballineddan to the start of the 'walk' (as this endurance test was euphemistically named).

Early morning drizzle turned into a raging storm as we ascended Lugnaquilla with fierce biting wind, hail and drenching rain making a mockery of all things Gortex, most especially my boots which were soaked within 20 minutes (Canadian-made lightweight hikers fit for the bin). As an article of faith, one was compelled to accept the

reassurances that we were in the shadow of Slievemaan and that wonderful views could be had on Lug 'when the weather blew the fog off the hillside'. In fact not a blade of grass could be seen on Lug and only minutes could be spent on the summit for fear of being blown off the top. Fog added to the ambience, making visibility only as good as the squelching boots of the hiker ahead, and there was literally nothing to see for the first few interminable hours as we trudged through blackbrown turf-earth, like rivulets of treacle, sucking our boots down into sodden bog, so old and dense that hiking sticks disappeared up to their hilts in oozing mud masquerading as gorse.

Bracken our fearless leader urged us on through this forbidding land, assuring us that this indeed was where he had carefully reconnoitred for us the week before. Trying to hold a map and compass steady in the howling wind and rain was too much even for the most experienced of walkers. Great tufts of weeping bogland provided shelter in the sodden mud valley trail at the foot of Benleagh and Camenabologue on our way to Table Mountain, and with new elevation we could leave behind the treacle-laden water holes that had filled our boots with sodden bogmarsh. Thicker hiking socks only added to the slop-cold flotation devices that had once been boots and 'weather proof' hiking pants became sodden on the inside from

sweat and seeping rain, making inside and outside strangely compatible.



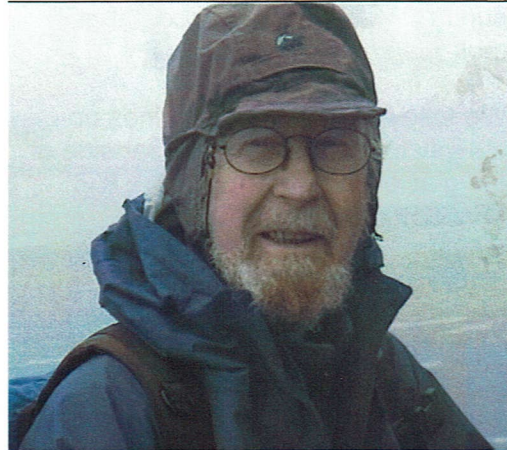
Stopping momentarily, Bracken ordered a banana break, whereupon twelve bananas miraculously appeared and disappeared in the same instant. A couple of hours more of incessant downpours and bog marching to whet the appetite, followed by a brief stop for lunch which brought with it a break in the weather, and for the first time Wicklow opened up to us with views of Lobawn and the Sugarloaf to the West. Patches of reflected sunlight showcased landscapes further South, and with lunch came more relief from unrelenting rains, and a merciful distraction from the sensation of cold sogginess that had focused the senses for most of the morning.

Light in the sky and brief patches of sunshine, provided openings for conversation that had been silenced in the inner landscape of private suffering, which had earlier demanded that every breath be conserved for the simple effort of putting one foot in front of the other. Words hung in the wind, warm and welcoming, bits and pieces of experiences transforming a group of silent pilgrims into a community of hill walkers, shared meaning created out of shared suffering.

Now over the worst and with the long walk out at the end of the day opening up before us the magnificent tapestry of fields and hills of South Wicklow, we saw in the distance a group of deer leaping for hiding in the woods as two dogs separated them from the sheep and sent them scampering into the bush. A quick pint in Knockanarrigan triggered memories of other 'great walks' and comparisons of lesser hardships born with equanimity, and an easy consensus emerged that not only was this one of the worst days ever for wind and rain but truly a walk befitting the A+ rating it had so deservedly earned in the annals of the club.

A Trekker on Mount Blanc

By Bill Hannon



There are over 100 routes to the top of Mount Blanc. Four of these have become established as "normal" routes which means that they are not too technically demanding. But they all require a high degree of fitness and acclimatisation. And if the weather breaks quickly, as it can, fierce winds and cold can make escape from its upper slopes a nightmare. There were five of us. Four, Kevin, John, Alan and I were old alpinists. The fifth, Tony, though new to the Alps, was a formidable "goer".

We first explored the Grand Mulets route but did not like the condition of the glacier with its complex crevasses and unstable seracs. To acclimatise we then climbed Mount Blanc de Tacul (a 4000m satellite peak) and the Aiguille d'Argentier, 3,900m.

Then we had to await a "window" in the unsettled and steadily deteriorating weather. A brief "window" was forecast for Sunday night / Monday morning. We decided to go for it. We chose the Gouter route. Popular because the Gouter Hut is so high, it is, in my view, dangerous because of stone fall below the hut.

A short spin by train to Les Houches, a teleferique to the Belvedere and a rack railway to the Nid d'Aigle (7,852 ft) and we were on our way. Kevin's description of the climb to the hut as "four hours of sweating and quiet cursing" was accurate except that it took Alan and me five hours.

We followed a trail which winds up steeply to a glacier. On the far side of the glacier is the Tete Rousse Hut (10,391ft). But we are heading for the Gouter Hut (12,524ft) so we climb diagonally up across the glacier and find ourselves at the foot of a notorious couloir. This featured a steep tongue of glacier between two rock ridges. It acts as a chute for all the loose rock from the ridges above. The couloir has to be crossed to reach the main ridge which climbs up steeply to the hut. Crossing it is like playing Russian Roulette. You clip into a wire cable and cross as quickly as you can. Ian Travers, a very competent young Irish climber, was killed here a few years ago.

As we climbed, the ridge became enveloped in cloud. The wind got up. The temperature dropped and rain, sleet and finally snow were driving across our faces. I was last and arrived wet and numbed. The hut was overcrowded and chaotic. The altitude was 12,524ft.

By 1.45am we were up and getting ready. Breakfast was unthinkable in the chaos inside. So by 2.30am we were outside, crampons on, and moving. It was now a still clear night. There was a full moon. The snow had frozen hard. We crunched up the steep slope behind the hut and soon emerged on the glacier above. We could see the torches of earlier parties higher up on the Dome de Gouter. The effect was eerie. Kevin, John and Tony were somewhat ahead.

Breakfast after an hour consisted of water and a banana. We were beginning to feel the altitude. But there was a quiet beauty as the slopes took shape in the moonlight. Soon we were approaching the Dome de Gouter (14,118ft). The eastern sky was lightening. The moon faded into the west and the sun rose dramatically over the Aiguilles Rouges in the east. It transfigured the summit snows and all the surrounding ridges.

A slight descent to the Col du Dome and up the steepening slope to the Vallot Refuge. The Vallot is an aluminium box anchored on the rock outcrop. It is squalid and smelly but it has saved many lives. We slumped down near it. Ice rattled in our water bottles. The sandwiches prepared in Chamonix were inedible. Another banana would have been welcome.

The wind was freshening so we moved on. Stops were now more frequent. The air was thinner. We climbed the narrowing and steepening Bosses ridge (14,919 ft) and then traversed the "knife-edge" ridge passing the rocks of La Tournette on the right. Where it widened we collapsed exhausted. More water and ice. Three figures were descending towards us. Kevin, John and Tony. They had reached the top at 7.15am. "Another hour to the summit". We wished each other luck and they moved down.

Our ridge veered east and narrowed. A false summit and then moving slowly, stopping often for breath, we climbed the last three hundred metres to the summit. It was 9.20am. The sun was well up and the day was clear. Yet it was bitterly cold with wind-driven spindrift stinging our faces. Our position was superb. It overlooked famous peaks and ridges on every side – including the great Penning peaks in the east.

PHOTO GALLERY

But we were in no mood to linger. A few drinks of ice and water, two quick photos (only one of which came out) and we began our descent. Once we had safely negotiated the icy "knife-edge" the tension relaxed and we rested often. We reached the Gouter Hut about 2pm. A bowl of tea and three lumps of sugar revived us and we continued down.

The descent from the hut over the "easy" rock scramble was nerve-racking. The sleet and snow of the previous evening had frozen to hard ice. We had stowed away and strapped on our rucksacks our rope, crampons and ice-axes. It took nearly three hours to reach the couloir. A last fright when some rocks whizzed past as we crossed. Then we traversed the glacier and trudged wearily down to the rack railway. Fortunately the trams were still running when we got there.



