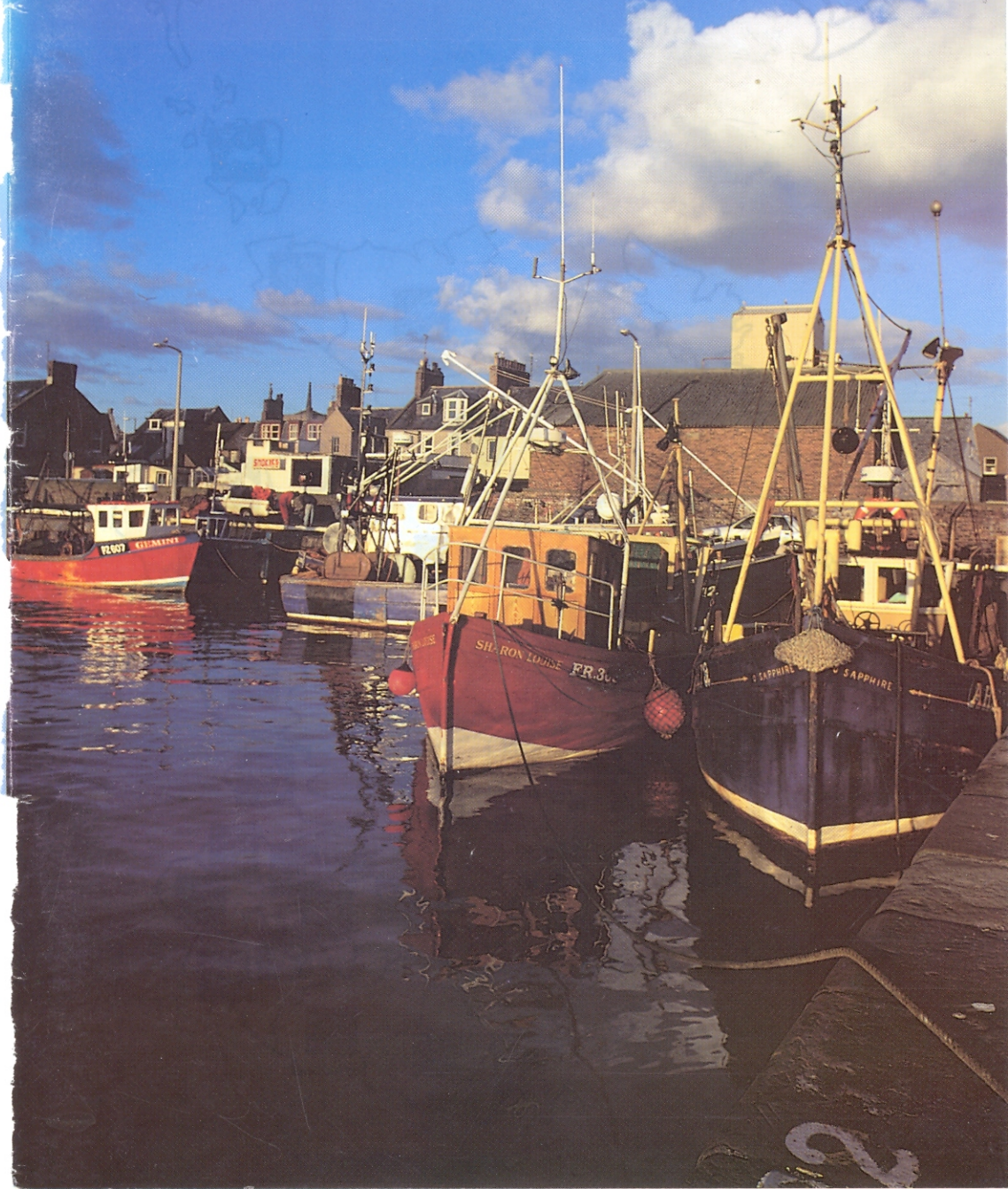


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# SCOTTISH HOME AND COUNTRY





How often do Mums long for a day off? With two rowdy boys under four, the prospect of even an hour with my feet up seemed like a dream. Imagine the bliss, therefore, when husband Mark volunteered to take some leave and look after the unruly mob while yours truly went on holiday! I needed no second bidding.

I vaguely recalled spending many a happy, pre-marriage, pre-child day, stomping around the Scottish hill-sides. I blew cobwebs off the maps and struggled into the loft to find my 'kit' — I was already getting back into mountain speak. I emerged, dirty and dishevelled, dragging a functioning Gaz stove and a few old but serviceable pots and pans.

I reluctantly parted company with some incredibly damp and fossilised 'instant meals.' Walking clothes no longer fitted around the post-baby bulges, and my boots had walked. Fed up waiting, I suppose. No amount of anguish could recall their whereabouts, so after an expensive trip to Millets, I set off on the great adventure.

As I took my leave, one son eyed the rucksack suspiciously. 'Have you got Christopher in there?' he demanded, unable to believe that I would really not try to sneak one of them with me. In fact, with enough food for five days of self-sufficiency, I felt I must have a toddler or two stowed in a side pocket.

As I kissed him good-bye,

## Mummy's Escaped!

by Caroline Deacon

I had a momentary pang. Would I be unbearable lonely with no one to talk to for days, after three and a half years of never being allowed to be quiet, even for 30 seconds. Nahhh...I couldn't wait!

The train had to halt by special arrangement for me at Achnashellach, deep in the Torridon mountains. I set off at a brisk pace towards the col where I intended to spend the night.

It was warmer than I expected. Aha! Time to try out one of my purchases. Trousers with a horizontal zip halfway up the thigh allow the seasoned mountaineer an instant transformation into rather natty shorts, without a pause in the relentless stride for the summit.

I unzipped with a flourish and pulled away the offending trouser legs...to discover I couldn't get them past my boots. Sighing, I off-loaded the rucksack and began the lengthy process of untying several yards of boot lace.

That of course was what the horse flies had been waiting for. Immobile, sweaty flesh. A huge swarm descended as one on to my defenceless thighs.

Hopping, swearing, screaming and ineffectually flapping my map at them, I

tried to outrun them, bootless, up the stony path, carrying my rucksack and boots in my hands as if they were suddenly weightless.

When I was four years old and (quite sensibly, I thought) terrified of dogs three times my size, I was told 'Don't panic, they'll sense it.' Uselessly as then, I chanted this mantra and gathered speed. I finally outwitted the swarm by reaching the brow of the hill and letting a highland wind blow them (and nearly my map-cum-fly swat) away.

The walk began to feel like a long slog. My rucksack was getting heavier and heavier. I wondered if I should stop and eat all five days' meals in one go and lessen the load. But then I reached the col. The views of the massive Torridon range and sea beyond were staggering.

I found an ideal spot for the tent, a modest sprint from a lochan for water for the morning brew and ablutions. I fried up some eggs, tomatoes and slices of bread. Yum! Why does fried food only taste delicious under canvas? I'd normally turn my nose up at such grub.

Similarly, having given up smoking, a mere whiff of smoke 100 yards away makes me feel ill, but on a mountain summit the old nicotine pangs reassert themselves and I would wrestle a yeti single-handed for a quick drag. I can only think that it is some form of

reverse addiction. Too much healthy living and exercise, and one's body starts to crave a bit of abuse.

Suddenly, right outside the thin canvas, the unmistakable cough of a male with a large chest capacity. Oh no, at least four hours to the nearest other person this side of Inverness.

Holding my breath, I reminded myself that for all he knew there were six burly rugby players from Cardiff in here. (In a one-man tent? All right, one slightly burly golfer from St Andrews.) I started the mantra again, 'Don't panic, he'll smell your fear...' No more coughs — the axe murderer seemed to have taken his laryngitis elsewhere.

I realised that a raving psychopath would probably not seek victims at 11pm on the col of a very minor Munro in Wester Ross. No, he'd be stalking his victims right where I had come from the previous day — at least 500 miles further south.

Blearily, I unzipped the tent next morning and beheld yet another glorious day in the Highlands. I scrambled out and straight up the nearest summit. On the way down, I stumbled across a doe and her calf. They regarded me without fear. This did not bode well for the autumn, as I was standing on a stalker's path.

Just then the doe coughed. I immediately recognised the psychopath of the previous

night and almost laughed aloud with relief.

After three days, I decided it was time to head towards (relative) civilisation and struck for Torridon — a grand metropolis indeed, comprising a few houses, a school and a shop selling everything from whisky to camping Gaz (does the intrepid explorer need more?). For one thing, I couldn't face reading that book again, and for another I craved some fresh veg — even a mouldy apple would be preferable to rice and dried carrots.

In Torridon, the usual highland mist descended and put paid to my idea of struggling up more epic mountains. I decided to sample the heady delights of Plockton, location for 'Hamish Macbeth,' and caught the post bus to connect with the train.

I had discovered this wonderful invention on a visit to Torridon many years ago. Then the postman drove a minibus, combining his meagre post round with a public transport service. Times had changed, however. For a start, the postman was now a postwoman and the bus was a very bumpy Landrover.

I found myself squashed in with two Germans, three rucksacks and a dozen huge parcels, one of which appeared to be a television set. I sat by the door and yelled 'Stop' every mile or so, when I would neatly throw up on to the twisty single track road.

At Plockton the number of tourists was incredible. The railway station buffet had been bought out and turned into a gourmet restaurant. The passengers of the 12.40 gazed wistfully at the Japanese tourists devouring enormous platters of giant prawns. The best they could hope for was the 'special' — a free cellophaned digestive biscuit with every cup of tea purchased. I was tempted to linger, but home and the boys beckoned.

A year on and now I find myself the mother of three children under five...the trip away not only revitalised me, it obviously gave my biological systems a boost too.

Mark does not seem too put off by his experiences as temporary house-husband and is considering letting me escape again this year and perhaps again after that...as long as the result is not a new baby each time!

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