

TGO Challenge 2015

Oban-Johnshaven

Bart Horeman & Jolanda Hamers

8 May 2015

We walk out of Oban station. Finally, we have arrived!

A backpack-man follows us, as we walk along the sea front.

He must be a challenger!

When he overtakes us, we stop and chat. Of course he is a challenger, but it's only his second time. His first was in 2009. Now he is alone, then he was with his wife Eileen.

"Then you must be Andrew Partington", I say, "I met you 6 years ago near White Bridge".
And he remembers too!



Later that evening we are chatting away in a fish and chips bar. It is time for bed when the sun sets beautifully behind Mull.

9 May 2015

Again we are eating out with Andrew, but meanwhile we have moved to the Taynuilt Hotel. Each our own route, Andrew did the Glen Lonan road walk, we did the Black Loughs bogs and a coastal route.

The bogs was my stupid idea to cross from Kilvaree to Auchnacoshan. We survived, but for Jolanda's first walking day in Scotland, I nearly scared her off forever. We managed

to get across with the help of an iron gate which was located over the deepest part of the slowly flowing stream.

Anyway, the weather was perfect and our shoes dried out quickly.



On the shores of Loch Etive, past Rubha Ban, we needed a break. Just as we reached the shore we glimpsed an otter that was treading towards sea. We watched it diving a couple of times and then disappearing between the seaweeds which formed the perfect camouflage. What a magic encounter!

10 May 2015

Rain! Prepared for the worst, we leave our B&B in Taynuilt in full rain gear. Behind Bonawe Smokery, where we turn left up Glen Etive, we see two walkers (challengers?) heading for Bridge of Awe. It's dry again as we plod through the forest towards Glennoe. Strong cold winds as we reach the shore of Loch Etive, and we even manage to brew a coffee.



Except for a passing car at Ardmaddy bridge, when we are having lunch in the lee of the forest, we seem to be the only souls on the winding track with beautiful views over Loch Etive.

But then immediately the tax collector arrives and we have to pay for the luxury of a dry coffee and dry lunch with torrential rain all the way up Glen Kinglass. Narrachan is one hour away and our only hope. Yes, it is only a roof, but that makes it a heaven. Despite a leaking raincoat, we venture outside again and plod through the Kinglass greyness. Sleeping in a wet tent still seems more attractive than a dry and windy mudfloor.

Where deer normally gather, we put up the tent, between the spruces opposite Glenkinglass Lodge. Not only my raincoat leaks. Streams of water have collected in my rucksack! A deer corpse lies 20 meters from the tent. I see it when I am off to collect water from a raging stream. Two hours later, when I am refilling the Platypus, I wonder how quickly the stream has returned to its normal size.

11 May 2015

Miraculously, it is dry when we pack up in the morning. Not for long though: outside the shelter of the trees a wind-rain is continuous, which makes it hard going. Jolanda really struggles when after the new bridge across Kinglass, a clear track is missing and we have to bog-trot a few hundred yards to reach to old route. The old horse shed at Loch Dochard provides a welcome dry coffee break.

How wet can you be? We're on the banks of Allt Ghabbar and we knew there was no bridge, but for one a kilometre upstream, so we turn left. I am sceptical, the going between forest and river might be as hard a struggle as just crossing the river. However, a sudden deep bog channel takes the decision: it is either getting wet crossing this side-stream (and those that follow) or wetting ourselves in the Allt Ghabbar. On the other side of knee-deep Ghabbar, the water damage in our shoes seems irrelevant. With strong backwinds and signs of weather improvement we enjoy the springy turf-path along



Abhain Shira and when we hit the track we sit in the lee of a hut wringing our socks.

Dozens of people march along the West-Highland way, but somehow Jolanda manages to see none of them. In stead of two extra kilometres to Inveroran, we use a sunny break to have lunch at Victoria Bridge. As a precaution, we put up the flysheet to stay dry. A car from Black Mount stops when we are erecting the tent and I rush to inform the driver that we are not camping, just wanting to have a dry lunch.

The long afternoon hike to Gorton is fabulous. Huge thunderstorms alternate with bright sunny spells and luckily most of the precipitation is not ours. The views are extraordinary. As predicted by the coverage maps, we even get a signal as we walk along Loch Tulla, so Challenge Control gets our message.



“Where have you been?” Andrew said when we finally reached the bothy at six. “I have been here since lunchtime waiting for you to come!” Andrew had taken the room with the hearth and – to get more warmth - we erected our tent in the other one. So we each had our own room that night, and apart from some mice collecting their share of our cookies , we did not have any haunting experiences.

12 May 2015

Last night Andrew let me read the long passage his vetter had written about the next section. I didn't know what to think of it. It seemed the crossing of the moor to reach Rannoch Forest was quite complicated and probably terribly difficult. My vetter had only warned me against the temptation to walk on the railway line, as in 2012 a German was hit by a train and lost his life.

So I understood Andrews unease when he set off in the rainy morning. We reassured him that we would follow and be able to pull him out of the bogs if needed.

I was glad I wasn't troubled by too much information, still the Tom Buidhe labyrinth proved quite a challenge. After crossing together with the Water of Tulla under the railway bridge, we came out on the vast moor with the forest in view. It seemed a matter of following the pylons of the power line. We did not. Much easier was to follow the bank of the Allt Coire a'Bhuic upstream, and where it turned away from the pylons I kept an easterly course to avoid the peat groughs – aiming at a small hillock. So far so good. Now we stood before a corner of the forest fence. We climbed over it. Yes we were in the forest, but surrounded by bogs. After we got stuck in too wet areas, we actually had

to follow the forest fence and use the fence to cross a huge peat grough. Then we reached fast-flowing Allt Criche, which was impossible to cross, but we could follow its bank. We even could jump across a tributary.

Although I had been quite confident to get across to the forestry track, Jolanda had given up and thought we were never to get out of this wet labyrinth of blanket bog and big channels. Next our river bank was covered by a dense spruce forest. What to do? I decided to try to get to the railway line, as we would anyway need the railway bridge to cross the Abhainn Duibhe further down. So we left the stream and entered the bog forest. I was very pleased when we reached the railway, moreover because it had a wide strip of unforested bog that, though extremely wet, lead us straight to the bridge. We trespassed on the railway, but only for the 20 meter to cross the bridge. When we came down we saw the new strange big bridge over the river (NN 41100 50210), not on our map.

Yes, we had reached the forest track and celebrated this event with a coffee break in in the lee of the forest. Strange it was to find that it was warm and dry under the trees, while we had the idea we had been walking through torrential rain and wind. (Later we heard Andrew's story that it had not been him who had to be pulled out, but actually he was the one who had to pull Phyllis out!!)



Since we left the bothy we had not seen a single soul. After our coffee break, a couple kilometres down the forest track, a man with a pack walks up to meet us. "Where are you going", he asks. "Bridge of Gaur", I respond. "No", he says, "I am going to Bridge of Gaur".

“Where have you come from”, I ask. It appears that he is a challenger too and he has camped near Gorton. I show him with map and compass that Bridge of Gaur is our direction. He is not convinced. He says, “if I am following the wrong direction, I will find out when I come out of the forest”. And he resumes walking. Flabbergasted, we continue our direction too. Jolanda says, “he knows what he is doing, he will find out that he has gone wrong when he recognises that railway bridge”.

Though I know my wife is right, the encounter keeps worrying me the rest of the day. In the evening when we camp in the forest south of Loch Rannoch, I phone up Challenge Control and share my worries with them.



13 May 2015

A lovely Spring morning! Dry and no wind. Cloudy but with the promise of some sunny spells.

From our pitch in the forest we look out over Loch Rannoch. We are slightly off route and have pitched 3km north of my initial plan. Jolanda agrees that the prospect of a long roadwalk along Loch Rannoch puts us off, so at Camghouran we turn south along the river to rejoin our original route. But is 10km track through Rannoch Forest more appealing than a roadwalk?

It turns out to be the right choice: large areas of tree-felling around Cnoc Eòghainn give us views usually blinded by the trees. It provides exactly the feeling of space that we normally lack in these forests. The sound of goldcrests and greenfinches accompany our coffee break.



Jolanda is gone. She was annoyed that I had taken this winding forest path that wasn't on my map and I did not exactly know where it was leading. That I was confident it would lead us somehow to Rannoch Forest parking lot, did not impress her. It led to a viewpoint where I had lingered when my thoughts went back to my 2011 route over distant Beinn Mholach's summit. "On that top I phoned you four years ago!", I shouted, but she had walked on. When I caught up with her down in the valley, she had installed herself at a picnic bench. We had a perfect sunny lunch!



When we paid at the counter in the Rannoch Country Store, we were thanked and greeted in Dutch! "From your accent I could hear you were Dutch", the owner explained. He had been running this shop for quite a number of years now. Except for him being Dutch, we were impressed by the range of products the shop stocked. The day had turned to a lovely sunny afternoon and surprisingly a parallel path reduced the roadwalk to Dunalastair from 5 to 3km. We walked past the curious ruins of Dunalastair castle, with trees springing up in the building, to reach The Gardens.

"The good news is that my wife is in hospital", Jim welcomed us, "the bad news is that I am the cook!" This typical Scottish humour was his way of showing he was glad his Tina was still alive and recovering from a heart attack. However, the promise of providing us with an evening meal made him nervous. Nevertheless, we felt a warm welcome in his lovely B&B. The Gardens were originally the homes of four gardeners' families of the estate. Jim & Tina lived in one of them and had turned the three others into B&Bs 20 years ago.



From our rooms we had beautiful views of Schiehallion. Following clear instructions from his wife, Jim cooked our evening meal. We sat in the warmth of the last sunbeams in the wonderful greenhouse they had built in front of building. When we had finished our meal, and we had repeatedly confirmed it was OK, Jim went back to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of whisky. Obviously he was relieved and wanted to celebrate his achievement.

We had a wonderful evening!

14 May 2015

All of us were up and away early. Soon after we had started our walk along the B846, Jim drove past us on his way to visit his wife in hospital.

Despite pictures of people on the weir in River Tummel, we found that the entrance was closed off with gates and barbed wire. Alas, no chance of a walk along the aquaduct and we had to continue our roadwalk to Tummel Bridge.

Again we were treated with fine weather and we had a coffee break in Tummel Forest. Finding the nice path leading out of Tummel Bridge was more difficult than I had thought, but the hill flank with beautiful mixed forest of bark and spruce was nice and gave some views down the Tummel valley.



Soon after we were on broad tracks through dull forest. A site in Bohally Wood, where Forestry Commission was preparing a blast, was the only interesting thing we passed. The wire that would be used to set off the blast, ran for several hundred meters along our track. We were too far off to hear them actually blasting. Just before leaving the forest at Loch Bhac we had lunch in the lee of the pine trees. It was sunny and a cold wind was blowing. Someone was fishing Loch Bhac in a boat.



The sunny decent down to Blair Atholl was superb, with fine views of Beinn a'Ghlo. Even the walk along the A9 was quite a pleasure , and soon we pitched at the campsite. We discovered we were not the only ones taking part in the Challenge: Pete (Lilo), Julie, John & Sue and Hein joined us on the campsite. Needless to say we were having a pint in the Atholl Arms that evening!

15 May 2015

We had planned a rest day and took the bus to Pitlochry to do some shopping. A visit to Blair Atholl Distillery was also part of our holiday. In the evening we enjoyed seeing other challengers dropping in on the campsite: Colin, John, Sheila, Nick & Lynn. We had a wonderful meal in the Atholl Arms.....



16 May 2015

Bright and sunny day with strong southwesterly winds and occasional showers. A perfect day for being blown through Glen Tilt.

We had set off early but by the time we were having our coffee – in the lee of Marble Lodge – several people passed us, walking, running, cycling. Indeed Glen Tilt gets more beautiful the further you enter it. Behind Forest Lodge we had lunch, and some rain drove in the cover of the trees. Only when we got going again we found out it only rained in the driving wind. Next stop was Falls of Tarf where we sat for a while studying the dipper that flew in and out the falls constantly.



Today seemed like a mountain day, when you spent more than half a day climbing the valley to reach the col. Actually I had planned to camp at the col. But it was too early and the wind too strong. In stead we sat down and watched a huge herd of deer grazing. They moved a bit hither and there, and our presence hardly disturbed them.



At Bynack Lodge I thought we could call it a day. Trying to erect the tent in the lee of the ruins, I suddenly felt uneasy. Do I want to listen to the flapping tent all night? Everything in me said: no.

Later, when we had moved to the next ruin, Ruigh-nan-Clach in the lee of the trees, Jolanda told me she had definitely had more wind on our tent in the Moroccan Sahara. "And you were not worried whether it would hold against those winds?", I asked. "O no", she replied, "the tent had a problem resisting camels, but it stood up against any wind." The advantage of my pressing on was that we had crossed the Geldie Burn, so whatever amount of rain would fall that night, we were safe.

17 May 2015

It may have rained, it may have stormed, but nothing disturbed our quiet night at Ruigh-nan-Clach. You just wondered why we were the only ones pitching here. Later we spoke Nick and Lynn who had camped at Bynack Lodge. It hadn't been horrible weather, still our pitch was so much quieter...



With the wind at our back and an occasional shower we followed the valley to Linn of Dee. We were greeted by Lindy Griffiths who had a rest day and had driven up with her husband to Linn of Dee. We had our usual coffee on the banks of the Dee and pleasantly roadwalked into Mar Lodge. At the 'tea room' we were the only ones. Nick and Lynn had skipped Mar Lodge tea and were having a rest at Victoria Bridge.



How can you get lost in a small piece of forest? We had had our lunch among the Birkwood pines, and now we tried to find a way out into Birkwood Nature Area. First we went too far down and only when we climbed back up I realised we were at another track than the one I thought. We climbed further up, quite far, and finally we found the stile over the forest fence. A beautiful path through Morone Birkwood followed by a decent brought us in Braemar.

I never been here. Expecting quite a large town, I was surprised by its smallness. The shop was just about enough to fulfil our needs for the next three days. And where was the pub? We would find out later and walked to the Youth Hostel. Mark Storey had been in the shop too and was in front of us, on his way to the camp site. We met Lindy again in the Hostel. That evening we roamed Braemar for a pub, ended up in the Invercauld Arms Hotel, to discover we were the only challengers there. Where was the rest hiding?

18 May 2015



It's not really raining, it's not dry either. We needed a break, so we were hiding under trees making coffee in Ballachbuie forest. First Robert Leech passes by and we have a little chat. He is carrying far too much load, but he explains he's doing it for some military challenge. Next one nearly walks by without noticing us. "Hey Andrew! Where have you been? We haven't seen you since Gorton bothy!" He is heading for Gelder Shiel and then making for Glas-Allt-Shiel, as he remembers it as a nice bothy. That's typical: Glas-Allt-Shiel was our initial plan too, but we are now on our FWA and not up over misty Lochnagar. Andrew's appearance was just what I needed to shift my moods. Yes, why not, let's leave the boring forests and follow Andrew. If it's horrible up there, we can just stick to the track and end up in Spittal of Glenmuick.



Gelder Shiel smells of freshly cut new wood. The renovation party has just finished its job. Wow, what a bothy! It is crowded with a group of youngsters, but they are packing up. Andrew leaves too, so we have the bothy to ourselves for lunch!

Andrew had trouble finding the indistinct path along Gelder Burn, and indeed it is not easy to follow. When we reach the col between Meikle Pap and Conachraig it is windy and still dry, with clouds coming down. We continue the path to Glas-Allt-Shiel and soon we are in snow showers. Still it was a clear path to follow, wet and all, with superviews of the hills on the other side of Loch Muick. Lochnagar remained in the mist and we skirted the low clouds when we reached the 750 contour. Despite the grim weather it was superb walking. A MTB'er overtook us! After the footbridge over Glas Allt we followed the firm path, past the waterfalls, down to the bothy. Again our personal bothy keeper Andrew was welcoming us! Nevertheless I decided to pitch the tent, as the sleeping platform in the bothy was full. Andrew soon followed us and later Colin Crawford and two others put up their tents too.



When I smelled a fire I moved back to the bothy and to my surprise found nobody and no fire. Nevertheless I managed to get a fire going and Jolanda and I had a pleasant evening around the hearth with Deborah and her two overseas friends chatting away. I was pleased: in stead of the long and dull FWA to Ballater we had reached this wonderful Glas-Allt-Shiel.

19 May 2015



A crispy and sunny morning – close to freezing but no visible ice. Camping at Spittal of Glenmuick John and Margaret had had night frost. They were packing up when we passed them.

A steady flow of challengers was climbing up the Allt Darrarie valley. We saw them passing while we had our usual coffee. At the end of the valley some challengers were breaking up camp. Up on the plateau the path seemed to fade out, but we kept following the grassy verges of moorland streams. They led us to the tributaries of the Water of Mark and down to Shielin of Mark. Occasionally a short shower passed by. At this wonderful bothy we stopped for a break and chatted with fellow challengers like Graham Brookes. In the changing weather we sat in the sun and had to move inside for a shower. Soon after John & Margaret had reached the bothy, we left for the final trudge op Muckle Cairn.



Again a shower forced us inside during our lunch at Stables of Lee. We had crossed the watershed and what was left was a long walk along the glen into Tarfside. Strong winds at the back helped a lot, but for Jolanda it was too much; she had wanted to camp earlier and did not understand the necessity to reach Tarfside. We were tired when we joined tent city.



It was crowded in the free-masons pub that night. We had a chat with Alvar Thorn and Jolanda left early for bed. I had another drink and chatted with Maggie Hems and noticed I wasn't the only one who became more talkative while the evening progressed.

20 May 2015

Some of the late night drinkers where quickly making their first mile to a breakfast in The Retreat. Andrew Walker overtook us when we were out on the road to the first Esk bridge available. Passed Dalhastnie we were free of roadwalking. It was a superb morning and various passing challengers commented on our lovely sunny coffee break spot.

A new bridge brought us back on the other bank of the Esk. It wasn't on the map, neither were the paths that led us to the forest track on the opposite side of the road. Behind the forest we enjoyed a sunny warm lunch with nice views over the lowlands around Montrose.



It was a pleasant stroll into Fettercairn, where we booked into the wonderful Ramsay Arms Hotel for the night. Enough time for a walk back to the Fettercairn Distillery and a (private) tour. With just one daywalk to go, Jolanda thought she could add some extra weight and carry a bottle of Fettercairn Fior home.

21 May 2015

Smoked haddock for breakfast! Yesterdays dinner had whetted my appetite, so again my plate was filled with this gorgeous smoked fish. Alright, we still had a day's march to go, but we were already celebrating and pretending we had done the trip. And why not? Jolanda was likewise having a big Scottish breakfast.

Just outside Fettercairn I noticed an interesting path through a wooded bank and we followed it round. It seemed to be the border of Fettercairn House grounds. Anyway it

saved some roadwalking, of which there was enough to come. But first we cut through Greenbottom Wood, following paths not on the map, still coming out at the other end. A bit of B9120 and a path along Gaugers Burn brought us in Laurencekirk.

Our coffee addiction needed to be dealt with. I knew there was something in Laurencekirk so we followed the long main road in search of a café. Just about when Jolanda gave up, I saw the sign, and soon we sat in the warmth of Hugo's coffee shop chatting to heavy-load-Robert. He looked tired but so very glad that he was going to finish today!



To avoid too much roadwalking, I wanted to cross Hill of Garvock. Outside Laurencekirk, we were trotting along the B9120. It started to rain. At the first option we left the road, climbed into a field and found ourselves amongst young bulls. Jolanda wasn't impressed by my navigational skills. Soon we were back on the tarmac. The only nice little track was the path around Paul Matthew Hill, which started off as if it was completely overgrown, but soon provided sheltered walking along the woods. And halfway a sunny lunch!

All of a sudden we reached the coastal highway and rapidly dropped into Johnshaven. We literally ended up on the seashore campsite, which looked dull and exposed, but the landlady directed us to a wonderful little sheltered spot behind the bowling green. Celebrating our arrival we strolled up and down the coast along the old railway line and the sea breeze instantly turned Jolanda's mood by 180 degrees! She had been deprived of the sea for 12 days!



It's hard to describe Johnshaven's pub, the Anchor. It is typical. The pvc tablecloths gives it the appearance of a fish-and-chips bar, but it seems they serve great food. Anyway, we had already eaten, so we drank our pints and enjoyed the rainbows over sea behind the small harbor.

