

The Eagles have Landed

Adam Long and a team of Sheffield all-stars head to the Hebrides to do battle.

"I've been led to believe..." Chris bellowed through the gale, "that it's possible to climb on Sron Ulladail, (Gaelic for Strone Ulladale) even in the rain."

There was a rustle and zip as he stuck his head further out of the tent into the horizontal downpour.

"But," he continued, "it looks wet to me."

So began my first trip to the mighty cliff of Sron Ulladail. Forty hours staring at tent walls shaking and bowing in the wind; slowly sinking further into the bog whilst peat chromatograms formed on the nylon. Forty hours we lay immobile and trapped whilst the tem-

pest blew itself out, the 20 hours of daylight dragging the day ever longer, making subsequent trips to Patagonia seem positively tame. At least we didn't see any midges.

On the third day the rain stopped, and after a characteristically slow start to let the route dry off (or, in the event, to let Ben (Bransby) and Pete (Robbins) dry the route off), we headed up to the base of The Scoop. Leo (Houlding) seemed very confident that it would be a soft touch. I didn't quite follow his logic but it seemed to revolve around remoteness and the fact that it had already been downgraded. However the first pitch is

described in the guide as a 'rude awakening', and coupled with the time Ben and Pete had taken, I was glad it wasn't my lead. It took about 30 feet before Leo got his rude awakening; above a sloping ledge was a succession of holds which ended with a huge gap to a peg and what looked like a good hold. After much moving up and down Leo finally did a huge slap with much flailing of limbs and jangling of gear. Above he moved up and right less steadily, heading for an in-situ sling. After a short run-out it turned out to be a tied-off RURP, and from the mutterings coming down it seemed Leo's respect for the route was growing.

Soon it was my turn, and all went well until I got the big move. My hands were cold (excuses already!) and the holds were small. I pulled up and eyeballed the hold, but it looked a long way. I moved back to the rest and thought about it. Three years careless in Sheffield might have got me up with the grit big boys but this was not my forte. I wasn't sure how aware Leo was of my lack of ability on big, pumpy routes, and I didn't really want to fall off this early on and set a precedent as a crap second. All this went through my head as I tried the move a second time. Eyeballing the hold again, it wasn't the hold that eyeballed me back, but the peg below it. Hmmm... if I grab that quickdraw... An instant later I was up and on the next section. Quick and efficient was the way I



Above: Carnais and Uige sands, Isle of Lewis



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Sam Whittaker and Simon Moore on The Prozac Link E4 5c, 5b, 5b, 5c, Screaming Geo, Lewis.



A strong team at Strone – l-r: Adam Long, Leo Houlding, Chris Wentworth, Ben Bransby, Pete Robbins.

needed to play it. I could always come back and lead it properly...

By the time I got to the belay ledge I was pretty boxed, and declined the lead with some muttered references to Yosemite speed techniques. Luckily Leo seemed to agree, and the next two pitches passed relatively easily (for me thanks to the odd peg!) until we arrived at an uncomfortable hanging belay in surroundings which had suddenly become very impressive. A big, wet corner reared out above our heads whilst below us the rock cut away. Here the free line deviates from the original. To our left a huge 45° overhang undercut the blank wall of the corner above. Where the two met was not a simple overhanging arete but a groove formed by a two-foot overhang and a two-foot hanging wall – the infamous 'Flying groove' pitch. Splashes of chalk left by Pete and Ben showed the undercuts which were the only handholds, whilst far below gusts of wind ruffled the surface of Loch Ulladaihl.

It was decision time. From this point 60 metre ropes would just reach the ground; above were five more pitches from which escape would be difficult. No ascents we knew of had done the whole route in one day, it was far more common to abseil off at this point and finish the route the next day. It had been about two in the afternoon before we had left the ground, and the weather had been threatening all day. We had no water and only one

'lanky larry' chew bar between us. But really there was no option: Ben and Pete had continued and so must we. Peer pressure had won out. (We later found out that Ben and Pete had had exactly the same discussion at this point, and had continued for the sole reason that if they abbed off we might continue!) After a rest and another tab, Leo got psyched and set out above the abyss. He placed a couple of Friends at full stretch and then returned to recover. A quick rest and he set off again; grunting and power-screaming he undercut out leftwards, his feet bunched beneath him, teetering on the edge of the huge overhang: The World's Best Traditional Climber™ in full flow. I felt quite privileged. But something wasn't right, he was looking tired, the shouts weren't psych anymore but desperation. But he'd reached the end of the flying groove, to where the climbing becomes more normal again. He was shaking. I shouted some encouragement.

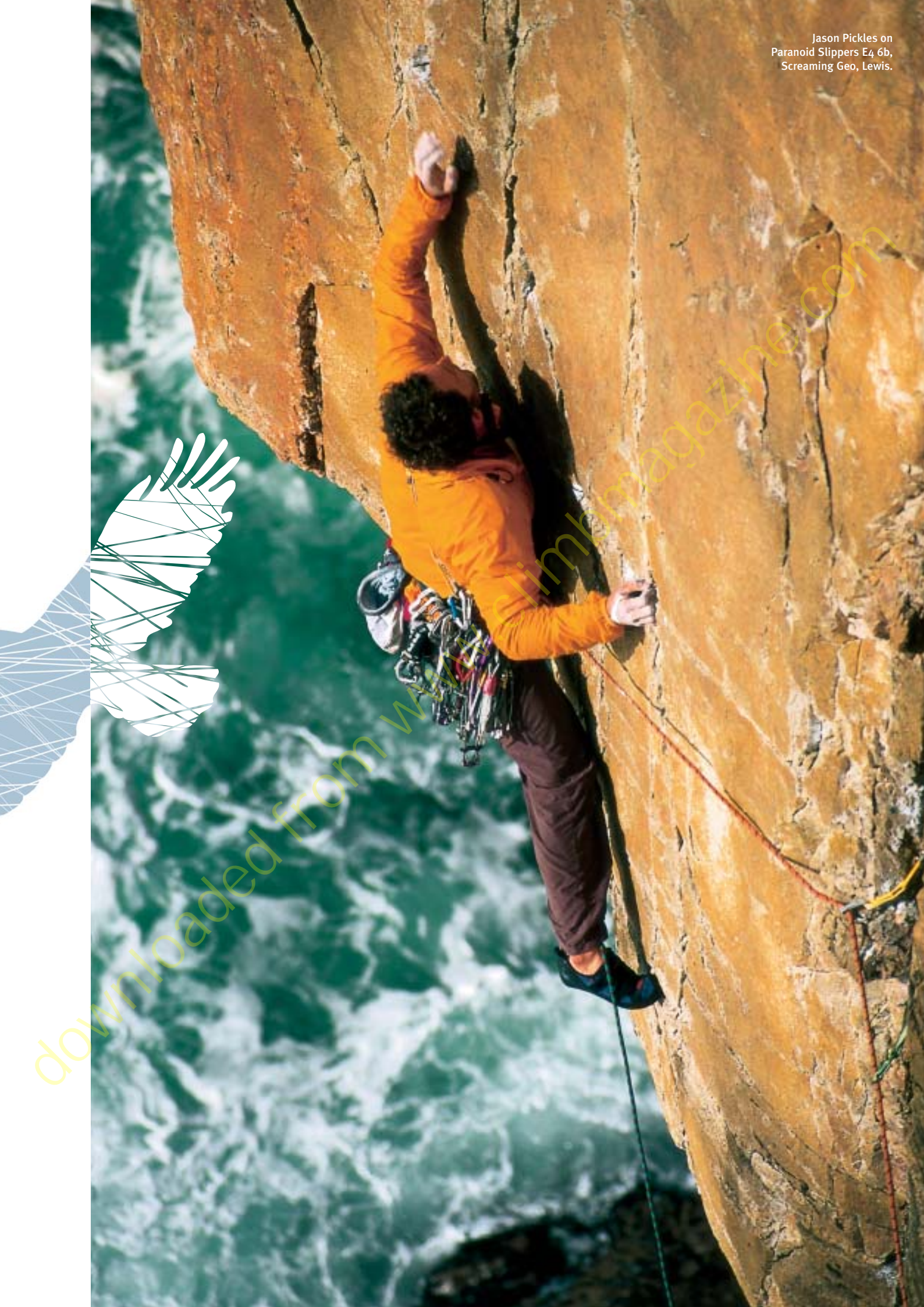
"I'm off!" he shouted.

I braced for the impact. There wasn't a lot I could do to take-in, cramped in the back of the corner. But the impact didn't come. Leo was still flailing and grunting 40' away. He was still moving up. Was he coming off or not? His feet began to disappear from view. And then he was off, flying backwards into space. Even before the rope came tight he was swearing and cursing at the top of his voice.

I let him hang there as he kicked the air and gave vent to his frustration.

Eventually he tried again, this time there was no shouting or flailing, just cool, calm climbing. Knowing that it wouldn't get any harder enabled him to save his energy and he soon disappeared from view into the upper groove. By now I was getting cold. There was no escape from the cold wind, which was picking the ropes up and making them dance in the updrafts like huge streamers. I was fighting to try and control them, scared that they would blow around the corner and snag on something. Eventually Leo shouted that I could climb. After a few scary moments, some judicious use of aid I was over the worst, a pair of feet came into view. Leo was huddled at the back of a good ledge looking cold. It was a foregone conclusion now that Leo was leading, and as the rope inched out I tried to get my hands warm. Eventually Leo shouted that he was safe and started another battle with rope drag. I stripped the belay and cautiously dropped off the front of the ledge. To the left a big detached flake led leftwards. I gingerly hand traversed it. The climbing was easy but the position terrifying. Right foot heel hooking, left foot swinging in space above about 400 feet of air, the whole experience out of all proportion to the height of the cliff. Even Yosemite never felt so exposed. After 40' I arrived at the belay and the reason for the

Jason Pickles on
Paranoid Slippers E4 6b,
Screaming Geo, Lewis.



The eagles have landed | Adam Long

rope drag; no Leo. On I went. Now the route's class was really showing with magnificent varied climbing. Although overhanging consistently at about 20°, it very rarely climbs actual overhanging rock. The route sneaks upwards, always taking the easiest line.

So it was that I found myself balancing up a slabby arete, then a short steep wall led to the belay below the final hard pitch. The capping roofs jutted out above us; only 30' above lay easy angled rock, water and an easy

descent to the tents. However it felt a lot further away than that. Leo was understandably nervous; this was the third pitch that would earn E6 in its own right and it did so by being strenuous and poorly protected. We didn't wait for long; the cold, gathering gloom, lack of food and water and painful rockboots drove us on.

After arranging some protection Leo set off. He made the first big moves up some very steep rock to an in-situ RP and an ancient

peg. It was at this point on the first ascent that Dawes had fallen off and cut through one of his ropes in the ensuing pendulum. Leo was well aware of this and moved carefully. After a few steps right he moved up to the final small roof. He reached over to the final quartz jugs. They were wet. He instinctively put his hand back in his chalk bag, but the water ran down his arm and quickly turned it to paste. He started shaking.

"It's f**king soaking!"

"Don't worry, I've got you, the gear's good."

I tried to reassure him. A fall now could result in a big epic.

Don't worry, I thought, he's the best climber in the world. Leo had no such comfort, but, true to form, gathered himself together and moved up out of sight. The ropes soon came tight and I set off. The first moves were big and powerful but not too difficult, there were no rests and I was soon pumping. Another trusty peg came to my aid, and after a short rest I peeped round the lip into cloud, drizzle and darkness. A tight rope made the moves on the wet holds easy and I was soon at the belay. We'd done all the hard climbing and there was just a HVS pitch to go. Finally I was feeling good.

"Shall I lead this pitch?"

"Piss off, d'you think I've led all those hard pitches just to let you top out first?"

Three years later we were back camped below the Sron, but not for long. Ownership of the land has changed and whilst trying to get the key for the track (which halves the walk in) concerns were raised about the resident eagles. After a to-and-fro between the Ahmuinnsuidhe estate, the North Harris trust and the RSPB, we were granted access and walked in to a dry but midge-infested crag. However it was soon raining, and the following morning, before we'd even touched the rock, a lanky fella appeared out of the mist and told us a mistake had been made. The eagles were not nesting where we had thought, they were right above us, or at least the chicks were. The adults had taken a dislike to our brightly-coloured tents and wouldn't return until we left. There was only one option – we packed up and walked out. Leo and Jason were due to arrive that day, so we met them off the ferry at Tarbert. Jason had come non-stop from California, swapping one big stone for another, and their initial excitement at getting a lift quickly subsided when they heard the bad news. A quick thumb though the guide later and we headed north.

Lewis is a big island, the miles of flat peat-bog interspersed with hundreds of lochans making for uninspiring climbing terrain but fast driving. As soon as we hit the coast the prospects began to improve with beautiful white-sand beaches and turquoise seas; whoever accused Cornwall of being a dull picture in a beautiful frame had never visited Lewis.

Below: Jason Pickles on The Alchemist E4 6a, Magic Geo, Lewis.



Where the road ran out we followed the guide over a fence... across the field... head for a round boulder... turn right... and there was a stunning multicoloured cliff – The Screaming Geo. Golden-grey granite woven through dark streaked lewissian gneiss, all shot through with fat veins of pink pegmatite, overhangs swaggering out over the foaming green Atlantic. We traced the lines of a clutch of E5s and E6s weaving their way through the roofs, massively inspiring but equally intimidating. Even better was the on-crag accommodation – right at one corner a little stone bothy was tucked into the cliff!

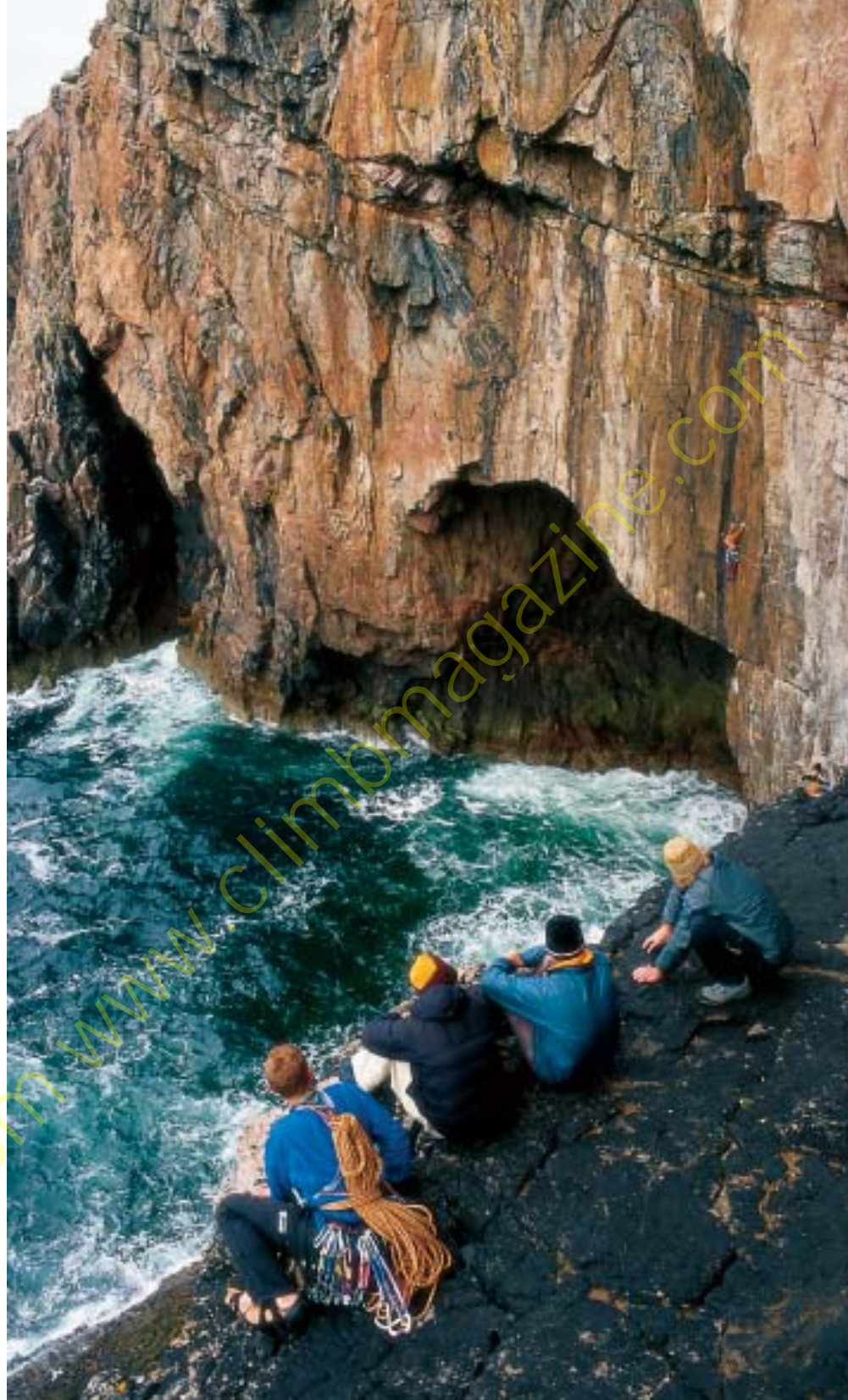
The Sron was quickly forgotten as we made full use of the extended daylight over the following days. Climbing was possible until 10 at night, which allowed for generous 'Wolfgang' starts. (After Wolfgang Güllich, the German superstar who was renowned for enjoying prodigious amounts of coffee and cakes before even approaching the crag.) Even better, the guidebook showed few routes for the amount of rock. Lots of new routes were bagged with several on the lower tier of the Screaming Geo. Pete got the best of the

Ben then set off up the wall of wavy gneiss above to gain the roof. After arranging gear he moved out to the lip... and quickly back again

bunch with two routes up the backwall of the Aurora geo. The first was a huge chimney line which gave a Gogarth-type pitch at E5. Pete squirmed, bridged and chimneyed his way up amidst a web of big cams to give Crimebusters Of The Sea, later claiming it "was just a succession of hands-off rests – it was moving between them that was hard." (George Smith would have been proud.)

He then tackled the stunning and obviously bold arete to the right of Crimebusters to give, at E6, the hardest route in the Zawn with the inevitable name The Eagles Have Landed. With 30 feet of bold 6a climbing up a sharp arete protected only by a sling on a poor spike it put Pete's gritstone apprenticeship to the test. After arranging some small cams he then pulled through the roof above to gain the wall and groove above. Unfortunately Pete took a fall on the crux move when a crimp broke; a slight mar but an unavoidable hazard when climbing such fierce new terrain on-sight.

Ben and Pete then provided the afternoon's entertainment by attempting the big E6 in the Screaming Geo – The Screaming Ab-Dabs. After swinging leads on the first two pitches



Above: The rest of the team settle down to watch the fun as Sam and Simon work their way up The Prozac Link.

they were established on the awesome brown wall above the sea cave. Ben then set off up the wall of wavy gneiss above to gain the roof. After arranging gear he moved out to the lip... and quickly back again. A more committed second attempt saw him matched on a big sloper on the lip in a wild position. Shouts of encouragement echoed across the Geo, but Ben had ground to a halt. Suddenly his left foot popped and his body described a graceful pirouette before pulling his hands from the sloper into a not-so-graceful 40ft lob. Now

anyone who knows Ben at all will know this is no common occurrence. In fact Leo and Jason, who have both climbed with him for years, reckoned they had never seen it before and celebrated by hurling abuse across the geo at Ben and pronouncing...

"It must be impossible!"

Even Pete, the man on form, declined the ropes after such a display and the pair 'escaped' up the E4 The Prozac link. However during the post-match analysis in the bothy that night they were far from disappointed,



Harry Pennells follows the final pitch of The Prozac Link, which proved so good it had ascents by all eight members of the team..

with the result that by the following day The Prozac Link had ascents by all eight of us.

Although described in the guidebook, albeit with three stars, as a variation finish to ... Ab-dabs, the consensus was that this was probably the best E4 in Britain. Four contrasting pitches with only one 5c move really make for a stunning outing.

The first pitch, 'the Yosemite crack,' is a fairly conventional E2 5c pitch, with a short steep wall leading to a clean granite crack. The parallel sides and lack of footholds do indeed bring The Valley to mind for a moment before flopping onto a perfect belay ledge. The next pitch is the really spectacular one; a big brown-streaked wall above the lip of a huge sea cave, with the route taking a diagonal line to land on a ledge nestled below the overhangs. It looks to be the ultimate in exposure but is actually very friendly, covered with big holds and not quite as vertical as it appears. You can romp across it, revelling in the position, and wishing there were more routes that looked so dramatic but were actually so straightforward.

Bring your mate up for pitch three and by now the situation alone would make for a classic. But leaving the granite of the lower walls and moving into the gneiss brings a real surprise. As some of the oldest rock in the world, Lewisian gneiss has endured more than most, the result being an incredible wavy grain structure, like a giant piece of driftwood, but with the friction of gabbro. So you step right from the belay, make a funny move over the lip of a roof and quest upwards on these incredible rough pinches, with here and there a fat cam placement in one of the bigger pockets. On reaching the roof a couple of unnerving moves get you round a big dark block that feels solid but doesn't appear to be attached, and then it's a few more gneiss moves down and left to an adequate belay in



Enjoying a 'Wolfgang start' Mangursthadh bothy, Lewis.

Below: Western Isles transport, Calmac ferry.





the bottom of a hanging groove. The guide-book suggests continuing, but unless all your quickdraws are a metre long it's much nicer to stop and take your time without all the hassles of rope drag and communication.

At this point though, niggling concerns start. Three pitches down, you're almost at the top but you've barely earned a 5c tick, let alone an E4. Sure enough the crux is still to come. The belay groove forms one side of a little pillar that allows a passage through the barrier of overhangs, and into a pegmatite band. Swinging out left lands you on a vertical pink wall covered in quartzy crimps. Gone are the solid little granite holds of the first two pitches and the gneiss jugs of the third. It takes a

moment to adjust to the different climbing style before you teeter across, fiddle in a couple of crap runners, and then gain the ramp and a rest. The original route takes the easy escape up and right, but for a real four star finish step left and back onto the gneiss for a final 30 feet. Following the waving grain of the rock a perfect rough hand crack gives a beautiful sequence of 5b jamming to a belay amongst the thrift and sea-ivory encrusting the boulders.

During our ascent a 25 foot basking shark had been lazily circling the geo below us; way away to the west a group of tiny bumps on the horizon were silhouetted against the evening sun on the Atlantic – my first view of St. Kilda.

It doesn't get much better than that. ♦

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