

Peak(s)	Ben Hope
Elevation(s) (ft/m)	3,041ft / 927m
Date(s)	July 7 2017 (Friday)
Partner(s)	Solo
Elevation gain/loss (ft/m)	+/- 2,970ft/ 905.26m
Distance (miles)	4.7 miles/ 7.56km
Total time (hours/mins)	3 hours 49 minutes
Equipment	Trekking poles
Weather Forecast	Precipitation in the early morning, fog and then just cloudy
Weather Actuality	Misted in the morning a little but the clouds hung around low for a little longer than expected (making it seem foggy/low visibility)
Flora/Fauna	N/A
Wildlife	Deer! A herd of deer moving in the mist!
Accommodations	Slept on the side of the road near Althnaharra
Tourist Attractions	Briefly stopped at the road side ruin - Broch Dun Dornaigil

Day 1	
Drive time	Circa 10 hours (with breaks) from Leeds to Althnaharra
Daily Distance	4.7 miles/ 7.56km
Daily Elevation	+/- 2,971ft/ 905.26m
Daily Time	3 hours 49 minutes
Alarm went off	5.50am
Depart Ben Hope Parking	6.49am
Summit Ben Hope	8.53am
Arrive Ben Hope Parking	10.39am
The Story	

After a bit of a hiatus, I ended up finding and putting on my big girl panties and drove up from Leeds to Scotland by myself. It took about ten hours to drive up to my start point with one stop just south of Glasgow, another just north of Inverness (quick stop for gas that time), and a little time trying to find where I should be! Luckily, I had some reception, but Kyle kept telling me to go further north and I kept fighting him on it. Turns out that I was looking at the start location for Klibreck even though I had told him I wanted to climb Hope first. It is fortunate we had that discussion since it helped get me on the right path. I pulled off at the Althnaharra Hotel in the hopes of finding some food, sadly they stopped serving food at the bar at 6.30pm. Funny, I had intermittent reception along the road up to the town, but once I was in the town, no reception. *Interesting*. Althnaharra had a bit of a horror film quality about it when I discovered that I had no reception.

I was debating car camping close by the town – a little for safety and a little not to have to drive much further. My call with Kyle just before the town had been cut mid-sentence and I didn't want him to worry. I'd drove through town and found the road I needed to take up to Ben Hope, but decided to stay closer to Althnaharra for the night. I didn't want to drive fifteen minutes south to get reception again, but I didn't want Kyle to worry and that's when I noticed an old phone booth in town. I had two pound

coins on me, so I pulled over and crept up to the booth... it was looking really decrepit and like it would probably house a lot of spiders. Sure enough, I opened the door and a giant web swung out with the door. *Yep! Kyle wouldn't be THAT worried! Plus, there was trash on the floor and it looked like it might double as a local toilet. Great.* There were some run-down buildings in the town and an old church sitting on the hill that only had a worn-out path through some grass to get to it. It looked unused and imposing. It also had an old cross over it. Back lit by the dim and overcast light, it just looked like a horror film waiting to happen. *Get out! Get out of this town! Haha!* I got back in the car and started driving south a bit to try and catch a little reception. I found reception and a decent pullover spot that was enough off the road I felt safe from traffic. I called Kyle and set about making it 'home' for the evening.

The forecast for the next day was looking marginal. Possibly some moisture in the morning, followed by 'fog' and then just cloudy. *Hunh.* I thought I'd rather get an early start because if I got an early start I could possibly do both Ben Hope and Ben Klibreck in the same day. I wasn't entirely sure about that plan but it's good to have options. So, I set the alarm for 5.50am. I'd laid out most of my kit the night before so all I had to do was put on my hiking pants and get behind the wheel. It took me a while to fall asleep (it stayed light out for a long time) but fortunately I was able to squeeze in a few hours before the alarm went off.

It was just me, the open road and a little Celtic Women that morning. *Even Gael FM 1 wasn't working anymore. Too bad, I felt like I was gettin' local flavor and a cultural vibe from that channel. Not that I could understand most of it.* I was skeptical about finding the parking lot, but fortunately it was well marked in this instance. I was the first there! I threw back a few more nuts, got out of the car and looked at the mountain. Moment of truth – go now, a little early when the weather may still take an hour to clear? It was definitely grey and lots of low clouds were obscuring most of the mountain. I used the sure-fire test of sniffing the air for moisture. *Like one does.* And my sniffer clearly whiffed moisture in the air but it didn't feel heavy and impending. And with meteorological skills like that, coupled with impatience, I made the decision to just go for it. I had turned on the GPS and now looked at it to mark the start point. *Great... it wasn't turning on.* It just kept showing me it was trying to start, but not actually starting. *Hmm. No GPS. No map. No visibility. No reception and no partner. Okay. Guess it is what it is!* My sleepy morning brain just told me if it got to be too much I'd just turn around. *That always, and most certainly, is a fool proof plan.* The path was mostly clear, although there were a couple sections where it got boggy, or where people diverged a little bit, but I didn't have trouble following it. I did, however, congratulate myself for changing into my tall gaiters, because it was muddy after the bit of rain last night. I also had a moment of astonishment – in many ways this was a big step for me. To have driven so far by myself, in another country. To be doing a mountain by myself, in less than ideal conditions. I was nervous that I'd disappear into the mist one moment, and then confident and strong the next. Those two combined just created a sense of wonder and accomplishment.

It didn't last too long though. Only so much energy for contemplative musings that early – I was sucking wind not long after. The trail started just south of a stone bridge and what appeared to be an agricultural building. The trail wound uphill, alongside a river, before crossing the river a little higher up and then winding to just below a steeper section and cutting back right (south) to follow a gradual slope up to an upper plateau of sorts. It was a wide-open space below the mountain. Of course, I didn't know this at the time... I was in the cloud at this point. The cloud level was sitting just about flush with this 'ridge'. From here, I turned north through a boggy section. The trail became a little harder to follow as

everyone went their own way to try to avoid the mess. I contemplated taking a bearing, but without a map the best I could do would be take one bearing and the ridge would undoubtedly curve etc. I think I was reliant on memory at this point. My mind wasn't any type of steel trap this morning either. I kept thinking I saw things through the mist. Once I thought a cluster of rocks might have been a person.

*Great! Reliable!*



*Stellar views on the summit of Ben Hope! Not sure it was a 'hopeful' omen!*

Somewhere in the inner grumblings of my mind, the majestic beauty of the landscape broke through to me when a herd of deer, along an arm, spotted me, looked up, and moved. Initially, I'd only seen a couple, but then more started moving. It was an actual herd! *Aww!!* *The true Highland experience.* I was alone in the mist, in a place that time hadn't changed for thousands of years, with creatures living and roaming freely. It was as it should be. And then, just like that, the spell was broken! I was back to trying to find my way up the mountain. Absolutely sucking wind, appalled at how out of shape I'd

become, and desperately wondering how much mountain was left. I kept encountering 'false summits' along this path, and I had no idea how high I was, or how much I had left. Oh, and the GPS still hadn't turned on. *Lord. Would it end? This felt like more than 2,700ft.*

I can't speak much more to the route up Ben Hope. It was a very straight forward route. Given I did it with low visibility and no navigational tools, I think that should speak to the ease of the route. There were a few cairns along the way, but nothing too extravagant. I eventually saw a summit trig start to appear from out of the mist. Good timing, because the weather was starting to mist now; not a full on heavy rain, but mist enough that it was starting to soak through some items. Almost everything I had was in waterproof bags (*I mean come on!*), and the rest was waterproof. But, I didn't want to get too soaked for reasons of safety and comfort. Once at the trig point I tried to snap a few selfies; there wasn't much else to take photos of. I checked my phone and found I had some service, so I shot off a few messages to Kyle to alert him of my progress, and as soon as I mentioned I was on, what I could only assume was the summit, I had a brief moment of panic; this undoubtedly harks from my hundred highest days. Was this really the summit? I called Kyle and we conferred about it. I described what I was seeing, and then he described what Google Maps said the summit should look like. *Was he looking at it from a different angle? Was I on the wrong summit?* Our descriptions weren't a dead lock. But, I was getting wet and decided that it 'had' to be the summit and started back down. After a hundred feet or so off I pulled out my phone, realizing it could give me GPS coordinates. I grabbed the coordinates, called Kyle, he punched them in online and said it was close to the summit. *WIN! Creative problem solving!* I then proceeded to continue descending and the weather decided to finally clear.



*Beautiful scenery opening up below as the clouds rose!*

The views on the descent were beautiful. So verdant and alive. There is something about wide, green, undisturbed landscapes that awakens something inside my soul. A primal sense of right and belonging. I tried to take a few pictures to capture the moment, but they simply didn't do justice to the environs or the feelings they provoked. I continued on my way down and ran into a gent making his way up. We briefly joked

that the weather was improving now, so he should be fine! I had stopped briefly to turn the GPS off and back on to see if it'd work. *What could it hurt? Like a computer, right?* Shockingly, it seemed to do the trick. It started up. Even more shocking, it had the tracks from the day! I ran into another gent just below the plateau, and we briefly talked about the area, where we were from, etc., before I continued back down to the car.

My knee was tweaking already, and I was trying to determine if I'd attempt Klibreck or not. At this point, I was just proud of myself for getting up with the alarm and getting up Ben Hope! But, it'd be nice if I could get Klibreck done and move onto peaks more southerly located. I stripped off my boots and put on my Tevas, rolled up my pant bottoms, and took off South. I briefly pulled over to see Broch Dun Dornaigil ruins. I expected the ruins to be 1000 years old at the oldest but they were dated to 1900-2300 years old! Incredible! On to Kilbreck...

Lessons Learned
1. Probably should always wear tall gaiters in the UK. Bogs are ubiquitous.
2. My big girl panties just may just still fit!
3.



