

## Primitive Areas in Great Britain

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THE average American tourist thinks of a visit to Great Britain in terms of its cities and cathedrals, its literary and historical associations, its countryside, Oxford. Britain to him would be almost the last place in the world he would expect to go for the peculiar attractions of wilderness and primitive areas. At the most, his idea of the natural beauty of the British Isles is that gained by a placid trip in the Lake District from Windermere to Keswick or the orthodox Trossachs-Loch Lomond side trip. There is no denying, so to speak, the feminine charm of these trips—trips usually made by char-a-banc or bus, and not too badly marred by noisy tourists. All the childhood memories of Ellen's Isle, of Wordsworth, or of the Scottish ballads make these two trips among those excursions not to be omitted, if time allows.

Those who love the wilderness and the crags ought not to be so easily satisfied. There are places in the British Isles, quite within the span of an extra two to four weeks, which for the sense of remoteness together with a measure of beauty and grandeur are the equal of all but the very finest of the wild scenic wonders of our own and other nations. How many who read this, for example, have even heard of the Rhinogs, of Glen Sligachan, of Ennerdale, or of Bideannam-Bian? Except in some of the remote and not too rewarding parts of North Scotland one admittedly must not look for those expanses of wilderness that are among the proudest features of our own country. The whole of Great Britain is scarcely larger than the wild area of Central Idaho. Yet in Britain there are many compact areas of concentrated natural beauty and wonder where unimproved trails are still the only visible sign of the intrusion of man. Moreover, some of them contain as exciting and even as difficult rock climbing as the enthusiast may ask for.

Except in parts of Scotland it is unnecessary to carry supplies and blankets, because many small farmhouses in the vicinity of these mountain areas supplement their income by accommodating hikers. This proximity to shelter at nightfall is an advantage or

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disadvantage according to the point of view. Inasmuch as so many of the houses are themselves remote, are made of the native stone, and blend with the rugged character of the surrounding landscape, they are less objectionable than might be supposed.

Where and what are these primitive areas?

A few words will suffice for the moors of Southwest England. Frankly I found both Dartmoor and Exmoor a bit disappointing. My visit may have been the wrong time of year. I concede to them a beauty similar to that of the prairie and a quality—especially on Dartmoor—of desolateness which has satisfactions of its own. Yet, after all is said, monotony soon palls. The moors of Yorkshire are superior in this regard, because they have also a very considerable beauty of outline and blend more readily with the clouds which are characteristic of the central spine of England.

There are three major British areas of genuine attractiveness to the wilderness lover—Carnarvonshire and (to a lesser degree) Merionethshire in North Wales, the western part of the English Lake District, and the Scottish Highlands. The latter, the most extensive of the three, has too many individual sections to mention them all.

Excluding quite properly those who travel to or from Ireland by way of Holyhead and the North Wales Coast, and those who take the cog wheel railroad which desecrates Snowdon, the American is rare who sees the real North Wales. The best center is probably Llyn Ogwen. Simple accommodations can be found there on a not too frequently travelled road. From here the Carneddys and their satellite moor-like peaks and ridges can be climbed, and also the Glyders and Tryfan, the wildest peaks of North Wales. One half hour from the little inn in almost any direction will bring one to a land of crags and moors where all consciousness of civilization is lost. Unlike many parts of North Wales this particular area is unscarred by quarrying. At the same time it has its full share of mountain tarns where an ice cold dip can be enjoyed part way down after a strenuous climb. The rock-climbing in this area, though not as well known as the Lliwedd precipices of Snowdon, is well worth exploring, especially on Tryfan.

One other much smaller section of North Wales deserves mention—the Rhinogs. There are several ways of approach. I happened to reach them from Barmouth over the rounded slopes of Diphwys. Here is an example—all too rare—of reversion from

the civilized to the primitive, for today there is no road to break its wildness. Yet, if one looks closely, the steps of an old road, perhaps Roman, can still be traced winding between the peaks from the Welsh seacoast off across the moors to the East.

I mention these two centers, not because they are the only ones of interest, for example, to the mountain climbers. Snowdon and Cader Idris are in some ways finer peaks than any of those mentioned. Yet they are climbed so often and have about them so many evidences of man's handiwork, that they do not warrant inclusion in the present connection.

There is one center in the English Lakes *par excellence*, and that is Wastdale. A half dozen farmhouses, an old inn catering primarily to rock climbers, a dead-end road seldom used, one of the half dozen "smallest churches in England" make up this tiny community. Around the dale on three sides are England's finest peaks. On the fourth side is Wastwater, England's deepest and wildest large lake. Incidentally, Wastdale is the true location of the courtship of Mr. Chips. The movie changed it to the Austrian Tyrol, in order to lengthen the story and thicken the plot. A galaxy of peaks and passes, rock climbs and ridgewalks, mountain tarns and color and clouds offer almost infinite variety. Sometimes from the peaks the dales appear drowned in a thick black mist, and the ridges seem suspended in thin air—so that in winter they look like the mountains of the blessed. Here, too, is one of the rare places in the Isles where the Spectre of the Brocken can occasionally be seen. Perhaps a dozen people in all have had this experience. It happened to me on a New Year's Day on the top of Red Pike, when the sun caught my shadow on the edge of the mist and outlined it in rainbow colors a thousand feet or more high on a cloud bank across the dale. Here also is the best center for exploring the spectacular climbs on Scafell, Great Gable's needle and its many other rewarding climbs, and the deservedly famous Pillar Rock.

Something of the spirit of Wastdale has been captured by an anonymous poet in the following words:

Wastdale and the long and winding path to Styhead Pass:  
 Gable and its crags, its gorgeous glimpse of Ennerdale,  
 Chiefly with the swirling mists that add to nature's depths  
 When shafts of the sun's rays color with their rainbow sheen.

These I yet remember, these I love for all their wildness;  
 Better e'en than that soft beauty that is Windermere,

Better than the glorious purple of a Crummock August,  
Better than the shapely hills round Derwentwater.

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For Scafell and its Pike, its rocks and pinnacles,  
They tell of strength and strength they also give  
To those who love them. In clean swift air on Gable's heights  
The North wind and that glow that comes from pitting strength  
Of lung and limb against the rocks until the heights are gained:  
These leave no room for gross or petty thoughts and deeds  
That stifle timid hearts of lowland city men.  
Their noise, the gale's shout; their scent of heather fresh and  
true;  
Their eye's vision, that of nature's heights and hazards vast.  
Till man's soul from such a scene takes back to city and to low-  
land  
Their freshness and their power; the tenderness of rocks  
caressed;  
The spirit of the wild and free; the strength of Jahveh's hills.

I wish I knew Scotland better. Apart from glorious train trips to Inverness by the Cairngorms, thence by the Skye Railway and return on the West Coast, my own experience is confined to two visits in the Onich area and two to the Isle of Skye. However, from books and from other hikers, I know there is many an area which contains everything to be desired by those who would cut themselves off for a while from man and all his works. The recesses and the moors of the Cairngorms, the remote hills of the Morven peninsula, the region in from and around Loch Ericht, almost anywhere on the northern part of the west coast, especially around Loch Maree, and above all the succession of glens—Moriston, Garry, Affric, Cannich, which lead northwest from Lochs Eil and Ness and the Caledonian Canal, any or all of these may be confidently visited by wilderness lovers, sure that nature will not let them down.

Around Onich the best thing is or was Glencoe. I say "was" somewhat reluctantly, because I understand that a modern highway has now been constructed through the Glen. Here is the site of the massacre of the MacDonalds, here on the shoulder of Bidean-nam-Bian is the desolate upland corrie where the MacDonalds kept the stolen cattle which played their part in causing the massacre. At its east end the Glen runs into Rannoch Moor where the pool of blood marks one of the bitterest and bloodiest fights of all the Scottish clan feuds. Mile after mile through the glen and over the



moor a man may wander without seeing a single house or a solitary human.

Of all places in the British Isles, I love Skye the best. This remote island concentrates within its scenery which of its kind is the equal of any in the world. It has two defects only—there is not enough of it, and it is usually raining. So true is this latter that it is scarcely worth visiting except during June, unless one is prepared to “wait out” the rains. The island is a paradise for mountain climbers and fishermen, and has numerous other features—Dunvegan Castle and the Quirang, for example—which deserve to be better known. However, it is the remarkable mountain range known as the Black Coolin which constitutes its supreme attraction for lovers of the wild and primitive. Only one of the twenty or so summits is easily ascended, only three or four others should be attempted without ropes. Nevertheless to camp in one of the corries or to go over one of the two passes leading out from Glen Brittle is an experience long to be remembered. My wife and I approached the Coolin in the finest way possible. We left the steamer at Broadford and rented a car for the superb drive past Blaven to Elgol. At this last remote settlement we rented a little motor boat which took us several miles up Lach Scavaig and landed us at the head of the lake. Scavaig is not a lake in the ordinary sense, but a fiord or arm of the sea penetrating several miles into the very heart of the Coolin. Apart from the tiny hamlet of Elgol at its lower end there is only one house—a shepherd’s farm, half way up and not visible from our landing place—on the entire lake. After landing, we climbed a nearby cliff and watched the motor boat sail away till it was only a speck in the distance. We then struck inland, past the incomparable Loch Coruisk, up over a wild, projecting divide called Drumhain and down into Glen Sligachan. The remaining four or five miles took us down the Glen to the comfortable inn at the mouth of the Glen. Incidentally this inn and the postmaster’s home in Glen Brittle are the two best centers for exploration of the peculiar wild beauties of Skye. Both of them are Meccas for rock climbers. The ridge of the Coolin can be traversed in a twenty-four hour day, but this does not tarnish its clear title to preeminence among the ridge climbs of the British Isles.

A few general remarks should be added. Nowhere in Great Britain are the mountains high by American standards. Ben Nevis,

the highest, is under 5000 ft. Sgurr Alasdair in Skye is only 3309 ft. Scafell Pike (English Lakes) is 3210 ft. Snowdon (North Wales) is 3560 ft. Yet almost without exception these mountains rise virtually from sea level. This fact, together with their sharpness of outline and sheer ruggedness, give at least the illusion of their being comparable to some of our Rockies—for example, those in Glacier Park, where the scenery is not dissimilar. The British country is glaciated, and hence lakes are abundant. Rain may be expected during July and August. May, June, September and October are the favored months for hiking. "Camping out" is infrequent, because simple accommodations, reasonably priced, are usually near enough even the wildest areas for the packless, rapid hiker to reach them by night fall. Parts of Scotland are an exception, and the usual tenting or pack equipment is serviceable. Apart from the Scottish glens, very little of the wild area is forested. Consequently views along the trails are unobstructed, and the trails themselves are often either rocks or bog. Many of the best routes are trailless, but are so out in the open that there is no danger of losing the way. The chief hazards are on the rocky trailless peaks when clouds and fog come. These peaks are really dangerous and there are not infrequent casualties.

Naturally, few if any of us will have the opportunity to visit the British Isles until the war is over. When that day comes, I hope that any member of the American Alpine Club who does visit Britain will carry the courage of his convictions with him and search out those places in the Isles which do not yield their joys easily, and which do not yield them at all except to those who are ready to "pit the strength of lung and limb against the rocks until the heights are gained."