

# Long walk to a cold beer

Nearly 20 years ago, **James Bainbridge** and his university buddies mounted an error-riddled expedition to the Old Forge, the remotest pub on the British mainland.

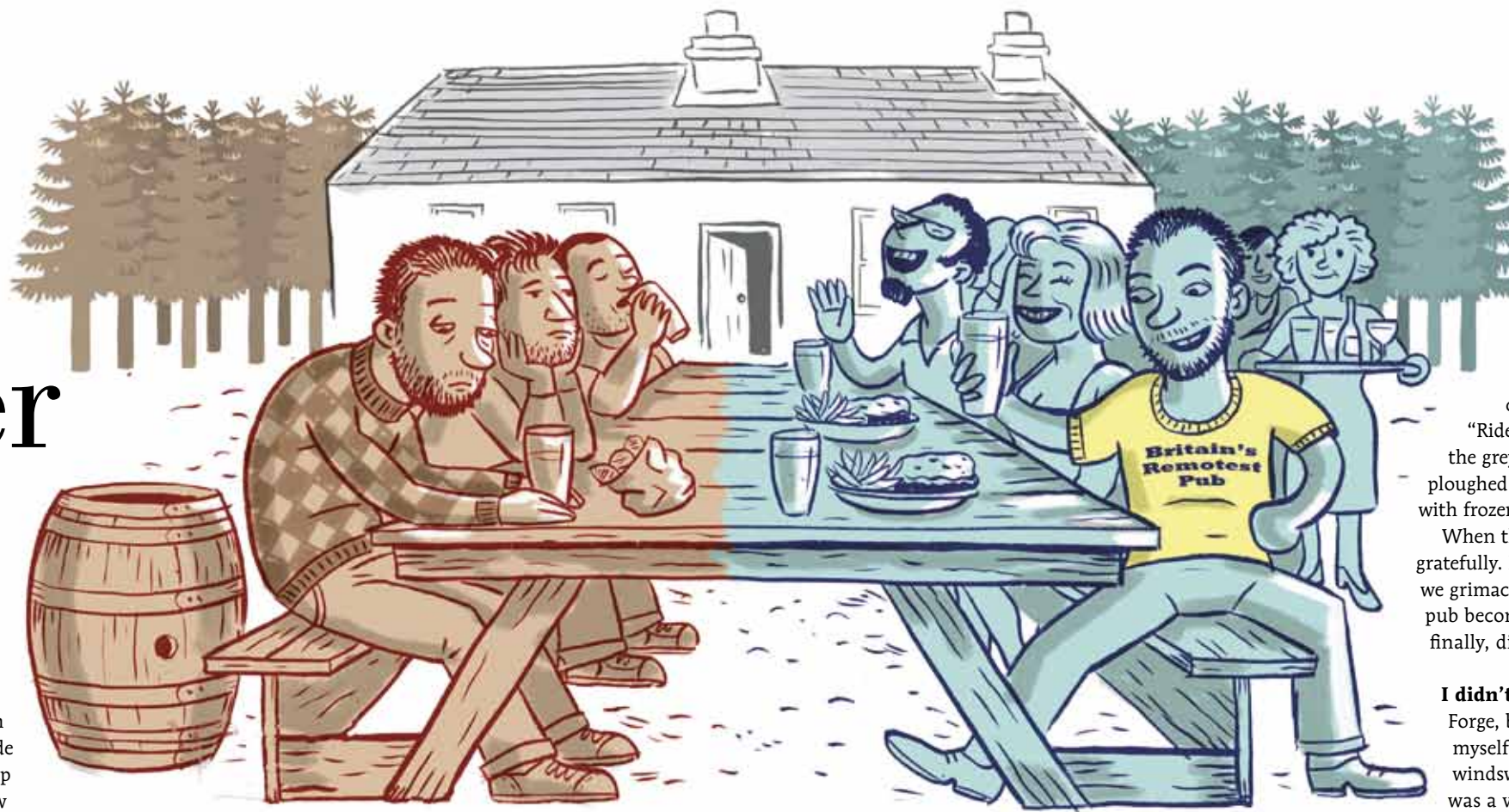
ILLUSTRATIONS  
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**M**oving to South Africa from the UK, marrying a local and settling in the Cape has taught me more than how braai boerewors. For example, I know that to holiday successfully in South Africa during the peak-season seaside migration, you have to plan your trip more than a year in advance. I know exactly which campsite on the Maputaland coast I will occupy over Christmas in 2015.

But I wasn't always like this. Long before I discovered the marriageable qualities of Afrikaans girls from Somerset West, I attended the University of Glasgow in Scotland. It was summer 1998, my graduation year, and my friends were variously getting jobs, dropping out and drifting off to Australia. Together with some Scottish pals, I decided to celebrate my new freedom with a trip to the pub. But not just any old boozier: Britain's remotest pub, the Old Forge, which is 30km from the nearest road on the mountainous Knoydart Peninsula. It's a two-day walk just to get there, across a landscape of towering Munros, silvery lochs, and glens carpeted with bracken and gorse.

The trip began inauspiciously. We lost one member of our expedition in a very un-remote pub in Glasgow. Undeterred, three of us climbed into my friend Paddy's Fiat Uno, put on a psychedelic-rock tape and headed bravely into the Highlands. We shimmied up Loch Lomond's serpentine shore and crossed Glen Coe's wild moors to Fort William, a rain-lashed town overlooking the steely waters of Loch Linnhe.

After a few drams of single malt and a hearty dinner in the nearest pub, we retired to the car for some shut-eye. The Uno stood alone in an exposed car park, buffeted by howling winds and icy spray from the loch. I don't know why we didn't look for accommodation; I don't think the idea even crossed our minds. As Paddy and I reclined the front seats,



forlorn groans came from the darkness behind us as we crushed our friend Dom.

The coming days were equally disorganised. We hitch-hiked to the trailhead and got a lift with a middle-aged hillwalker. Clad in breathable synthetic materials, he enthused about the day ahead, happy in the knowledge that his wife would be following his every step on a satellite tracking system. Blinking through his spectacles at Paddy's tousled keffiyeh, Dom's holey woollen jumper and my Nepalese bobble hat, he inquired about our plan. That's when his breezy manner evaporated and the car lapsed into an uneasy silence. He bade us farewell at the trailhead with words that would haunt me for the rest of my twenties: "I hope you find what you're looking for, lads."

**We struck out merrily**, stopping only for whisky-infused tea, and came to a bothy as the sun was setting. These stone shelters were traditionally used by shepherds; today, they're more likely to accommodate gangs of fitness freaks. This bothy was no exception: The bunk beds inside were all taken, reserved under bundles of state-of-the-art orienteering gear. More organised people had beaten us to it: unsmiling men with chiselled faces who were now colonizing the kitchen. We retreated outside to pitch our tents.

As we grappled with poles in the twilight, a cloud of bloodthirsty midges feasted on every inch of exposed flesh. Even more disturbing was the

discovery of ticks embedded on our lower legs. Displaying a surprising depth of entomological knowledge, Dom explained that the parasites could pass liver fluke from sheep to their human host, and extracting them suddenly seemed an urgent matter. Paddy produced some tweezers from a first-aid set that looked like it had come in a Christmas cracker. While I nervously bared my legs, he proffered a bottle of Old Spice aftershave. "Alcohol disinfectant," he explained. "Don't wanna waste the whisky."

Paddy successfully removed our ticks and late the next afternoon he showed his fierce determination once again. The light was fading and we were discussing whether to pitch camp for the night. Suddenly he realised what day it was. "It's Saturday," he boomed. "We can't not be in the pub on Saturday night!" When I complained that I was tired, he simply loaded my rucksack onto his back alongside his own. Dom and I watched him disappear over the brow, the sinews in his neck bulging as he muttered, "Pub... Saturday night..."

**After such a feat of endurance**, the Old Forge was rather anticlimactic: We arrived at 8.10pm to be told that the kitchen had closed at 8pm. Our loose plan had been to catch a ferry to the fishing town of Mallaig then take a train back to Fort William, but the barman told us the next ferry would only depart in two days. We were stranded in mainland Britain's remotest pub with diminishing funds.

Resolving to cut back on the single malt, we dined on crisps and pints before pitching our tent on a patch of wasteland behind the pub building.

I finally ate a square meal the next day, having been told to wait for the chips to arrive from Mallaig Spar. "Here they come!" said the barman, pointing out the window at the coastline beyond. It was a heroic, "Ride of the Valkyries" moment. Across the grey sweep of the bay, a lone motorboat ploughed towards us through the swell, loaded with frozen chips.

When the ferry finally arrived we piled in gratefully. It edged into the choppy water and we grimaced in the wind as we watched the pub become a tiny blob on the shore and, finally, disappear from view.

**I didn't expect to return** to the Old Forge, but almost a decade later I found myself crossing the Knoydart Peninsula's windswept glens once again. This time it was a very different experience. I visited with a group of fellow young professionals and media types from London; not Dom or Paddy, the latter having developed a penchant for Buddhist retreats.

My new gang was an altogether more organised bunch, sporting cagoules, compasses and even the odd girlfriend. After a good night's sleep (in a bed, not a car) we drove all the way to the trailhead, no hitch-hiking this time, and reached the bothy in time to score the bunk beds, awaking refreshed for the day's hike to the hallowed pub.

Reflecting my own changes, the Old Forge had realised its novelty status and gentrified: a restaurant section had been added, "Remotest pub" T-shirts were for sale and fleece-clad weekenders from Glasgow and Edinburgh docked their sailing boats to munch a shepherd's pie. Even the shepherd's pie was served with hand-cut chips rather than the frozen variety, although the motorboat from Mallaig Spar was presumably still the pub's lifeline. Guesthouses had sprung up and we passed a pleasant night in one before chartering a private boat back along the loch to our waiting cars.

If I think about it, though, that first expedition was far more memorable. It was more stressful, sure, but it was also more fun. When you've returned from the wilderness, the only thing you have is the story. No matter how much you suffered along the way, it's that story that you'll hang on to for the rest of your life.

I might need to chat with my wife about planning a bit less and letting a holiday just take its course...

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