

THE BOOK OF THE BIVVY

by Ronald Turnbull



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Ronald Turnbull



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DEDICATION

To the man in Ruigh-Aiteachain bothy who asked: 'But what happens if it rains?' I'd walked a long way that day, and it didn't come out very lucidly. But the answer's disarmingly simple, and he'll find it in Chapter 5.

SAFETY NOTE

A survival bag or bivvybag, carried as an emergency shelter, is a valuable safety aid.

However, when the bivvybag is used in place of a tent on trips through wild country, the margin of safety is reduced. This practice is only recommended to those with hillwalking experience, who understand the use of map and compass and how bad the weather could get. The normal precaution of leaving a timed route-plan with a responsible person is even more important for bivvybag walkers.

Note on 2007 Edition: The 'Manufacturers and suppliers' pages have been updated and should be referred to for current information.

Cover photo: Ronald Turnbull at dawn, Snowdon summit (photo by Glyn Jones)

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FOREWORD

by Julian Miles
designer and manufacturer of
Kathmandu Trekking bivvybags and bashas

When Neolithic man and Neolithic woman first slipped quietly into a cave, stopping only to build a fire at the entrance before disappearing inside for a long, long weekend, humanity gained a sense of privacy, but began to lose touch with its environment. This process has been going on ever since.

Within a few days, two pairs of eyes began to look out over the flickering flames, into the sunshine and the darkness, at the forests and the hills, as the wind blew, the snow fell and the rain lashed the rocks. Those eyes had already begun to forget what it was to be out there all the time, with the animals, at the mercy of the elements, and probably even more vulnerable than the wolves and the deer were themselves. Then one day there were three pairs of eyes looking out, and man had a home, a family to look to, and little time to remember what it had been like...

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then, much of it very murky water indeed. But throughout the world, except in areas where shepherds still sit and watch the sheep, or the plough scrapes through the soil behind an ox, people look to the land, whether it be called heath, highland, outback, wilderness, savannah, desert or jungle, with an ancient longing to return, albeit temporarily, to what was before.

There are many ways of doing it. From the Mongolian nomad sheltering in the luxury of his felt-clad yurt against the gales that tear across the Steppes to the wretched tin boxes some people drag around behind their cars from one campsite to another.

In between we have the ageless 40-pounder tent that can hold a platoon of soldiers, the conviviality of the patrol tent of the scout and those metal-framed contrivances that take all evening to assemble. Then there is the greater portability of the ridge tent, and the later geodesics with their flimsy aluminium flex-poles, whose versatility allows the creation of a profusion of shapes, sizes and designs in myriad colours.

But these are, one eventually gets to realise, still structures. A compromise can be achieved by stretching a basha above a sleeping bag. But this is another structure, and a draughty one at that.

And then, needs spawning deeds, there is conceived and brought forth a home that can be taken from a rucksack, unrolled, thrown to the ground, and climbed into in an instant, in any weather, anywhere, any time.

Thus the bivvybag was born.

In this book Ronald Turnbull takes us through every aspect of bivvyng, from our shepherd wrapped in his fleece, and later strange practices on mountains, through the novice with his appalling and nearly useless orange plastic bag, to the variety of cheap-to-expensive breathable bags on the market.

Within these chapters appears a strange race of people. The small, sinewy mountaineers of the 19th century, who seem to have approached their mountains with little foresight or planning and consequently suffered the death-rate of wartime pilots; and later, the hard men with frost in their eyelashes, rainwater in their underwear and tiny rucksacks on their backs, pounding the hills like demented grape-treaders determined to get it done as rapidly as possible...

Now this, dear Reader, is bivvyng *in extremis*. It is quite possible to take your bivvybag onto the lawn on a spring evening, with a cup of cocoa and a candle, and have a wonderful time; or to escape to the hills with a 60-litre rucksack packed with wholesome food, and spare woolly socks, for a three-meals-a-day warm and dry wander with your chums. The strange thing is, however you do it, you still end up amongst the streams and the trees, the tumuli and the dolmens left by the ancient peoples, whose world you share as you walk and sleep with your bivvybag.

This is not a conventional handbook, packed with dreary facts and figures, mostly irrelevant, about bivvies. That stuff is to be found on the swing-tickets in the retailers' shops. But it does take you through the history of, and equipment used by, people who have bivvied and who bivvy now.

Then it is up to you either to sit back and dream, or go out and do...

End of extract from
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'They are the best of nights: they are the worst of nights.'

Just where are the half a million bivvybags sold in Britain over recent years? Probably waiting for Ronald Turnbull to show the nervous virgin users the way forward.

Ronald's informed, humorous, instructive, wry look at the world of the bivouac is certainly the first, and perhaps the last, word on this unexplored territory. *The Book of the Bivvy* is a half-and-half mix of how to do it and why to do it. (Or how not to do it and why not to do it.) Accounts of bivvybag nights and expeditions, both nice and nasty, alternate with practical chapters about the technicalities of the breathable membrane, how little kit you really can get away with and the secrets of lightweight long-distance. The book closes with a selection of bivvybag expeditions to initiate the unwary into the secrets.

Along the way, Ronald shows that 1900 to 1969 was the dark age of the bivouac, how Diogenes (the Cynic) bivvied under timber, and that the Eiger was climbed only through improved bivvying technique.

'People who don't smoke or drink also tend to have sexual intercourse less often. And I suspect, though this has not been studied by sociologists, that they tend to prefer the Pennines to the Isle of Skye and the B&B to the bivvybag.'

**Winner of the Outdoor Writers'
Guild's Award for Excellence –
Best Outdoor Book 2001**

The OWG Award judges described the book as 'Quirky. Entertaining. Funny. Heart warming. Very well researched and stunningly presented'.



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