



NADIR KHAN & TOM McNALLY

Foreword by Leo Houlding

EXTREME LAKELAND

A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY THROUGH
LAKE DISTRICT ADVENTURE SPORTS



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Back cover: Leo Houlding climbing *Entonox* (E7 6c) on Scafell's East Buttress. © Tom McNally.

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FOREWORD

LEO HOULDING

Stumbling through the darkness, exhausted and shivering with cold, my head torch illuminated nothing but the dense, wet mist that ripped past on wind that chilled through to the bone.

Completely disorientated, verging on seasick, in the white-out I could hardly tell if I was going up or down, never mind east or west. The only way I knew I was on the right path was thanks to the remarkable half-metre accuracy of the GPS, my eyes glued to the bright screen watching the red arrow sway either side of the blue dotted line while sore feet squelched through boggy ground.

Having already been on the go for over twenty hours, covered twenty-five miles of rough terrain and climbed thirty-eight pitches with severely insufficient food or water intake, wearing all my layers and carrying no emergency equipment and with no communications, I was acutely aware of the precariousness of the situation. With any hope of rescue a long way off, a sprained ankle or twisted knee could easily and quickly result in hypothermia or worse.

But this time I wasn't on a major expedition to some remote greater range, I was just down the road from home, somewhere between Pillar Rock and Great Gable in the Western Lakes. It occurred to me that I'd first been up here when I was a child not much older than my daughter who was tucked up in bed not twenty miles away.

The Lake District 'Classic Rock Round', a thirty-four-mile, 4,300 metres of ascent, sub-twenty-four-hour jaunt around the fifteen Lakeland climbs featured in Ken Wilson's iconic book *Classic Rock*, certainly isn't a picnic, but I hadn't anticipated the day leading into such a serious predicament.

Our complete lack of preparation, having not done any of the climbs or inspected any of the routes in advance, meant Anna Taylor and I knew we wouldn't be vying with Will Birkett or Tom Randall for a heroic sub-twelve-hour record.

But the climbs are well within our capabilities and our presumed general familiarity with the fells made an on-sight round a tempting prospect in what would most likely be the last fine-weather spell of the year.

The short October days certainly didn't help but it was the far-worse-than-forecast weather that forced us to abort our attempt three quarters of the way around at Pillar Rock, the most isolated point of the round, and left us stumbling through the darkness, deeply grateful to the GPS, taking extra care to avoid an incident.

Then out of the fog a uniquely colloquial saviour, a barbed-wire fence, appeared like a lifeboat through the swell, offering an easy line to follow down to safety. Soon enough we dropped below the cloud base and out of the wind, eventually hitting the road at Honister Pass.

As a glorious dawn brought with it the warmth and colour of a perfect autumn Lakeland day we slogged the last six miles down the road through Borrowdale to the car that was parked at Shepherd's Crag. It was here that I had climbed my first multi-pitch route, *Little Chamonix*, thirty years earlier. A smile grew across my face as I considered the irony of having been on the edge of an epic so close to home after a lifetime of extreme expeditions to the most hostile natural environments across the globe.

I was born a stone's throw from the foot of those fells, in Penrith, the gateway to the Northern Lakes. It was here in 'the loveliest spot that man hath found', as Wordsworth put it, that I discovered a passion for outdoor adventure that would evolve into a profession as a climber and a life of extreme adventure that has led me to the wildest experiences in places I never dreamed existed, at the most remote ends of the Earth – from skydiving high into the Canadian Arctic, to discovering lost worlds in the depths of the Amazon rainforest, and from snow-kiting thousands of miles at breathtaking speeds to reach a mile-high cliff in Antarctica, to bouldering in 1920s alpine gear at the top of Mount Everest.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to these Lakeland fells that I once again call home.

My journey on this adventurous path began with family forays on to the gentler fells, Blencathra

and Catbells, and weekends wild camping in the woods of Borrowdale and becks of Swindale when I was little more than a toddler, kindling a love of living in nature, of being feral in the wild.

But walking uphill is tiring and my young self was soon bored of the majestic views. It wasn't until my dad and I progressed from the well-trampled trails of the classic Wainwrights on to the jagged scrambles of Striding Edge on Helvellyn and Pinnacle Ridge on St Sunday Crag that these rolling, sheep-covered hills became a much more enticing proposition.

Once you start needing to use your hands to ascend, getting to the top becomes a much more engaging endeavour. As the flanks grow steeper, the consequences of a mistake grow higher and the element of risk comes into play.

Then a friend introduced me to rock climbing proper. A brave new world of vertical walls, high exposure, specialist equipment and real danger. That was the pivotal moment when I found the meaning of my life and have hardly looked back since.

As the stakes grow higher, fear and adrenaline enter the game and these humble, green hills beloved of poets and painters take on an entirely different persona. Viewed through the right prism, armed with the necessary gear and skills, the Lakes becomes a big kids' playground created by Mother

Nature to allow those who can to push themselves in directions others don't even know exist. This is Extreme Lakeland.

In the three decades since discovering this world of adventure and extreme sports I've been thrilled to enjoy most of the activities captured within this book. Many I encountered for the first time here in the Lakes, while others I was introduced to elsewhere and have yet to practise on my doorstep as pictured here.

I left the Lakes in search of bigger game and greater scale straight after finishing school. The appetite for adventure I developed here has served me well on countless missions throughout seasons spent in many of the world's finest adventure playgrounds – Chamonix in the Alps, Yosemite in California, Patagonia in South America – and dozens of major expeditions to the greater ranges and beyond.

Throughout those decades of travel I imagined I would settle in one of these glamorous adventure hubs. The sun-kissed walls of the western USA, Alpine delights of Europe or rustic wilderness of Patagonia were all tempting, and I seriously considered putting down roots in all of these places. But as I matured and began to figure out what I truly valued the most, the subtle beauty of this little patch of North-West England consistently came out on top.

On becoming a parent and the plethora of new dimensions and complications that brings to life I realised that, for me at least, I can think of no better place to raise a family and to call home.

Yes, it rains a lot! Yes, the crags are small and the approaches long. Yes, some winters the snow and ice are sparse.

But when the conditions do align – those long spells of sunny high pressure when all the high crags are dry and the trails become dusty underfoot; when the ice does form and the snow settles, and the north faces come alive with tools in hands or skis on feet; when the rivers are in spate, or the thermals and winds harmonise for a sublime day of flying – I could not agree with ol' Wordsworth more that this is indeed 'the loveliest spot that man hath found'.

At least that's what I felt walking down Borrowdale on my tired legs in that crisp autumn sunrise after surviving that aborted attempt at the Classic Rock Round.

Welcome to Extreme Lakeland. Enjoy it!



© Nadir Khan Collection

Adventure sports photography has always been a passion, a companion, a familiar touchstone telling me who I am, how I relate to the world around me as we spin on our little planet in space. And we all need a sense of who we are. It grounds us and gives us reference points. But for me a lot of those certainties have seemed to change and shift as I've got older. Priorities change and what once seemed like absolutes now seem less certain.

We live in an image-obsessed world, where style means more than substance and the appearance of a life well lived has more value than actually living. In this self-obsessed, social-media world that we now inhabit, it seems counterintuitive to bring out a book celebrating 'the image'. But the purpose of this book isn't just to celebrate the summit shot, the happy face, the celebratory fist bump or the Instagram shot to make your friends envious. As we all know, life isn't made up of snapshots of victory and triumph. Life goes on when the cameras are switched off, so while not sexy or envy-inducing, these images actually say more about who we are as people than the mountaintop moments of glory.

INTRODUCTION

NADIR KHAN

I hope in this book you will glimpse behind 'the brave face' and see people being honest about who they are. There are short stories from people talking about battling ill health, juggling family life, dealing with mental health and the one none of us can escape, getting older.

This book is a celebration of life, of lives well lived, in all their messy glory. It's a celebration of a community of climbers, runners, walkers, mountain bikers and paddlers. It's a celebration of joy, of the privilege to live in a land where movement is free and one can go about one's business, pleasure and sport relatively free from mortal danger, in an age where so many in distant lands do not have that privilege.

And it's a celebration of connections. All the athletes photographed in this book will know of each other, or have climbed or biked or paddled with each other, such is the network of people that make up the adventure landscape in the Lake District. And it's connections that help us to feel human, to feel love and to feel we belong to each other in many ways. Especially coming as it does during a time when connections and closeness have been threatened

and tested to breaking point. I hope that this book inspires you to seek out parts of the Lakes that you've not visited or to plan some new adventure, and to share those adventures with people you love and care about and create memories to cherish and yes, to get that next Instagram shot!

This book is a successor to *Extreme Scotland: A photographic journey through Scottish adventure sports*. That book took six years to complete, mostly while living in the south of England in a previous incarnation of life. If I was going to do another book, I felt it would be more productive to work with a collaborator, someone whose style complemented my own but also who could give a unique view of the land and people. I had come across Tom McNally's work just as I was finishing the first book and when the publishers gave the green light to start *Extreme Lakeland* I already had in mind who I wanted to work with. The fact that Tom had the same idea after seeing *Extreme Scotland* sealed the deal so to speak, and the result is what you have in your hands.



© Bruno Skinner

The Lake District, cornerstone of the English Romantic movement and home to Wordsworth, Wainwright, Peter Rabbit, fell walking, sheep farming, great pubs, excellent food, odd place names, and millions of visitors enjoying all of the above. Delve beyond these first impressions, however, and a far more nuanced and complex landscape emerges, disconnected from the somewhat sedate and 'natural' place many perceive, one in fact heavily shaped by industry and with a rich history of exploration, exhilaration and risk at its very heart.

Since moving here around ten years ago I have always wanted to embark on a photographic project exploring our contemporary interactions with this unique landscape, one that reaches beyond the quaint, well-trodden stereotypes. As an outdoors person I've always been inspired by the Lake District as a forge of adventure, steeped in heritage thanks to the legendary exploits of such historical figures as Walter Parry Haskett Smith, Bentley Beetham, Millican Dalton, the Abraham brothers and George Mallory. Today their legacy is perpetuated by a vibrant outdoor community operating not only at

INTRODUCTION

TOM McNALLY

the cutting edge of 'traditional' outdoor activities such as climbing and kayaking, but also more eclectic pursuits such as BASE jumping and slacklining. *Extreme Lakeland* seeks to document these diverse sports and just some of the amazing people who undertake them.

There have been many obstacles to overcome in its completion. The challenges presented by Covid-19 lockdowns have been significant, and my own personal recovery from the illness was a bit more character-building than I would have liked. Its lingering and strange effects reduced my activity levels for over a year – not ideal when trying to shoot images of predominantly mountain sports. The positive outcome is that these limitations forced my hand creatively, compelling me to consider at length the efficiency of each shoot and how to achieve the very maximum visual impact from every location.

Living in the national park afforded me the flexibility needed for some of the 'set-piece' images – namely the luxury of being able to plan (and wait for) the magical alignment of location, subject and light. As such there are a few pictures that took

years to actually realise. In contrast my collaborator, Nadir, living in Scotland, was sometimes forced to adopt a more fluid approach, making the long journey south, and despite our best-laid plans was faced with unpredictable weather conditions and/or a lack of subjects. Despite this, his photographs are stunning and perhaps more authentic to the true Lake District outdoor 'experience' many of us know and love!

I would like to say a huge and heartfelt thanks to all the people you see (and don't see) on the following pages – to those who put up with my tens of 'one last shot' at the end of a tiring day, often ignoring discomfort, hunger and hypothermia; to those who put themselves in mortal danger all in the name of a good picture; to those who did all of the above and didn't make the final cut; to those who looked after my children at short notice when I spotted an opportunity too good to miss before disappearing out to 'work'; and of course to my wonderful wife, Louise, and the boys, Edward and Oscar. *Extreme Lakeland* would not have been possible without every single one of you. Thank you.





WINTER



WINTERCEPTER

BY NADIR KHAN

It's 5 a.m. and I'm crunching through fresh snow to the car parked at the end of the lane. The snow is heavier than forecast and the car is covered in an icy crust. I'm wondering how the drive up to Borrowdale is going to be.

The camera bag is thrown in to the back of the four-wheel drive. The forecast is good but I'm driving through spindrift and deep snow to meet Matt and Adam just outside Kendal. The drive should be forty-five minutes to the parking place at Seathwaite from where we'll set off, but in these conditions gritting has been sporadic or non-existent, and the boys seem to think there's a big difference between North Lakes and South Lakes councils' urgency to maintain the roads. In the end the journey time is more like two hours, driving at about twenty miles per hour and occasionally side-slipping, unintentionally, around blind corners.

Finally we get to the parking spot. Vitamin I (ibuprofen) caps are taken, bags checked and loaded, and we head off. I have more body fat in my little finger than these two young lads have between them and I'm older than their ages put together. Self-doubt, aches and pains and general creakiness are creeping into my bones and leave me wondering

how long I can keep going in the world of young guns and super-psyched athletes.

Adventure photography is something I've done since university, even through the years of having a family, career and the various twists and turns of life. But the last two months have been turbulent. Moving to Edinburgh full time after living in the south of England for thirty-two years, leaving all I had known behind me, has left me feeling lost, empty and very alone.

I'm walking up behind Adam and Matt and surprise myself by actually keeping up with them and not being half an hour behind. Sweat drips down my back and I wonder how windy it will be when I change into a dry base layer. I'm kicking myself as I only have one pair of gloves with me that are warm enough to keep the cold and wind out, and I can feel sweat building up inside them.

We get to the top of Gable Crag and I drop an abseil line down the side of the route that they're climbing – *Winterceptor* (VII, 8), a hard mixed testpiece. My gloves have now frozen into cardboard and I'm abseiling down the line as they get ready to set off. The climbing is slow and steady, as Matt tries to find gear in thin cracks, and clear away ice

and snow to find ledges and grooves for picks and crampon points to purchase.

I'm eyeing up my single abseil line. I have rope protectors on the edges but an experience from 2017 at Gogarth when my abseil line was cut almost in half leaves me feeling on edge. As a photographer, you spend a lot of time on an abseil line, as compared to a climber. As Adam climbs up, I jumar up the rope, the seesawing action causing the rope to rub up and down unhelpfully against the rock.

I focus on the composition, keeping an eye on any facial expressions or body positions that speak of the energy of the climb. Stupidly I had decided to keep my crampons off for the jumaring and I get little purchase against the icy cliffs with my non-active foot. I watch my rope as it scrapes against the rock walls.

Matt is at the crux and I hold my breath, expecting him to take a fall as he shouts to Adam, 'Watch me here!', so tenuous do the moves seem to be. But somehow he's through the crux sequence and around the corner and I breathe a sigh of relief for him but also that I can get off this damn abseil line.

Note to self: from now on, always drop in with two lines.





Matt and Adam on the slopes of Great Gable. © Nadir Khan





Matt Eaves ski-touring on Helvellyn. © Tom McNally

« Dava Waterhouse on Hall's Fell Ridge, Blencathra. © Tom McNally



Becki Vale enjoying an icy dip at Blea Tarn. © Tom McNally

LETTING GO

BY GILLY McARTHUR

All you can do in very cold water is let go.

Let go of the day before or the day ahead. Of the ego and of any expectation of what is going to happen in the next moments when the sharp cold takes her grasp.

That's certainly my experience of it all, over the last six years of shedding my outer suit and just submitting to the kinaesthetic perception of the icy nip of winter.

It's a meditation, a portal to a dreamlike state of involuntary attention to now. The water is so familiar yet every time its properties are so unswervingly unique it brings me back to what it means to feel alive.

When I meet folks at the water's edge in winter (usually when I'm in a state of undress) the common and curious question is, 'Is it cold?' followed by, 'You're mad, I could never do that', and my reply is always, 'Yes, it's cold!' then, 'How do you know it's not for you? Have you ever given it a try?'

There are so many things in life, as we get older, that we close off from because society or our brains (shaped to be a certain way by years of unconscious routine and formulae) tell us that it's 'not for us' – and isn't that a shame?

By doing new things and opening up to new experiences we can develop new neural pathways to be happier, to explore this wonderful world in new ways and to find a new freedom.

Life will, at some point, deliver hammer blows of sadness and dreams deferred. Expecting life to be anything but this is folly. These hard times, however, don't need to change the whole life story to black.

For me, being totally present in nature, in a body of water, gently sews new stitches in the tapestry of my story. The dark patches of grief and sadness that life has placed there are joined with other vibrant colours; the bright colours need the dark to sparkle off.

Tiny intricacies year on year follow the same pattern of birth, growth and death. The sap rises in the trees; the leaves unfurl, play host to life, and by autumn they are withering. The wonder of it all is so beautiful, so breathtaking.

By accepting this ultimate truth of life, and its cycle of renewal, we can discover more joy in living. There's a harshness, a beauty and a wonder we have sometimes just ceased to notice.

Perhaps we have forgotten what plump raindrops really feel like on our naked skin and what grainy

rough pebbles and spongy moss really feel like between our toes. We have forgotten how soft and animal-like we really are, in all the trappings of our twenty-first-century bodies, with waterproofing and wick-away; of adornments and egos; of technology and rules on how we assess risk. We are subtly bombarded with how we need to look to be valid and how we should feel and act. It's not nature's way.

So as summer slips effortlessly and quietly into autumn and the leaves begin to let go from the branches, we can open up to possibilities to do the same.

Find opportunities to strip things back. Discover that adventures don't have to be far away; the best ones sometimes happen in our minds. Give it a go. The water does nothing but be itself, and in that simplicity we can find ourselves, awakening to life as we find it now.

I'll be up high with my axe this winter again, chipping away at the bodies of water we all really are.



James Austrums on *Window Gully (III)*, Great End. The rime on the rocks creates an other-worldly feel to this image.
© Nadir Khan

