

## BEN NEVIS (THE BEN)



'Mountain with its head in the clouds' is perhaps the most likely possible translation of the name Beinn Nibheis. With the summit wreathed in clouds on average 200 days per year this interpretation certainly rings true. Avoid the summit if you can, as it is a bit of an eyesore, littered with memorials, plaques and discarded litter left behind by the hordes of tourists that trudge up the pony track.



*"Nevis, the most massive, malevolent, most elevated lump of rock on these islands, is itself an island, humping hideous flanks from endless bogs, hard to equal for hidden depths of character."* – Jimmy Marshall

In the Groove, Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal, 1971

**Access:** Turn east off the A82 at Torlundy, 1.2 miles/2km north of the A830 Mallaig turn-off and cross the railway bridge. Turn right and follow track for 0.5 mile/0.8km to a large car park.

**Approach: (A)** From the car park, follow the steep path diagonally up through the woods to the upper (guides) car park by the dam. Continue less steeply up the left (north) bank of the Allt a'Mhuilinn (stream of the mill) leading to the CIC hut in around 2 hours.

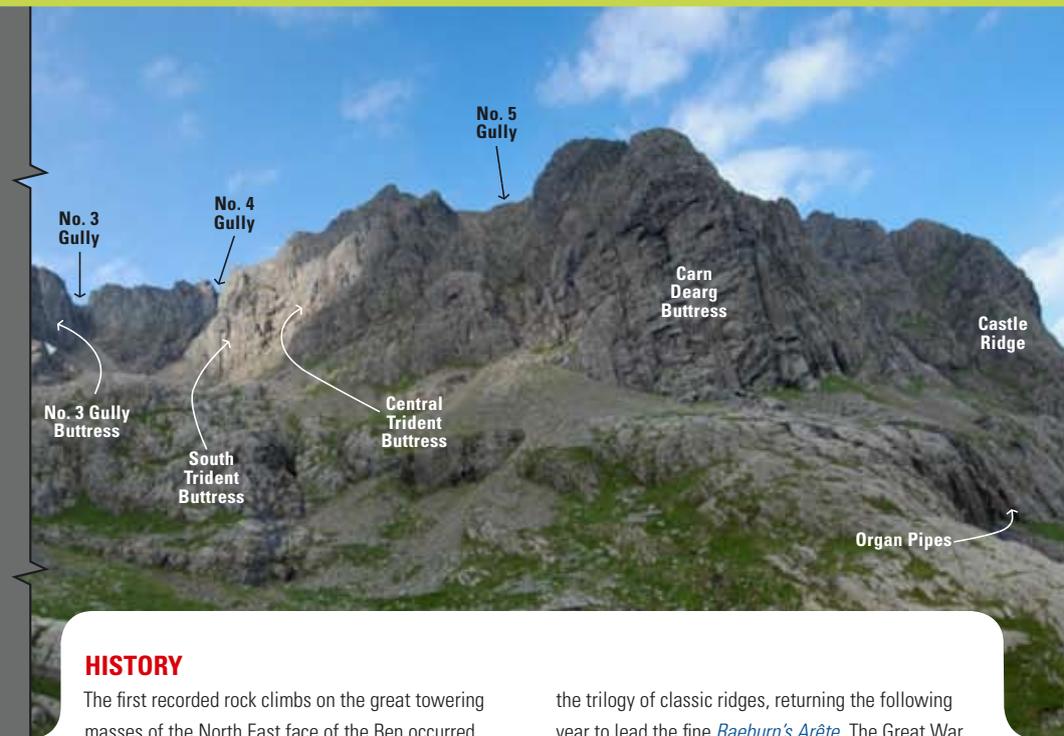
**(B)** On foot from Fort William, either follow the pony (tourist) track starting from either Achintee or opposite the Youth Hostel in Glen Nevis, cutting off left (north) at the halfway lochan and following a path contouring round the hillside to the CIC Hut in 2¼ hours.

**(C)** Alternatively, cut through the distillery opposite the A830 Mallaig turn-off, cross the railway and follow a path up the right (south) bank of the Allt a'Mhuilinn for 500m, cross a small bridge and head steeply up a path to join up with the usual approach at the dam.

*"I've never seen a bigger hill,  
I don't suppose I ever will,  
But Everest is bigger still,  
The very thought would  
make you ill."*

– Doug Benn

The separate cliffs are described from **right to left**, as encountered on the approach.



## HISTORY

The first recorded rock climbs on the great towering masses of the North East face of the Ben occurred in September 1892 when the Manchester based Hopkinson family – brothers Charles, Edward and John and John's son Bertram descended *Tower Ridge*, three of them having ascended as far as the Great Tower the previous day. A few days later they all ascended *North-East Buttress*, adding in the space of a few days two classic ridges, which are today the two most popular routes on the mountain. These discoveries went unrecorded until a footnote appeared in the *Alpine Journal* in 1895. The first actual ascent of *Tower Ridge* occurred the previous year, when Norman Collie, Godfrey Solley and Joseph Collier made an ascent in full winter conditions, unaware of the Hopkinson's endeavours. The West Highland Railway opened up in the autumn of that year, greatly easing access. *The Direct Route* on the Douglas Boulder was ascended by William Brown, Lionel Hinxman, Harold Raeburn and William Douglas the following year.

Raeburn was prolific at the turn of the century, making a solo ascent of *Observatory Ridge* in 1901 to complete

the trilogy of classic ridges, returning the following year to lead the fine *Raeburn's Arête*. The Great War wiped out a whole generation, though significantly, the CIC Hut was erected in the 1920s as a memorial to Charles Inglis Clark, who was killed in the war. The left side of Carn Dearg Buttress was breached with the chimneys of *Route 1* from Graham McPhee and Albert Hargreaves in 1931. Hargreaves soon returned to cross the *Rubicon Wall* on Observatory Buttress, a bold and committing lead for the day. Later, the irrepressible Dr Jim Bell made numerous forays with various partners on The Orion Face, culminating in possibly the longest vertical route in mainland Britain with the aptly-named *The Long Climb* in 1940, setting a new standard on the mountain at Very Severe in the process.

Far and away the most active climber throughout the Second World War was Brian Kellett, a conscientious objector assigned to work on the forestry at Torlundy. Climbing mainly solo and after work, he repeated the majority of the established rock routes and added many important new routes and variations. On Carn Dearg Buttress, he pioneered the committing rising

traverse of *Route II* in 1943, whilst the following year up on the Minus Face he contributed the fine *Left Hand Route* and *Right Hand Route* (both VS), the latter solo and on-sight. He also soloed the fine *1944 Route* on the South Trident Buttress. Ironically, Kellett and his climbing partner Nancy Forsyth were killed later that year, from a fall whilst roped together on the North Wall of Carn Dearg. After the war, Arnold Carsten and Tommy McGuinness pushed standards to HVS with *The Crack*, equalling Kellett's remarkable solo ascent of the eponymous *Kellett's Route* on Gardyloo Buttress two years previously.

In the fifties activity shifted to the obvious potential of the great sweeping slabs on Carn Dearg Buttress. In April 1954 two of the strongest English climbers of the day, Rock and Ice members Don Whillans and Joe Brown, snatched the plum line of chimneys near the right side of the buttress. The route was named *Sassenach*, after an understandably miffed Scotsman (George Ritchie) shouted up "*English Bastards!*" This much-eyed line had been attempted by the likes of Kellett in 1944 and the strong Aberdeen team of Patey, Taylor and Brooker the previous year, both teams attempting to traverse in from either side. At E1 with some aid, the technical difficulty was beyond the reaches of either party at the time.

Talented southern teams continued to dominate over the next few years, with Cambridge climbers Bob Downes, Mike O'Hara and Mike Prestige adding *Minus One Direct* in 1956. When combined with the *Serendipity* and *Arête Variations*, added subsequently by Ken Crockett and Ian Fulton and Stevie Abbott and Noel Williams respectively, the route gives a superb E1. A few months later, Whillans returned with Downes, adding the plum line of *Centurion* up the centre of Carn Dearg Buttress and *The Shield* up the right edge. National pride was restored in 1959 when Edinburgh climbers Robin Smith and Dougal Haston put aside "*a mutual antipathy*" and teamed up to complete the fine hanging corner of *The Bat*. That same summer, Creagh Dhu climbers John McLean and Bill Smith added the similarly difficult (E2) *Subtraction* on the Minus Face. In a different vein, Ian Clough and Hamish MacInnes pegged their way up a

line of cracks up the overhanging right wall of Carn Dearg Buttress. *Titan's Wall* elicited the comment "*pegs shouldn't replace skill or supplement a basic lack of shame!*" in the SMC Journal.

Carn Dearg Buttress remained the main focus of attention, with Jimmy Marshall and James Stenhouse adding the superb sweeping traverse line of *The Bullroar*, and *The Shield Direct* (Marshall and George Ritchie) in the early sixties. McLean and Smith returned with Willie Gordon in 1962 to add the sustained *Torro*. A couple of years later, Brian Robertson and Jimmy Graham completed the complex line of *King Kong*, taking impressive ground between *Centurion* and *The Bat*, though employing much aid. Ian Nicolson and Norrie Muir freed the aid on the second ascent in 1970. The same pair added the inaugural *Heidbanger* on Central Trident Buttress, with Stevie Docherty and Bobby Gorman adding the neighbouring *Steam*. Docherty returned with Davy Gardner the following year to complete the excellent *Metamorphosis*. Muir and Nicolson also made impressive solo ascents of *Centurion*, unaware of each other's ascents until a later meeting.

*Titan's Wall* had attracted many attempts at a free ascent, with southern raiders Mick Fowler and Phil Thomas snatching the free ascent in June 1977 from under the noses of the locals. Dave Cuthbertson and Murray Hamilton made a further free ascent four days later, at the time unaware of Fowler's ascent. Round the corner, the glaringly obvious 'big banana groove' had been the subject of numerous attempts down the years. Cuthbertson, Willie Todd and Dougie Mullin added *Caligula* in 1978, climbing the initial groove before traversing out right, climbed on-sight. Murray Hamilton pushed standards to E4 in 1983 with his ascent of *The Banana Groove* in its entirety, after Kenny Spence had cleaned the line the previous weekend. The following weekend Pete Whillance added what remained the hardest route on the mountain for almost two decades with his ascent of the bold *Agrippa* up the exposed left arête of *Titan's Wall*. The following summer, Spider McKenzie made the second ascent, in addition to making audacious solo ascents of *Torro*, *Centurion* and *The Bat* in a

morning. Rock climbing activity slowed down, with the only other addition of note in the eighties Willie Todd's *Boadicea* to the right of *Titan's Wall*. Finally, in 2001 Rick Campbell and Gary Latter completed the hardest

route on the mountain with their ascent of the sustained continuous cracks of *The Wicked*, climbed ground up. They later returned in 2004 to complete the adjacent *Trajan's Column*.

## 1 Castle Ridge \*\*

270m Moderate

FA Norman Collie, William Naismith, Gilbert Thomson & M.W.Travers 12 April 1895

The northmost and easiest of the great Nevis ridges. Although not matching the quality of the 'big three' classic ridges (*Tower*, *Observatory and North-East Buttress*), being both lower down and further north and west, it comes into condition much more readily than the others, particularly in the spring when the Orion Face is still in winter condition. Start at a tongue of rock above 'the lurching stone', an obvious large boulder on the path from Meall an t-Suidhe. Wander up slabs to get established on the main ridge or gain the ridge by an obvious traverse above **The Organ Pipes** from the **CIC Hut**. Once established on the ridge itself, like all



2hr

the other Nevis ridges the correct route is well marked by crampon scratches. Follow the easy angled ridge then a clean cut left-slanting corner leading to easy bouldery ground. A steep blunt tower is the crux starting by an awkward corner before moving up right to climb wide crack in the steep nose. A short chimney above marks the last of the difficulties. Continue along the crest then a large tilted slab to gain the final boulder slopes of Carn Dearg. **Descents:** Either **(A)** traverse a short way south west to avoid the North Wall and descend the tortuous boulder field down to the south end of Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe, or **(B)** from the summit of Carn Dearg contour south to gain the zig-zags on the tourroid path, or **(C)** descend by *Ledge Route* on Carn Dearg Buttress.

📷 *Castle Ridge, Jo George climbing. Photo Dave Cuthbertson, Cubby Images.*



**THE ORGAN PIPES**

2hr

NN 165 723 Alt: 700m

The long low crag situated below **Carn Dearg Buttress**, 10 minutes up right from the CIC hut.

**1 The Trial \*\*****45m E3 5c***FA Wills Young, Andy Tibbs & Andrew Fraser 19 June 1988*

An excellent pitch. Right of the main watercourse and at the right side of the crag is a dry area of buttress. At the

right side of the steepest part is a corner which starts from a grass ledge. The route climbs the cracked arête on the smooth wall left of the corner. Start directly below the arête. Climb the clean wall to the arête, then the arête.

**CARN DEARG BUTTRESS (RED CAIRN)**

The showpiece cliff, the front face contains a series of slabs and overlaps, steepening on the right side of the buttress. Round the edge the north-west face presents a clean 100m high vertical to slightly overhanging wall with a fair concentration of high standard modern routes all finishing at a convenient central abseil point. The front face receives the sun until early afternoon; therefore an early approach is worthwhile.

**Approach:** Head directly up from the CIC Hut towards Coire na Ciste then follow a path cutting diagonally right across the screes to the base of the buttress. 15–20 minutes from hut.

**Descents:** Traverse leftwards down *Blue Route* and down the lower reaches of **Number 5 Gully**, which often holds considerable quantities of snow well into the summer. This can be bypassed by an obvious fault on the left (west) side (about Moderate) or by continuing across a good path on the continuation of the upper shelf and down the lower reaches of Coire na Ciste.

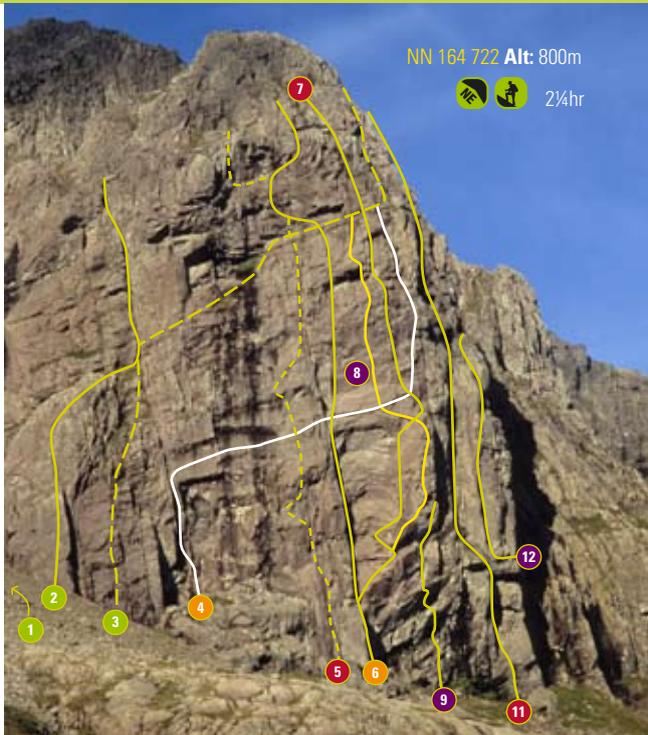
Alternatively, in situ abseil anchors are in place on the belays of *Titan's Wall*, which provides fast descents for routes from *The Bat* rightwards. 60m ropes reach ground on stretch!

**1 Ledge Route \*\*****450m Easy***FA J. Napier, R. Napier & E. Green 9 June 1895*

An exhilarating route, the easiest 'climb' on the mountain, it is in reality no more than a simple scramble. Start up **Number Five Gully**, the large gully defining the left side of the buttress. This usually holds much snow until well into the summer. If so, climb a fault line up the buttress to the right. Traverse out right on the first prominent shelf (often damp – crux) and continue round this until beneath a shallow slightly left-slanting scree-filled gully. This leads to another wide shelf. Follow this rightwards until it eventually leads to the easy angled crest of the buttress. Finish up this airily to the plateau.



© Rick Campbell on the 'hoodie groove', pitch four of *The Bat*.



NN 164 722 Alt: 800m



2¼hr

## 2 Route 1 Direct \*\* 180m Very Difficult

FA Albert Hargreaves, Graham MacPhee & H. Hughes 17 June 1931; Direct Start Robin Plackett & W. Campbell 31 August 1941

The conspicuous chimney cleaving the left edge of the buttress. It provides a traditional struggle, saving its crux for the final pitch. Start to the left of the lowest rocks bounding the lower left flank of the buttress.

- 1 **30m** Climb just left of the right edge to belay by blocks.
- 2 **45m** Climb directly then a groove on the left to its top. Move right round the edge and up diagonal break then the wall above to belay on a second ledge.
- 3 **35m** Scramble to the top of the subsidiary buttress and walk right to the base of the chimney.
- 4 **25m** Grovel up the chimney (not as ferocious as it looks) then by a grassy groove to a recess. Go up the right wall to a belay.
- 5 **25m** Regain the chimney and climb it to belay on ledge above.

- 6 **20m** Continue up to gain the final chimney. This leads with interest to large block-strewn terrace. The path of *Ledge Route* lies just above.

## 3 Route II Direct \*\*\* 235m Severe 4a

FA Brian Kellett & W Arnot Russell 9 June 1943; Direct Start Brian Robertson & George Chisholm 19 May 1962

A superb high level rising traverse across the buttress. Committing for the grade – there is much steep ground both above and below! Start at a cairn on a large wet mossy lump (spring) right of *Route 1*.

- 1 **30m** Climb up the centre of a smooth slab to a small ledge, traverse right 1m to a smooth wall and up a small slanting corner. Traverse left to a stance. Continue up a small black crack to a flake belay.
- 2 **15m** Climb straight up for 15m to a large block below a groove.
- 3 **10m** Climb the groove and move out right to a shattered ledge.

- 4 **25m** Continue up broken ground to belay at the base of the chimney of *Route 1*.
- 5 **15m** Follow the chimney to a large chokestone at 10m then traverse out right on the slab to a small belay stance.
- 6 **25m** Continue out right to a large flake beneath the great overhangs.
- 7 **10m** Traverse the flake for 6m then up the rib to an inconspicuous thread belay low down.
- 8 **40m** Continue traversing the prominent fault to a platform on the edge of the buttress.
- 9 **30m** Scramble up the edge.
- 10 **35m** Follow the groove above mainly on the right wall to gain the crest of the buttress.

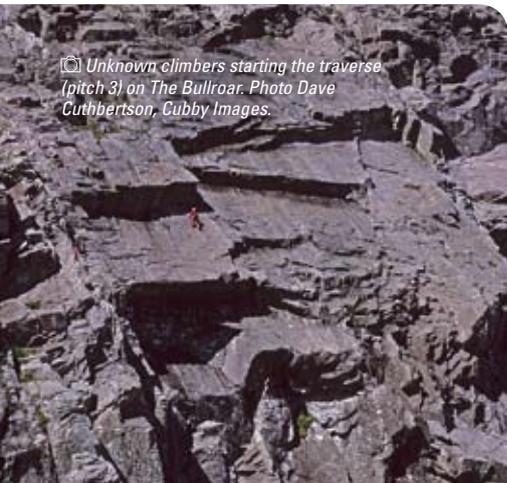
#### 4 **The Bullroar** \*\*\*\* **280m HVS 5a**

FA Jimmy Marshall & James Stenhouse 30 May 1961

A long route following a committing rising traverse line across the centre of the buttress. Excellent positions with considerable exposure – not for timid seconds! Start 30m right of the *Direct Start to Route II* at a bottomless groove 6m right of a large vegetated right-facing corner with some large boulders at its foot. The wet streak on the main slab dries early in the day but returns by mid to late afternoon. The first pitch is often wet and a little dirty; thereafter the climbing is on immaculate rock.

- 1 **35m 5a** Pull over an awkward bulge into a bottomless groove and climb this

📷 *Unknown climbers starting the traverse (pitch 3) on The Bullroar. Photo Dave Cuthbertson, Cubby Images.*



- steeply (often wet) to belay at a thread 5m below the overlap at the top of the central slabs.
- 2 **15m 4b** Move right then go up a crack to just beneath the overlap. Traverse right across the slab on obvious weakness to belay just above.
- 3 **28m 5a** Step down and traverse right across the slab, dropping down to a (PR). Continue traversing the obvious line leading to a finely positioned belay in groove on the edge halfway up pitch 3 of *Centurion*.
- 4 **30m 4c** Climb the crack above then traverse right to a belay under the overlaps.
- 5 **30m 4b** Traverse right under the overlaps on excellent small flake holds to easier ground. Climb this to a large terrace above the chimneys of *The Bat* and *Sassenach*.
- 6 **12m** Traverse left from the left end of the terrace to an area of shattered rocks beneath an undercut groove.
- 7 **20m 4c** Climb the left-slanting groove to large ledge beneath undercut roof.
- 8 **45m** Negotiate the awkward slot to good holds and continue up the groove and continuation to grass ledge.
- 9 **50m 4c** Continue in the same line to large ledge with loose blocks.
- 10 **15m** Finish more easily up the slabby wall above the broken edge on the left.

#### 5 **Torro** \*\*\*\* **225m E2 5c**

FA John McLean, Bill Smith & Willie Gordon (1 PA) 25 July 1962;  
FFA Ian Nicolson & Ian Fulton June 1970

Excellent sustained climbing following a good natural line up the slabs left of *Centurion*. Start just left of the rib forming the left edge of the *Centurion* corner.

- 1 **30m 5b** Climb the steep initial groove to a flake then the groove above to a larger flake. Climb the right side of the flake and step back left and continue up groove to belay at a flake.
- 2 **30m 5b** Up a fault above then left and up a slim groove to PR on slab. Traverse left on a lip round the arête and up leftwards to belay on a ledge.
- 3 **25m 5a** Move up and right to a flake, step right and up rightwards up a slab to belay at an old relic.
- 4 **20m 5c** Follow a faint crack for 6m then step up left onto a higher slab. Climb up the edge of the

slab to the roof, step left and cross this (crux) leftwards. Climb the groove above to a belay.

- 5 35m 5a** Follow the fault for 5m then traverse right across the slab to a crack. Follow this to an overhang which is climbed trending leftwards, then by a groove to a grassy stance.
- 6 20m 4b** Continue up the fault to a grass ledge beneath the long band of overhangs.
- 7 30m 5a** Move up to the overhang then out left onto a steep slab, heading out left to another overhang. Step off a detached flake and delicately traverse left onto a large slab. Continue easily up rightwards for 12m to belay beneath the final overhangs.
- 8 35m 5b** Traverse left into a steep little corner and follow this to a large grass terrace at the top.

## **6 Centurion \*\*\*\* 200m HVS 5a**

*FA Don Whillans & Bob Downes 30 August 1956*

A magnificent route based around the great central corner – the classic line on the cliff. So named because the overlapping slabs on the right reputedly resemble the armour plates of a Roman centurion!

- 1 15m 5a** Climb the left wall of the corner by an awkward crack to fine stance on top of the rib.
- 2 35m 5a** Traverse into the corner and climb it to a belay on a slab in an overhung bay. A brilliant pitch – the holds and protection just keep coming!
- 3 25m 4b** Traverse left onto the edge. Climb easy grooves until level with the lip of the big overhang then step back right onto the lip and move up to a stance.
- 4 20m 4c** Move back into the corner. Traverse left up across the wall on flakes then up the arête to a block belay.
- 5 50m 4a** Climb slabby grooves in the same line past a block then continue up easier ground to join the *Route II* traverse. Trend diagonally left to belay on small muddy ledge.
- 6 30m 5a** An intimidating exposed pitch. Move up to the overhang then out left onto a steep slab, heading out left to another overhang. Step off a detached flake and traverse left onto the slab on good hidden holds. Saunter rightwards up the fine

rough slab above to belay beneath some blocks.

- 7 25m 4c** Traverse right for 6m and climb a spiky arête to a bulge. Surmount this, step left into an easy groove and climb this to the terrace at the top.

## **7 King Kong \*\*\*\* 275m E2 5c**

*FA Brian Robertson, Fred Harper & Jimmy Graham 1+2 Sept 1964: FFA gained from The Bat: Norrie Muir & Ian Nicolson June 1970*

A fantastic long sustained route following an improbable and intricate line through the overlapping slabs right of *Centurion*. The original contrived start is seldom climbed (slow to dry) and the route is described by the more usual approach via *The Bat*.

- 1 15m 5a** As for *Centurion*.
- 2 15m 5b** Climb 6m up the corner then traverse right across the pink slab to belay at a perched block.
- 3 35m 5c** Step left from the belay. Make a hard move up to gain a steep slab. Move up leftwards to gain an obvious line of weakness through the overlapping slabs and continue directly to reach an impasse at a large overlap. Undercling down and right to gain a thin crack springing from the lip of the overlap. Follow this diagonally rightwards across the slab above to belay at the right bounding rib.
- 4 35m 5b** Climb directly up to gain a vertical crack in the red wall above. Climb this then trend up and right across the wall (bold) and up to belay at the top of *The Bat* corner.
- 5 40m 5b** Move up from the belay then traverse left for 5m to the crack system left of *The Bat*. Climb this over a series of overlaps to move left to belay on a small grass ledge.
- 6 25m** Climb easily by a grassy bay to a vertical wall then traverse left and up to a block belay beneath an overhanging wall capped by a small roof.
- 7 40m 5a** Follow the crack through the roof and the continuation corner on the left to belay beneath a corner. *Route II* crosses here.
- 8 40m 4c** Climb the corner, swing across to a spike then move left and continue up to a spike belay.
- 9 30m** Continue slightly right then up to a grassy groove, moving left then up to finish.



 *Rick Campbell  
nearing the top of pitch 4  
of King Kong.*