

Scaling new heights

Abigail Williams was looking for a fresh challenge 23 years ago – but a charity climb proved a real up and down experience

I was bursting with confidence and felt on top of the world. Well, actually I almost was. I'd just reached the summit of Ben Nevis – at 4,406ft it's the highest mountain in Britain. Not only that but it meant I'd raised hundreds of pounds for cystic fibrosis sufferers.

It was 1993. My life was rather humdrum working in a steady nine-to-five job in London's Square Mile and I was still single. I was needing a fresh challenge when I saw an advert asking for volunteers to undertake a sponsored charity 'walk' up Ben Nevis. The charity would organise transport, food and accommodation. All we had to supply was enthusiasm, some sponsorship from friends and family, and strong legs! I dusted off my walking boots, dug out my

woolly hat, gloves and a warm sweater and squeezed them all into a borrowed rucksack. It was a crisp October morning and as I neared the designated pick-up point I began to feel nervous. I was alone, and suddenly feared everyone would be with friends. Thankfully, my fears were mostly unfounded. Lots of people were milling around, but many were alone too.

I got chatting to some of the other single women. As the coach sped along the motorway we learnt about each other's lives and reasons for wanting to take up the challenge. By the time we reached the Scottish border there was a real sense of camaraderie. By now darkness had descended and the huge, dark silhouettes of the mountains eerily surrounded us as we approached our hotel in

Fort William. That night, after a de-briefing by the organisers and an early dinner, I massaged my legs with a blend of special oils in preparation for the next day's ascent.

At six the following morning, the mountains were still resting behind low cloud and mist

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and in spite of the early hour I breakfasted on bacon and eggs and hoped this was not a huge mistake! An hour later our group of 20 to 70 year olds of all shapes and sizes stood at the base of Ben Nevis in silent awe as we looked up at the challenge ahead, each secretly hoping we'd make the top. I started the walk in leggings, sweatshirt, walking boots and chunky socks but an hour into the ascent I was boiling and was sure I would never need the woollies I'd brought or the windproof jacket that had been supplied.

We set off across a small bridge before joining the undulating path that teased us into the ascent. The weather brightened and it was amazing to see our surroundings clearly now; the air was pure and the landscape breathtaking. As we climbed up



Abigail faced up to the challenge and remembers the experience as one of her greatest moments

and up, scrambling over jagged rocks in places, I stopped now and then to take photos and a much-needed breather! At one o'clock we all sat down with the packed lunch we'd been given.

Then, the ascent really started. The weather became increasingly cold and I was grateful to put on my woollies and jacket. As the path became rockier and rockier I began to feel weary, lagging towards the back but was encouraged by one of the guides. "Keep going, you can't give up now," he said and somehow it had the desired effect. I pushed on, my feet crunching over the light snow that was now scattered over the path.

Although the rest of me was warmly clad my face now began to feel raw from the wind, but

just as I thought I couldn't take another step, the mountain summit came into view. It was the incentive I needed. With aching legs, back and soles of my feet, I kept putting one foot in front of the other until at last I was atop the summit. It was exhilarating. Everyone hugged and posed for the group shot to prove we had done it!

Just when I thought it was time for the easy part, my nightmare really began. As the descent became more vertical my toes rammed into the front of my boots and it became increasingly painful with each descending step. I untied and retied my boots to give my ankles better support, and rest my feet, but to no avail. Close to tears I realised there was only one

thing for it, I had no option but to run down that mountain to minimise the length of time I'd be in agony. And so I did, leaping and running over rock slabs, whizzing past everyone and everything and despite the ever-increasing possibility of ending up spread-eagled over the rocks, I survived and made it back to base a whole hour before the rest of the group.

For weeks after, I felt I could conquer the world. Despite bruised legs, black toenails and my muscles aching every time I went downstairs, I felt a huge sense of achievement. Not only had I faced the challenge but I knew my sponsorship money was going towards helping people with much greater life challenges to overcome. I still count that experience as one of my greatest moments.



Plenty of enthusiasm was the main requirement for tackling Ben Nevis