

Visit to Lake District from 21st to 29th April 2009

The purpose of my Lake District visit was (a) to have fun and (b) to test some of the equipment that I will be using during my JOGLE trek. My walks are recorded below. Most nights were spent sleeping in the back of the car, inconspicuously tucked away at the back of various car parks or down country lanes. The nights of Sunday 26th and Tuesday 28th were spent camping alongside Grisedale and Styhead tarns, respectively. From 21st to 25th I used a Berghaus Freeflow 35 litre daypack. From 26th to 29th I carried the Aarn Natural Balance bodypack loaded to 18kg.

Day	Walking Route	Miles	Mountains > 2,000 ft	Other Fells
Tue 21 st Apr.	Keswick to Catbells and back	8.5		Catbells
Wed 22 nd Apr.	From car park just north of Latrigg to Skiddaw, looping around via Skiddaw House and Atkinson Pike to Blencathra, then back.	14	Skiddaw Little Man Skiddaw Bakestall Blencathra	Latrigg
Thur 23 rd Apr.	Loop from car park near Ashness Bridge, east of Bleaberry Fell on the west side of Derwentwater.	14	Ullscarf	Bleaberry Fell High Seat High Tove
Fri 24 th Apr.	Loop starting from Buttermere (village), along mountains on south side, and back via Hopper Quarry, Fleetwith Pike and south side of Buttermere (water).	11	Dodd Red Pike High Stile High Crag Fleetwith Pike	Seat Hay Stacks
Sat 25 th Apr.	Loop from southern end of Haweswater, up Kidsty Pike and back via High Street.	7.5	Kidsty Pike The Knott High Street Mardale Ill Bell	
Sun 26 th Apr.	Start from Patterdale. Camp at Grisedale Tarn.	10	St. Sunday Crag Fairfield Hart Crag Dove Crag Great Rigg Seat Sandle	
Mon 27 th Apr.	Return to Patterdale.	12	Dollywagon Pike High Crag Nethermost Pike Helvellyn Helvellyn Lower Man White Side Raise Watson's Dodd Great Dodd Stybarrow Dodd	
Tue 28 th Apr.	Start from Wasdale. Camp at Styhead Tarn	6	Scafell Pike Broad Crag	
Wed 29 th Apr	Return to Wasdale.	10	Great Gable Green Gable Brandreth Grey Knotts Kirk Fell Looking Stead Pillar	
TOTALS		93	39 major peaks	7 lesser peaks

Note: Linear distances specified. No account for elevation.

Equipment report

1. Leki Ultralite Titanium Trekking poles

These were not used until the second day. Initially, the locking mechanisms slipped a few times until I learned that if I did them up quite tightly I could still get them undone (unlike some others I have had experience with). This is the first time that I had made serious use of a pair of poles as opposed to a single one, and I quickly became comfortable with them. Their low weight was appreciated, and using them I found myself able to relentlessly power myself up the hills, even with an 18kg sack. By the end of my visit they were looking fairly battle scarred, but this was only cosmetic and testimony to the amount of use I had given them. Functionally they were perfect, and I had by then become quite fond of them. I doubt if I will ever be without a pair again when hill walking.

2. Aarn Natural Balance bodypack

This relatively expensive specialist pack has been manufactured by Aarn Design in New Zealand, a company owned by the designer, Aarn Tate. It has several unique features. Firstly, it uses large front 'balance' pockets to enable part of the load to be placed in front of the chest. This is intended to compensate for the weight on the backpack section, enabling the wearer to walk upright rather than hunched over. The total volume of the balance pockets is less than that of the backpack section, but by placing more dense items in them (i.e. water), the front and rear weights can be roughly balanced. I also packed the items I needed easy-to-hand in the front pockets, such as my camera, mobile phone, notepad, sunscreen, sunglasses (wishful thinking on this trip). The front pockets are mounted so that their weight is applied to the hip-belt, not the shoulders, and their existence explains the 'bodypack' description.

For a 65 + 10 litre pack, the Natural Balance is light at only 2 kg. That includes the weight of two built-in dry bags in the main sack, one for each of its two compartments. Along with the roll-top closures, these ensure that the main pack is completely waterproof. Dry bags are still needed to protect items in the balance pockets. Freedom of movement whilst wearing the pack is restricted only minimally due to the pack's unique suspension system - I even managed some fairly dodgy scrambling whilst it was loaded up to a full 18kg.

The pack is comfortable enough to wear all day. I was encouraged to do this by the fact that it was a bit of a pain to take off and put on with the balance pockets swinging about, but I got better at this with practice. My main criticisms are as follows:

- (a) The slotted adjusters on the sternum straps had the irritating habit of partially unclipping themselves from the shoulder strap web. This occurred more-or-less daily and happened on both sides. On later contacting Aarn, it was suggested that this could be fixed by hooking the sternum adjuster to the shoulder strap web upside down. I will experiment.
- (b) The metal frame from one of the front pockets slid out of its location, escaped its Velcro containment and poked out of the top of the pocket on one occasion. This was easily corrected, but I did see another report somewhere on the

web suggesting that someone else had experienced this. Aarn have admitted to a slight manufacturing flaw here that can be corrected by adding a little stitching at the top of the frame cover.

- (c) I was concerned about the strength of the plastic components that slide up and down the back stays, especially since I mount my tent and Ridge-Rest on top of the pack, which adds extra strain. It is difficult to repair or substitute for the function of these plastic rings in the field (a metal ring might damage the stays), so I asked if Aarn would send a couple of spares. They assured me that no breakages of this part had been reported in 3 years, but were nevertheless happy to assuage my fears and provide the spares requested.

In summary, once I have dealt with the issues discussed above, I am confident that the pack will serve me well during my JOGLE trek.

3. Hilleberg Unna tent

Everything it says on the packet, and more. Easy to erect (both inner and outer pitch together), stable in the wind, roomy and cosy. Although not described by the manufacturers as having a porch, the sewn-in floor section can be rolled back and the outer pulled outwards using the guy rope to produce a significant porch area. With the front partially opened to form a wind-brake, cooking is easily done in this space. Furthermore, even with the front of the tent closed because of rain, I had no particular concerns about using this unfloored area to cook inside the tent - appropriate care being taken, of course. Just magic.

4. Boots – Scarpa GTX and Brasher Hillmaster

It is easiest to discuss the two pairs boots together because they were so similar in many ways. I wore each pair alternately, so they both covered roughly the same number of miles and suffered similar treatment, although the Brasher's got a good soaking in Thursday 23rd when I ended up sinking into bog up to my knees. I dried them using pages from the 'The Daily Sport' which, at 30p, turned out to be the cheapest expendable national newspaper I could get. Except for this, both pairs kept my feet dry.

The Scarpa's had Superfeet 'Green' insoles fitted and the Brasher's Orthaheel Sports insoles, which are almost identical in shape. The inner and outer socks made by Smartwool and supplied by Cotswold were comfortable although, on initial use, both boots made my heels a little sore. I have suffered bursitis in the past, so I think that my heels object to being pushed to the backs of the boots when climbing for long periods. After protecting each heel using a Compeed blister plaster and covering this with a layer of zinc-oxide tape, I experienced no further problems. With the Scarpa's, I did also experience soreness on the top of my big toe on my right foot, perhaps because of where the boot chose to crease. The zinc oxide tape again prevented any worsening of this, and I suspect the problem will go away as the leather softens.

Since the paths of many of my routes were quite rock-strewn, with the occasional bit of scrambling being necessary, the boots looked pretty battle-scarred at the end of the eight days. There were fully inspected at home after a good clean and a dose of

Nikwax. Tread wear was barely noticeable, but on both pairs (although worse with the Brasher's), the rand had started to detach from the leather near to the toe-bend area, potentially compromising waterproofness. I will have to live with this as I am certainly not running-in any further pairs. The 600 miles that each pair is expected to do during my JOGLE walk will soon reveal how they hold up over longer distances.

Both types of boot are quite heavy, but I felt that they provided good foot protection over some pretty rugged terrain. They gripped reasonably well, perhaps needing a bit of care on wet rock, and were still comfortable by the end of the day. I concluded that they were equally suited for my JOGLE trek. I have chosen to use the Scarpa's for the more mountainous Scottish part of the journey and the Brasher's for the flatter southern section, but doubt that it would make much difference if I reversed this choice.

5. Katadyn Mini water filter

At 210g, this is probably the lightest pump-type water filter available. It was not only the lighter weight that caused me to select this over the 310g Katadyn Hiker. It was the fact that the ceramic filter cartridge can be cleaned in the field should it get blocked (whereas a replacement filter cartridge is required for the Hiker). I had heard that the Mini was hard to pump, perhaps rather evident given its smaller pore size. It is true that the effort required is somewhat similar to that required to pump up the bicycle tyre, and the delivery of filtered water is quite slow, but not so slow that it presents any problem in hydrating a lone trekker. The ceramic filter has a much longer life than the Hiker's fibreglass unit, but is reported to be more fragile. In other words, I must take care not to drop it.

Naturally, I tested it at home before taking it outdoors. It was immediately obvious that stowing the silicone input tube and pre-filter in the space made to accommodate them at the base of the filter required more patience than I had. In inclement weather, I couldn't imagine anyone doing what the designer intended. Instead, I stowed these parts in a separate polythene bag to keep them away from the exit tube, and slipped an elastic cord around the lot before putting the filter back into its carry bag.

Although the water flowing into the tarns I camped by was probably clean enough to drink 'neat', I used the filter anyway to test its functionality in the field. No problems. Easy to use. Pity that a chlorine tablet is still required to remove viruses, but great if you want a crystal-clear cup of tea.

6. Keela Sonic Jacket

I had seen one of these on sale in Dartmouth and, on trying it on, found that it fitted nicely with or without a thick fleece underneath. I liked the 'burnt orange and black' colour too. The name Sonic apparently arises because the material is cut ultrasonically to save the weight of hemming.

However, at over £120, the jacket seemed a bit expensive, especially since Cotswold Outdoor had promised to supply me with a Rab Burgen. However, when I saw a factory-second Keela Sonic for £40 at the NEC Outdoor Show, I couldn't resist. Since

the Bergen would not be available in time for my Lake District visit, the Sonic came with me instead.

The Keela product has ‘waterproof’ zips throughout. Note the cynical commas around ‘waterproof’, although I cannot say that I noted any leakage during showers. Being at hip-height, the side pockets are unusable anyway when a rucksack with a hip-belt is worn. The chest pocket is OK though, and large enough to be useful, although not large enough for an OS map. The jacket breathed OK and was comfortable to wear all day over a range of temperatures and degrees of wetness (i.e. from drizzle to downpour), although I kept the pit-zips open all the time. I only took it off when the sun came blazing down for a brief moment during the walk up St. Sunday Crag. I needn’t have bothered. It was back on ten minutes later.

A notable problem did occur at Buttermere. The bottom bit of the main zip (apparently called the retainer box) fell off along with the slider, presumably when I was undoing the jacket. This rather seriously compromises its ability to remain waterproof and windproof. Amazingly, I found the bits in the grass nearby, and effected a temporary repair using UHU adhesive. This held out until I got home, and I have now reinforced things with two-part epoxy adhesive. Phew. I will take a pac-a-mac with me next time as an emergency back-up.

My only other comment relates to the odd positioning of the strap that is intended to neatly stow the hood. It’s in the wrong place, and scrunches up the whole neck of the jacket if I actually use it. I didn’t. I have subsequently thought of moving the strap and restitching it where I think it should be, but leaving the hood unconstrained is really no problem so I won’t bother now. In all other respects, I like the jacket.

7. Mountain Hardware Lamina 20 sleeping bag

Like the Hilleberg Unna tent, this does all it is supposed to do. At 1.33kg it is light for a synthetic bag with lower comfort limit of -7 degC (20 degF). I enjoyed very cosy nights next to the tarns when the outside temperature was down to around 3 degC, and it packed easily into its compression sack so that it could be stowed in the lower compartment of my Aarn pack. Nothing more to say. It does the job – but see below.

8. Multimat Adventure Superlite

I bought this mat because it is less than half the price of the equivalent Therm-a-Rest Prolite 3 Short. This may have been false economy. The friction between the nylon shell of the sleeping bag and the surface of the Multimat is low, so I tended to slide around rather more than I would have liked. Since the tent was pitched on level surfaces, I didn’t find my sleep unduly disturbed, but this would not be the case on sloping ground. Therm-a-Rest state that their Prolite uses a sticky-dot non-slip surface. If this works then it may be worth the extra money. As for being self-inflating, I haven’t yet seen one of these that can fully inflate without the help of a good pair of lungs, but the internal volume of these short mats is so small that only a few puffs are necessary.

STH
14th May 2009