

# Chapter 14

## Ben Nevis

After a couple of years of getting used to work, I decided I needed to look at making more of a career out of garden centres – by now I couldn't imagine doing anything different, the work was physical and fast paced, and mostly I really enjoyed it.

I have always liked people and there were plenty of those in the shape of customers and staff, but I was working for an independent family business with one garden centre only, making advancement in the short term unlikely, so when an opportunity came to move to a nearby centre which was part of a small group it seemed like a sensible and interesting idea.

At the new Garden Centre my role was very similar to my previous job, but it seemed more structured and there seemed to be a more realistic possibility of progressing to a more senior role whilst still giving me free access to toilets.

I also quickly developed a good relationship with a colleague in the management team who, a few months into my time there, invited me on a challenge he and a friend of his did each year; this was to drive overnight up to Scotland and walk up to the summit of Ben Nevis.

After spending several days considering the variety of problems, I would potentially be faced with – a lack of toilets on the mountain itself, a very long drive in a car without ready access to toilets being the two most obvious I decided with a well-planned approach it would be possible for me, and I really felt like challenging myself, so I agreed to do it.

As the trip got closer, I realised it also meant I would have to tell my companions something about my condition. It was only fair to give some explanation for why I would need to stop on the way there on a regular basis.

I also needed to make it clear that I needed the toilet arrangements to be, front and centre of any plans made for the ascent of the mountain, as well as a good estimate of how long it might take to reach the summit and back down again.

Even as I write this, I still find it hard to believe that I agreed to do this, I am sure I would say no if asked again today but having agreed to do it I told my surprised parents and bought myself some new hiking boots.

A few days later in October 2001, I found myself getting into my colleague's car after work preparing for the drive up to the mountain.

I had told him by this point that I had a condition which meant I had to go to the toilet more often than other people but not really anything else, and he didn't seem too bothered. This helped me feel more relaxed and confident, after all he was one of the few people outside my family I had ever told.

The plan was simple as car journey's go, I just needed to say when I needed to stop, and they would stop as soon as possible after that for me. He reassured me that there was a toilet at the bottom of the mountain which we could use before and after the hike so I should be okay.

As expected, it took the whole night with the 2 of them taking it in turns to drive, I didn't have a license myself at this point, so I got to sleep on the way more than they did.

After the 10 or so hours of driving and several stops for me, we arrived at our destination and for a few moments just stood marvelling at the sheer size of it.

I know it sounds obvious, but the mountain was big, not just big, it was **Huge** (it is a mountain, right? But still, it is hard to appreciate the sheer scale of it until you are there contemplating how you are going to get to the top of it).

I was now feeling extremely nervous, what had I gotten myself into? The more I looked at it the more massive the mountain seemed.

The walk was around 8 hours with no toilets available, which in theory sounded just manageable, but by this point I was getting quite worried that if I had a random bad day this would be a serious issue.

Just to top it all off I was (and still am) scared of heights too.

I was seriously questioning my mental state when making the decision to join in this adventure, but it was too late to back out now without looking like a wimp, so resigning myself to the challenge I used the toilet, put on my brand-new unworn hiking boots, tried using the toilet again just in case.

Then I took a deep breath and set off with the others and an empty stomach (I often did this when trying to delay any toilet urges for as long as possible).

The first part of the walk was straight forward enough; I was no stranger to walking and it was quite a cool but not too cold day.

Once we hit the snow line it became much harder very quickly.

Despite it being a definite walk and not a climb I did fall over more than once and on one occasion slid quite a distance from the path, at the time I found it highly amusing as I couldn't seem to stop at first.

When I finally did stop and get up I discovered I was much closer (around 10 metres or so from memory) to a pretty big drop (I don't know how high we were at that point, but it was certainly enough to be an early finish to my story) than I would have liked – it stopped being funny pretty quickly at that point and I was very careful making my way back to the path and the rest of the way up too.

After (I think) around 3 hours or so, we were about half an hour away from the top of the mountain. I started inevitably needing the toilet. This was not great timing, but not yet urgent so I just gritted my teeth and pushed on with the walk.

Once we finally reached the summit, I did have a moment where I forgot about my building urgency just staring around at the majestic yet terrifying view.

My emotions were a bit of a jumble at this point; I was certainly proud of my achievement. I spent most of my life planning, minimizing risks, and always playing it safe.

But here I was, despite my lack of large bowel. I had managed to get to the top of the highest mountain in Britain and had even managed to not (so far) shit my pants, I felt ready to burst with happiness (well mostly just happiness).

After a few more moments my intestines brought me back in the present with a kind of pulsing jolt, something had moved closer to the end of its journey. I had to get off this mountain before it got too much further.

Wanting to capture my achievement, I took out my camera only to find it had frozen, so I couldn't take any pictures.

Instead, I took another moment to check out the terrifying but spectacular view trying to imprint it within my mind, breathing in the thin but fresh clean mountain air.

We sat and ate some lunch then we started the journey back down. Despite my severely low energy level and gnawing hunger due to the lack of breakfast (and the walk up the mountain), I couldn't risk eating enough to properly refuel (just half a sandwich to keep me going I think). I was now feeling quite a bit of pain from the strain of preventing anything escaping my far frequently busy behind.

The decent was easier than the climb for me despite the pain in my bowels, the lower we got the better I felt, not only due to the anticipation of reaching the glorious safety of the toilet awaiting me but, the increasing levels of oxygen in the air meant that I was fairly motoring and got to the bottom much faster than we got to the top.

The toilet at the bottom was my only focus by now and I fairly charged down the last section getting there ahead of both of my companions. I was sweating with the effort and pain of preventing an unsanitary incident from occurring in my

underwear, but with what most have looked like an almost comical mad dash over the final few hundred feet, I made it to the toilet.

Even though toilets are not sentient I felt pretty sorry for this one after my severe eruption, it didn't really deserve what I did to it at that point. The power of my body's evacuation was stunning, to feel and hear, I felt like I was draining myself completely, it was horrifying yet strangely exhilarating at the same time.

After a few minutes I left the toilet behind certain that it would never be same again. I felt utterly drained, but I stared back up at the mountain which while still massive, no longer looked as intimidating. Not bad, I thought to myself (for a guy with no large intestine), my chest swelling again with pride and tears in my eyes, I turned away and joined my companions in the much shorter trip to a hotel for the night.

Work with that company carried on being good to me I got promoted and given more responsibilities, I also continued to have a very active social life with friends from the local pub

and work, including braving the Worthing nightclub scene for the first time.

