



GO: Lake District
DO: Ennerdale and Pillar

Scrambling on Pillar's northern flank,
with Lakeland favourites Haystacks,
Fleetwith Pike, Robinson and Dale
Head dominating the background.

LAKELAND'S GOLDEN MILE

It's been described as the most adventurous mile of path in Cumbria, but what makes Pillar's High Level Route so special?

Trail couldn't resist finding out.

WORDS **OLI REED** PHOTOGRAPHS **BEN WINSTON**

Any hillwalker who tells you they don't dream of being a mountaineer is probably lying. Although we can hit virtually every height in the UK with a pair of boots and a set of waterproofs, deep down we all fantasise about the Hillary Step. Daydream about edging up the Eiger's north wall. Imagine ourselves atop the Matterhorn. Pipe dreams? Alas, probably.

True mountaineering is the realm of Himalayan or Alpine adventurers, right? There's no official definition, but the BMC describes it as 'a combination of walking and scrambling, as well as rock and ice climbing' – placing it tantalisingly out of reach.

But what if there *was* a way? What if there was a route here in the UK that provided a window into the mountaineering kingdom? And what if it wasn't in the far-flung corners of Scotland, but slap-bang in the heart of the Lake District? Well, we've got some good news for you; read on if you're interested. >



BOOK YOUR BED

Accessible only on foot, serving piping hot three-course evening meals and with an impressively stocked bar, Black Sail Hut is pretty much the dream mountain retreat. For full details visit www.yha.org.uk/hostel/black-sail

Pillar's the kind of mountain that can't fail to set your pulse racing. Its rugged north face stretches half the length of the Ennerdale valley, with a network of crags, buttresses and arêtes combining to create a tangled wall of rock so wild that just casting a glance at it feels like sticking your fingers in a light socket. The 892m summit remains concealed when you gaze skywards from the valley floor, but Pillar's frenzied Ennerdale flank is the mountain's standout attraction. A thick canopy of trees cloaks the lower slopes that rise from the meandering banks of the River Liza, before the scene opens out into a rich, mountainous blend of broken cliff faces, shifting scree chutes, darkened hollows and colossal boulders.

But the strange thing is you don't notice any of them. The same way you don't notice the grand architecture that surrounds the Eiffel Tower, or the mighty Hudson River that laps at the base of the Statue of Liberty. That's because it all fades into insignificance next to what writer Alfred Wainwright lauded as 'the most handsome crag in Lakeland'.

Pillar Rock is one of those natural features that must be seen in the flesh to be properly appreciated. Widely believed to be the scene of the first ever British rock-climb – when a plucky shepherd reportedly scaled it to rescue a cragfast sheep in 1861 – this brutally magnificent outcrop of naked rock juts from the mountainside like a dark watchtower

An early start at Black Sail Hut. If there's a cooler hostel in England, then we're yet to find it.

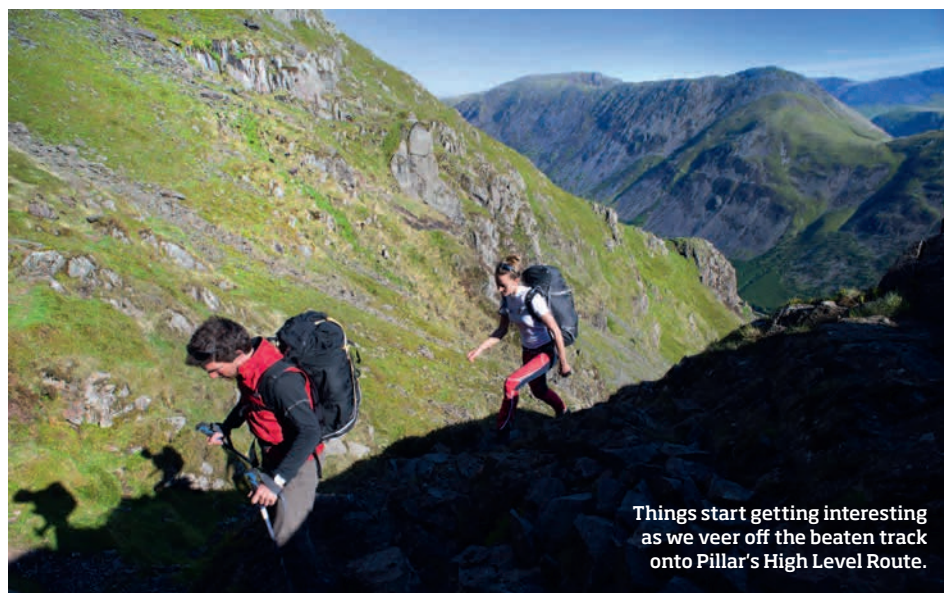
safeguarding the veiled summit above. For any *Lord of the Rings* fans out there, picture the immense rock spur running through the heart of Minas Tirith and you won't be far off. The full-frontal length of the imperious column is around 200m, and it's easy to see why this is one of Lakeland's most prized climbing scalps. Pillar Rock is home

to some of the region's most revered graded climbs, with sinisterly named routes such as The Black Widow and The Necromancer snaking across its furrowed walls; but it isn't exclusively reserved for expert climbers.

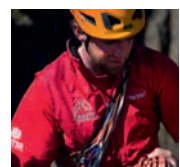
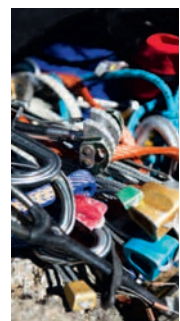
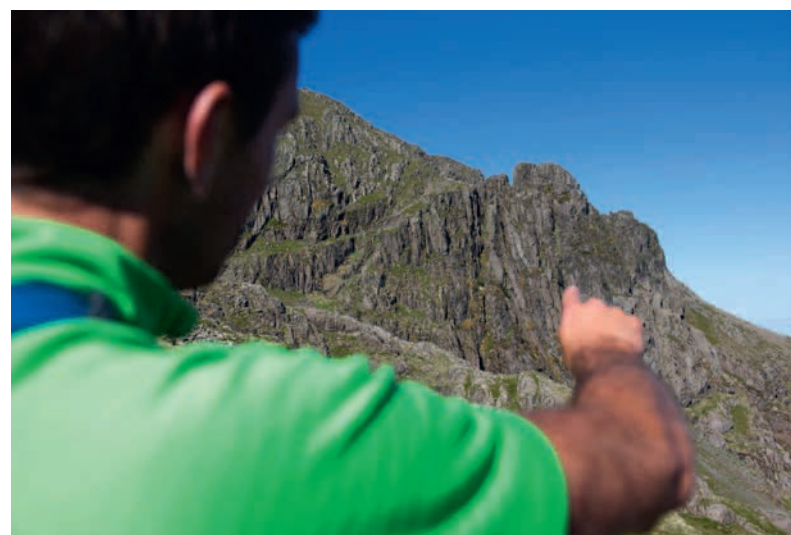
The well-worn 'Slab and Notch' route is officially classed as a Grade 3 scramble, although anyone who's attempted it will tell you it carries more than a faint whiff of proper mountaineering. The route leads you directly above a series of sheer crags, and looking down certainly isn't recommended for anyone not entirely at ease with heights because the consequences of an unroped slip aren't even worth thinking about. But the good news is that the moves aren't overly technical; and with the security of a rope around your waist and an experienced instructor showing you the way, an ascent of Pillar Rock is well within the capabilities of any gutsy hillwalker.

And so it was that I found myself peering at the formidable outline of this famous landmark from the door of Black Sail Hut on one of those deliciously clear mornings that come along so infrequently in the UK mountains; psyching myself up for my very first 'mountaineering' adventure. There are many ways to approach this grand peak, ranging from a direct drag from the foot of Pillar Rock to the popular stomp from neighbouring Steeple, but nothing compares to the fabled High Level Route – and there's no better base camp than Black Sail. The former shepherd's hut has been fantastically transformed by the YHA into a 16-bed hostel that oozes history and charisma, and its location at the head of Ennerdale makes it the ideal launchpad for an assault on Pillar.

For walkers who like getting right into the heart of their mountains, the High Level Route is the *only* way to climb Pillar. This classic climbers' traverse leaves the main summit path from Black Sail Pass at around 650m then cuts straight across the fellside



Things start getting interesting as we veer off the beaten track onto Pillar's High Level Route.



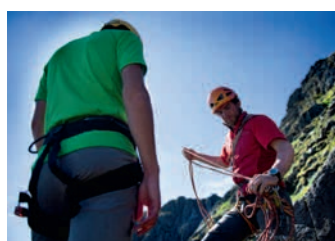
GRAB A GUIDE

Trail received expert instruction from MIC-qualified Paddy Cave who runs **Mountain Circles**, a Lake-District-based company that offers courses in all aspects of mountaineering. To find the right course for you, visit www.mountaincircles.com



for a glorious mile of walking, weaving through a tousled wall of high coves and spiky rock before joining the airy Shamrock Traverse that leads directly to 'The Rock'. This was to be our route for the day, and we'd recruited the services of local instructor Paddy Cave to add some extra spice to the occasion.

Although every member of our party knew it was well within our capabilities to stand on top of Pillar Rock before the morning was out, it eased our considerable apprehension to know we had a qualified pro with us. A few minutes quizzing Paddy about his credentials as we began the steep climb alongside Sail Beck revealed that not only had he climbed every mountain I could name, but also run the full length of Skye's fearsome Cuillin Ridge in just five hours (a traverse that usually takes two days) and



is planning to guide on Everest next year. Safe to say, he'd passed the test.

It had been a painfully early start, mainly due to our bossy photographer Ben booting us out of bed at 6am to chase the 'good light' up the mountainside, but the rewards were worth the sacrifice. Sunlight flooded the valley as we reached Black Sail Pass, and Ennerdale really was a sight to behold. Everyone has

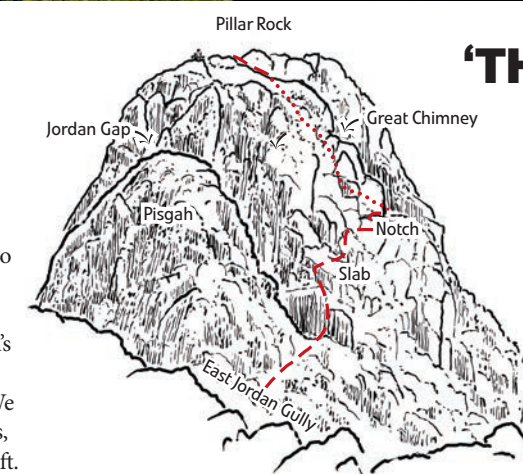
their own opinions about the vast conifer plantations that began swamping this most secluded of Lakeland valleys in the 1920s (and the Wild Ennerdale project is doing a fine job of returning the landscape to its natural state), but there was no denying the majesty of the view. With no roads in sight, steep mountains rising sharply from every angle and nothing but the sound of wildlife, wind and water filling the air, it felt as close to an alpine wilderness as you can find in England.



Dwarfed by the landscape on Pillar Rock's 'Slab and Notch' route.

And that feeling was heightened as we began our traverse of the High Level Route, described by local guidebook author Paul Buttle as 'the most adventurous mile of path in the Lake District'.

The route was originally created by climbers who desired a fast route to Pillar Rock from their base at Wasdale Head, which is probably why every footstep feels so fantastically precarious. Our 'golden mile' began with a scree descent onto the open flanks of Green Cove, before a thin path wound across the hillside towards the narrow col at Proud Knott. From here, our eyes fixed on the distant outline of Robinson's Cairn – a memorial to John Wilson Robinson, a pioneering British climber who scaled Pillar Rock hundreds of times. We then entered Hind Cove, twisting through a cocktail of grass, boulders and scree with jagged crags looming large to our left. It wasn't hard to imagine why those courageous early climbers loved this place so much. Upon reaching Robinson's Cairn we



'THE ROUTE WAS ORIGINALLY CREATED BY CLIMBERS, WHICH IS WHY EVERY FOOTSTEP FEELS SO DELICIOUSLY PRECARIOUS'

got our first proper look at Pillar Rock – with the Slab and Notch route easily visible – and I’m not ashamed to admit my heart started pounding. We could clearly make out a vicious network of chasms and gullies, each of them holding both beauty and terror in their depths, and it was becoming increasingly clear we’d have to tiptoe over more than our fair share of them en route to the summit. We nervously ate up the remaining 500m of path, which included an anxious plod across the lofty shelf of the Shamrock Traverse, before we dropped our bags at the head of Pillar Cove and began strapping on harnesses.

At this point my eyes drifted towards a horrifying scar in the rock that began just below our route, before plunging directly towards the valley floor.

Paddy: “That’s Savage Gully – amazing, isn’t it?”

Me: “I don’t like it. What’s that other one?”

Paddy: “That’s called Walker’s Gully.”

Me: “That sounds nicer. Is that because it’s an easy gully for walkers like me?”

Paddy: “No, it’s because a guy called Walker fell down it and died.”

That was enough talking for me, so I clipped on my helmet and trudged silently towards the edge of the ‘Slab’. Our route crossed a section of broken crags below the lesser summit of Pisgah before leading across a gently inclined slab of rock, which is where the rope began to prove its worth. There were no moves trickier than a moderate scramble, but the penalties for a slip were potentially fatal, and the benefits of an experienced instructor were becoming patently obvious.

We watched in awe as Paddy vanished into the ‘Notch’, jamming equipment into walls and fixing ropes as he went. Then we were off, clipped into

Negotiating Pillar Rock’s famous ‘Notch’. If it looks like there’s a truly horrifying drop below us, that’s probably because there is.

‘WE COULD CLEARLY MAKE OUT A VICIOUS NETWORK OF CHASMS AND GULLIES, EACH OF THEM HOLDING BOTH BEAUTY AND TERROR IN THEIR DEPTHS’

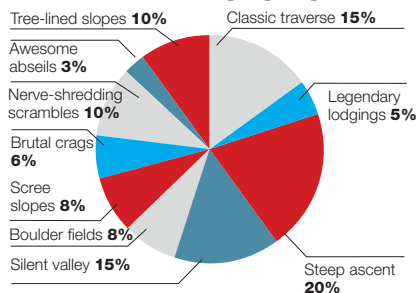


Left: taking the easy way off Pillar Rock.
Below: feeling slightly agoraphobic on Pillar's true summit.

PILLAR HIGH LEVEL ROUTE

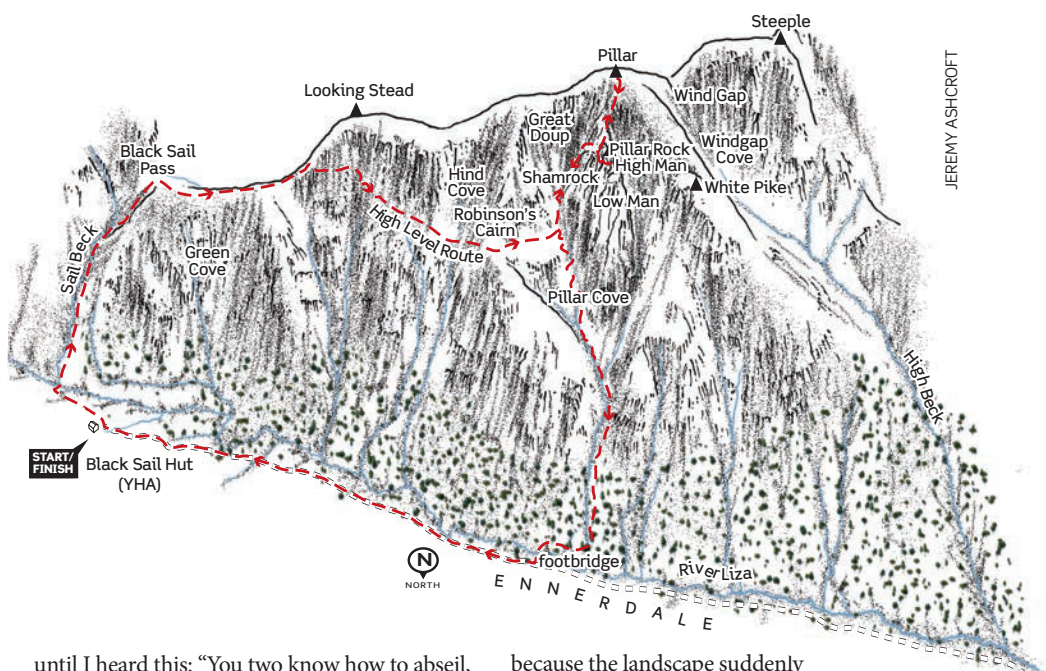
Start/finish NY194123 (Black Sail Hut)
Distance 8km (5 miles)
Time 6 hours (including ascent of Pillar Rock)

THE PIE THAT DOES NOT LIE™



SUMMIT STATS

PILLAR NY171121 892m/2,926ft



JEREMY ASHCROFT

the same rope and moving as a team. To me, that summed up the appeal of this adventure more than anything. As the last member of the climbing party, I was tasked with removing the gear from the route and carrying it to the summit. It felt like a true alpine ascent, fast and light and all clipped together, and it really was exhilarating stuff. The holds felt extremely good in the dry conditions and although there were two short, steep ascents, we were never too far out of our comfort zones.

As we spilled out of the Notch and onto the summit, I felt a tinge of regret that the whole ascent was over inside 20 minutes. That was

until I heard this: "You two know how to abseil, right?" The next thing I knew I was suspended from a rope and rappelling into Jordan Gap with nothing but my feet on rock and air at my back. When I hit the ground I decided it was official: I was now a mountaineer – even if the whole experience had taken less than half an hour.

But there was still the small matter of Pillar's true summit to deal with. As soon as the ropes were packed away, we weaved up through the ragged rocks and steep scree slopes that led to the mountain's top. And what a contrast it was when we got there. It felt like we'd walked into the middle of a high-altitude cricket pitch,

because the landscape suddenly burst open to reveal a vast plateau littered with loose rocks, stone shelters and a lonely trig point. Gentle paths led away from the summit in a multitude of directions, providing pedestrian access to Pillar's apex for those who hadn't fallen under the spell of the mountain's gnarled north face. "Where's the fun in using those boring paths?" I grumbled to Ben as he snapped our summit shots.

But deep down I preferred it that way, because it left the best bits of Pillar for us. **I**

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ATTRACTIONS**

