



Ross Hewitt climbing the gully leading up to the fork of Hanging Garden Route in superb snow and ice conditions

Hemming Wackerhage

HANGING GARDEN ROUTE

Grade: 300m, V,4

Location: Creag an Dubh Loch

Route Base, Aspect & Rock Type: 750m, North-East facing, Granite

First Ascent: Andy Nisbet & Alf Robertson, 6 January 1977



Neil Morrison

Looking across to the great cliffs of Creag an Dubh Loch from the approach

With more than a kilometre of 300m-high cliffs, Creag an Dubh Loch is rightly recognised as one of the finest rock climbing venues in the British Isles. This reputation transfers to winter, but only in a qualified way. Success on one of the great lines on Central Gully Wall would crown any Scottish winter career, but conditions are so rare that they reside in a highly specialised category. The four winter climbs on this face have only had six ascents between them over a period of 30 years.

Fortunately the huge depression left of the Central Slabs holds more snow and has a more northerly orientation so it ices readily on a consistent basis. The big tick here is Labyrinth Direct (VII,6), the most difficult pure ice gully in Scotland, but more amenable in nature is Hanging Garden Route.

For many years the route was graded IV, and when Dave Hesleden and I started up it as a fall-back option one New Year we quickly realised that we had severely underestimated it. We had come prepared for mixed climbing so our axes and crampons were blunt and we carried no ice screws, but once we were above the Hanging Garden, the big depression in the centre of the face, the Left Fork was a continuous ribbon of brittle ice. Cracks are sparse on this section of cliff, and the few protection possibilities were obscured by a bullet-hard glaze of ice. We climbed three long and sustained pitches with only our ice tools for belays and no runners. I was immensely grateful that I was climbing with Dave, one of Britain's finest all rounders.

A couple of years later when Andy Nisbet asked me to review the script for the first edition of the SMC's Scottish Winter Climbs, I suggested that Hanging Garden Route should be upgraded to V,4. Andy agreed, and it has kept that grade ever since in recognition of a long, superb, committing and ultimately very satisfying ice climb.

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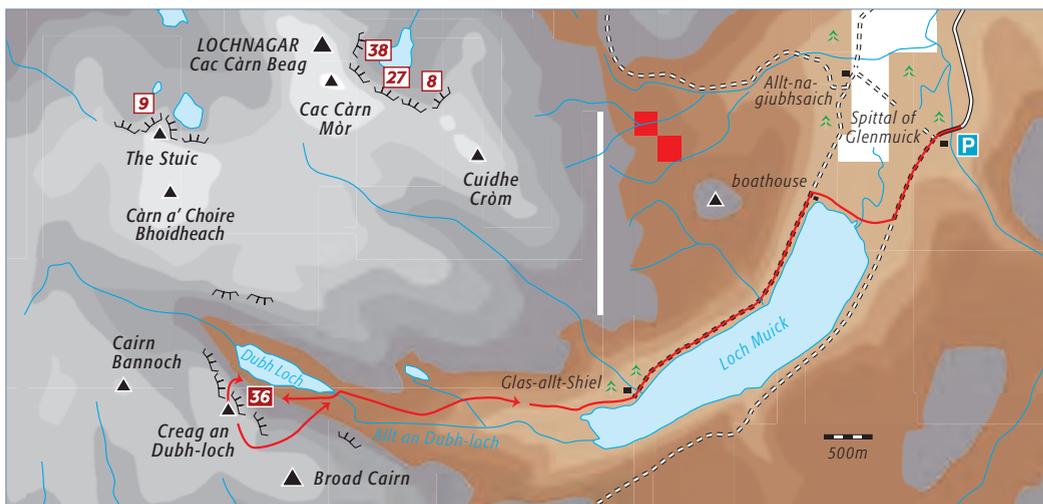
Henning Wackerhage

The initial couloir on the approach to the Hanging Garden. Climber Ross Hewitt

Approach

From the Spittal of Glenmuick car park (Pay & Display) follow the vehicle track southwards to near the north end of Loch Muick. Bear right along a path passing a

boat house to gain the vehicle track on the west side of the loch and follow it to its end at the shooting lodge of Glas-allt-Shiel. From here, a good path leads through trees and then up the north side of the Allt



Simon Richardson

36. Hanging Garden Route, Left Fork (V,4)
 R. Hanging Garden Route, Right Fork (V,4)
 LD. Labyrinth Direct (VII,6)
 LE. Labyrinth Edge (IV,5)
 C. Central Gully (I)

an Dubh-loch to gain the east end of Dubh Loch. Cross the river and skirt around the western side of the loch (or walk across it if well frozen) to reach the foot of the prominent Labyrinth Couloir (2hrs to 2hrs 30mins).

Descent

Either descend Central Gully (easy Grade I) or walk south-east from the top of the climb to the open col between Creag and Dubh-loch and Broad Cairn and follow the depression leading down to the east end of Dubh Loch.

Conditions

A sustained period of cold weather is required to make climbing on Creag an Dubh Loch a viable proposition, however with its north-east aspect, the Hanging Garden routes form more readily. Unlike the rest of the cliff, which tends to build ice mid-season, Hanging Garden Route can be climbable as early as December and a wet autumn will help ice formation. However the cliff is very susceptible to thaw, and will strip quickly, even after only a few hours of warm air.

Top Tips

Protection is hard to find, so take ice screws, pegs and ice hooks and make sure your axes and crampons are sharp!

Description

Creag an Dubh Loch is divided into two main sections by Central Gully. The left-hand section is cut by the

prominent Labyrinth Couloir that leads up to a high snowfield known as the Hanging Garden. Above, the couloir splits into two forks. Either can be climbed, but the Left Fork is the more obvious line with ever increasing exposure. Start up the couloir, move left to gain the Hanging Garden, and continue up the gully above to reach an inverted triangular buttress that separates the two forks. Move left to belay on a pedestal a little way up the left fork, and then continue up a steep icy groove until the way is blocked by a steep wall. Traverse left across an awkward slab and ascend easing ground to the cornice that is normally passed on the left.

Alternative Routes

The icy stepped fault of the **Right Fork** (V,4) is an obvious alternative line, but it can lead to a difficult cornice. If the ice in the Hanging Garden area is poor, **Labyrinth Edge** (IV,5) provides a good alternative mixed route of equivalent stature. It takes a vegetated line on the left side of the Central Slabs with a high-light pitch up a vegetated crack cutting through the left edge of the exposed Sea of Slabs.

Guidebooks

The Cairngorms (SMC), *Scottish Winter Climbs* (SMC), *Winter Climbs in the Cairngorms* (Cicerone).