Isn't it so true. The best plans are hatched on a night out.



In fairness, it absolutely was 3am, but with no feed of pints in sight. Instead, perched on the side of the Silent Valley in the pitch dark of a January night, the idea took shape.

"Cassie's Challenge"

"Oh aye, beautiful book"

"Divided into walks too"

"2020. Let's do it."

With another friend eyeing up the requisite 50 peaks for his 50th birthday weekend, it seemed like 2020 would be a popular one for Cassie.



116km split over 7 attractive hikes seemed much more my style, and it would appear my friend Cara was thinking along the same lines. Right now on the hillside though:

"Here, what's that, is that them now?"

The "them" in question was Moire, Paul and their gang of support runners, taking on a Winter Denis Rankin Round (DRR). Cara and I were drafted in as the catering team; a brave leap of faith on their part but all turned out well. A 3am teabreak at the end of Stage One was followed by a 7am breakfast at Deers Meadow, by Spelga. Yes, I have friends who seem to think this is how weekends should roll.

While DRR is perhaps better known than Cassie's Challenge, take a stroll with me to the stats department, and you'll see they are almost level pegging. 24 hour time limit, 90+km and 6000+m climb. Two very different routes though, with Cassie's starting and finishing at Annalong Harbour.

Storm after storm, and then covid, meant it was early July by the time Cara and I found ourselves admiring the guillemots in the harbour wall. This became one of my favourite things about the attractive Cassie's Challenge book, created by Mourne man Harry Teggarty. Yes, ultimately it is a route guide to the Challenge, but it's so much more.

Outstanding full colour photographs throughout, enticing route descriptions, and unexpected little pointers on plants and bird life and rocks and pools, all mean you simply know you will enjoy the adventure, before you've even pulled on your boots.

So back to Walk One Annalong...

[17.2km, 724m, Annalong Harbour to Bloody Bridge].

Off we set, with the hill ponies on Round Seefin our first port of call.

Cara and I are a curious sort of partnership in the hills. We've known each other for years through Lagan Valley Orienteers. Cara is never in a tremendous rush on an orienteering course, preferring accurate navigation and a steady pace.



In contrast, I tend to be a flurry of misplaced enthusiasm right up to the finish kite. Not necessarily very fast, or indeed accurate now that I think of it, but I certainly would earn an A for effort.

Hiking, though, it's a different matter. I swear the contours don't even seem to exist for Cara. Off she goes, a wee mountain goat, while I haul myself ever upwards through the heather. I am certainly not as goat-ish, and sometimes my pace is best described as glacial, but I do enjoy a good view, and we have tremendous fun along the way.

Walk One certainly delivers on those views, right across the Annalong Valley to Slieve Beg, with the Devil's Coachroad in sharp relief to the sheer cliffs. The highest point for us is Chimney Rock at 656m, and we celebrate with lunch just below the summit. Food is a great motivator for me, something which Cara uses to her advantage. Anything to chivvy me along a wee bit, and peanut butter balls seem to do the trick.

By Walk Two... [15.8km, 1220m, Bloody Bridge to Donard Park]

She is already shooing me over the earlier peaks of Crossones, Leganabruchan and Millstone to Thomas's.

I have been on Millstone once before, on a Hill & Dale race years ago, back when hurrying up & down mountains seemed like a bright idea.

But these others? Never been there.

This Challenge visits the big'uns, but the real delights for me are the lesser known peaks. No sign of boot prints round here, and navigation is needed.

Map & compass out when the clouds come down.



Walk Three... [19.2km, 1324m, Donard Park to Carrick Little]

sees us step inside the Mourne Wall for the first time since Rocky back at the start of July. It's now the end of August, with today best described as "tough but achievable".



This was illustrated by my increasing frequency of whingeing. I think my plaintive whimpers of "I'm really tired" on the way up Slievenaglogh sort of alarmed Cara. After all, we still had Corragh and Beg and Cove and Lamagan to go. But as the wind picked up, so did my enthusiasm, and we fair skipped along the western ridge of the Annalong Valley.



A momentous descent of Lamagan followed – yes, I actually overtook someone. I am the owner of two rather substandard knees, and renowned for painstakingly cautious descending skills, so this moment was definitely a highlight of 2020.

The hiker in question did catch us back up though, being as how we had to stop at the bottom of the steep descent for a congratulatory snack. Carrick Little Track did its usual trick of getting longer every single time we walk it, but we were homeward bound. No stop at the Blue Lough for a swim today.

Walk Four...

[19.9km, 1400m, Carrick Little to Ott Car Park]

became Walks 4a and 4b. Such weather! Turns out my 20-year-old ski gloves aren't fully waterproof. Turns out the slopes of Bearnagh are windy as. Turns out Cara calls the swampland between Ben Crom and Bearnagh "Mordor" and she's not wrong.

Turns out the early morning cloud didn't lift after all. Turns out the forecast heavy afternoon rain arrived about 10am. Turns out the better option was to bail after Bearnagh.



The importance of good kit and bad weather routes and teamwork and decision making. The Mournes will still be there another day. And another day it was for us, and another failed attempt at a beautiful sunrise, with thick fog lingering for the first few hours.

I still can't get over Ott car park being full to the brim well before sunrise. That hike along Ott, and out to Doan, was one I did as a child with my brother and parents, and we would have seen not a soul. Not so in 2020; it's busier than a busy thing on National Busy Day out there. And who could blame them, it is stunning on a good day.

The cloud obligingly cleared just as we reached the summit of Doan, though we opted instead to linger on the summit of Carn.



Much quieter, and plenty of space to take great lungfuls of Mourne air.

Walk Five... [12.0km, 470m, Ott Car Park to Hen Car Park]

was a wee shorty.



We now had the end in sight, and knew we had to squeeze these smaller days in, if we wanted half a chance of finishing the final walk in 2020. Daylight fast disappearing, rusty Autumn colours in full swing, and another fog-bound day round about Spelga. Very few other hikers spotted, in fact none for the first three hours, which I love.

Walk Six... [12.7km, 907m, Hen Car Park to Deer's Meadow]



started in a similar vein, yes more fog. Really? REALLY? But it cleared, and what an amazing day we had.

The low autumn light tuned the mountains golden, contrasting with strong blue skies and the high white trails of cirrus clouds. Life was good, if a bit swampy at times, and the climb up Eagle was surprisingly challenging for me. Cue more plaintive bleating on my part, only there was noone to hear me.

The sheep had more sense, and Cara was already sheltering by the wall near the summit.



More bog-trotting followed, a few slithery moments on the gentle descent down off Pigeon Rock, and we were eyeing up Slieve Muck.

And we were back in a few days to do more than merely eye up Slieve Muck...

we would be climbing up, on Walk Seven [20.0km, 1227m, Deers Meadow to Annalong Harbour].



I was ridiculously excited as we climbed higher. The weather conditions were simply perfect, and we were going to get our sunrise. We had to climb climb pretty quickly to capture the early light, and it was worth it. Worth the dark mornings, the foggy mornings, the rainy mornings. If you've ever met me in the hills, I've probably wittered on about temperature inversions to you. And today we got them. Cloud inversions right up until sunset. Glorious. I was in my element. Quiet mountains, with the notable exception of Slieve Binnian, had me in my happy place.

We are so lucky to have the Mournes as our playground. Cara was in search of quartz crystals, which slowed her down to a suitable pace, and we both thoroughly enjoyed the final hike. The daylight seemed to disappear all of a sudden though. We were ready for this; being November, headtorches are definitely part of the mandatory kit. On they went, and crikey that final hour or so on the road was tough. However, the lure of chips kept us going, and we skittered down the final set of steps to the deserted harbour.



Well done us!

Thank you...

Thank you so much to Harry and the whole Cassie's Challenge Team, from both of us.

