


HILL OR MOUNTAIN: A young person's journey to the outdoors

by Ethan Thomas

I am never quite sure what to call the beautiful, yet humbly sized peaks that protrude the landscape of my country. And I don't know why that is. Are they too big to be hills? Or too small to be mountains? At what point do I become a "mountain climber" and at which point did I stop becoming a "hill walker"?

The UK is unique and something, as adventurous people, we should cherish. Its geology is phenomenal, its weather... unpredictable, and its effect on the history of mountaineering invaluable. So why is it when speaking to foreign mountaineers the Brit feels slightly belittled? Our mountains are mountains like any others in the world. And although perhaps a tad smaller than many, they offer peace, tranquility and above all challenge. Those who stand on top of them are filled with accomplishment and those who look up at them are filled with awe. There is something for everyone in the UK mountains, and that can't be said for every country. Ben Nevis, the UK's highest point, has been ascended by babies, wheel chair users, pets and dismantled washing machines (beat that Mont Blanc!). Its western side holds a reassuring, sturdy track, whilst it's northern side holds some of the hardest rock and ice climbs in the world!

Perhaps there comes a point where the UK hill goer stops being interested in the height of the summit they stand on. You won't see me by the trig point examining the map for digits or confronting an altimeter. I'll be sat slightly out of the picture, observing the land around me. Looking across to the hills I know and love, and onwards to the ones I've yet to discover. You'll see me looking down at the settlements below, contemplating life



and where I'd be if I'd not had the curiosity to find my passion for the great outdoors.

The UK hills have their own community. One can go into a pub such as the Old Dungeon Ghyll (Langdale) or the Clachaig (Glencoe) and be inspired; ice axes hung above the bar, photos of old school climbers on the wall, bar men and women with a vast array of ascents under their belts and most of all the punters fresh in from a day on the hills and all the atmosphere they bring with it. I feel at home in the UK mountains. In the years I've known them they have shaped me from a young, ambitious teenager, escaping the ongoing dilemmas of school, into a qualified Mountain Leader. They have touched the hearts of so many other young adventurers in the past. From Chris Bonnington to Leo Houlding, many of this world's cutting edge climbers and mountaineers found their roots in their home hills. As the new generation of outdoor adventurers comes along I strongly believe that it is our duty to inspire them too. Parent, grandparent, teacher, instructor or armchair explorer - we can all be a major stepping-stone in a young person's journey to the outdoors. Who knows where it will take them?

So back to the initial question: "Hill" or "Mountain"? You choose. That's its beauty. I've rarely used the term "hill" when working with young people in the outdoors. They're climbing mountains and who am I to tell them any different? Ultimately some people are hill walkers and some people are mountain climbers and that isn't affected by where they are or what they're doing. It's affected by who they are and how far they dream. ■



About the author

Ethan Thomas Hill is a freelance outdoor instructor operating in the North of England. He holds the ML, SPA and BCU level 2, and enjoys spending his spare time in the hills and crags of the Lake District and further afield.

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