

Climbing Bothanvarra Sea Stack

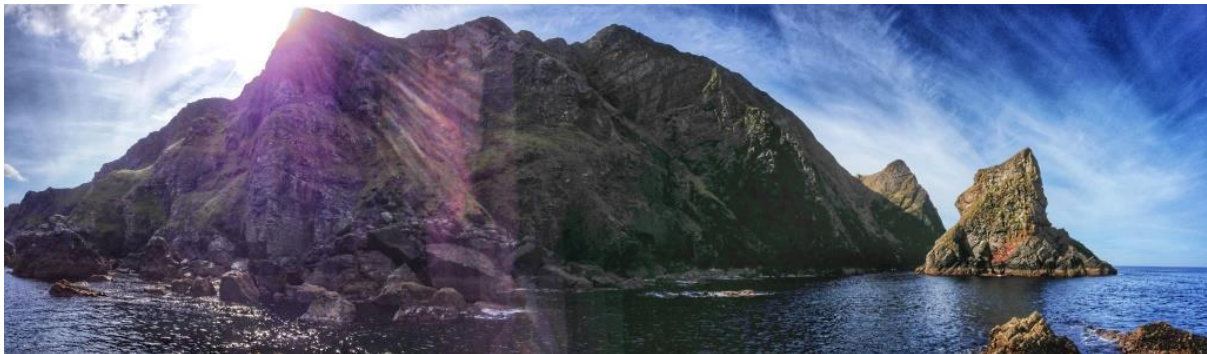
by
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Living on the north west tip of the Inishowen Peninsula is the 230 meter high Dunaff Hill. This hill is hemmed in by Dunaff Bay to the south and by Rocktown Bay to the north, which in turn creates the huge Dunaff Headland. This headland has a 4 kilometre stretch of very exposed and very high sea cliffs running along its western circumference to a high point of 220 meters at which it overlooks the sea stack Bothanvarra.

Bothanvarra is a 70 meter high chubby Matterhorn shaped sea stack which sits in the most remote, inescapable and atmospheric location on the Inishowen coastline. It sits equidistant from the bays north and south and is effectively guarded by 4 kilometres of loose, decaying and unclimbable sea cliffs.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNw6wNKpqQQ>

It was until the 24th August 2014 one of only two remaining unclimbed monster sea stacks on the Donegal coast.



Dunaff Head from the sea

It was in 2010 when I first paid a visit to the summit of Dunaff Hill and caught a first glimpse of Bothanvarra. Alas this was on a day of lashing rain and with a pounding ocean and so it was buried in a todo list of epic proportions.



Approaching Bothanvarra

Fast forward to 2013 and we were at Fanad Head to do a shoot Failte Ireland film and abseil off the lighthouse. It was then that I saw the true nature of the beast from a totally different perspective from across the bay and so it was game on. A week later and as a troop of four we headed to have a wee look at gaining the stack from the summit of Dunaff Hill by descending to sea level and a nautical passage from there. On this visit it was very apparent that this was a beast of a stack with major access and logistical problems but a lot was learned from this attempt and several cunning plans were formed.

In October 2013 accompanied by a couple of troops (Sean O'Keefe and Julia) from London we descended the 200 meter high gully to the south of the stack to a monster storm beach at sea level. It was then a 300 meter sea passage to the base of the stack from here. On this occasion we made it on to the base of the stack but alas the sun only arrived on the stack very late in the afternoon and alas the entire stack was soaking wet and the climbing on the seaward face looked very involved. We retreated and re-ascended the gully as evening and rain began to approach.



Approaching the stack

In May 2014 made a fourth attempt at the stack, this time with Louise O'Connor, with a slight change of plan we hammered in a stake and abseiled/scrambled down the steeper gully directly facing the northern tip of the stack. We descended this grotfest of a gully until about 20 meters above sea level alas with no sensible anchors and with 20 meters of steep slime covered slabs to the hideous boulder beach death drop below us we retreated. Again from this position just above sea level directly opposite the stack there did not look to be any easy way to the summit, which gave a mild note of concern.

And sho, after four attempts and having viewed all the available approach strategies, a very cunning plan was hatched.

It had by this time become very apparent from the previous attempts that this was an Uber stack of epic proportions and it was now time to go it alone. This is not as foolhardy as it may first appear as logistically and practically being along on such an endeavour, as it reduces potential collateral mishap but alas increases the commitment and fear factor to epic proportions.



Climbing on the Sea Stack

It was now the 24th August 2014 and attempt five was underway, there was a 12 hour window of less than 1 meter swell from the south west and winds were blowing off shore for 24 hours. This time I was accompanied by Aiden McGinley as a cliff top photographer and the cunning plan was a circumnavigation of Dunaff Head by small inflatable dingy to access the base of the stack and solo climb to the summit.

We arrived at Rocktown Harbour, the bay to the north of Dunaff and I immediately inflated the mighty vessel and set sail whilst Aidan headed off up to Dunaff Hill summit. The sea state was nice and relaxed as I paddled around the coast below the unescapable and extremely scary ever growing sea cliffs looming above me. After about 30 minutes and about 1 and a half kilometres of atmospheric paddling I landed on an offshore skerry approximately 200 meters to the north of Bothanvarra. From this sea level position the stack towering above me looked very much like suicide as all round me on this very exposed wee stance the entrance to Hades became a very real doorway to the further. I decided to simply leave the stack summit to someone else as a rising tide of fear was beginning to dull the real world senses to a point where it was difficult to tell whether I was really there or simply in a dream having already drowned on the sea approach in the last 30 minutes.



Walking carefully along the summit ridge

I returned to the boat and began paddling home through the channel between the stack and land. It was then with a lightening bolt of total recall, a crystal clear memory of a groove system running up the south face came to mind. I paddled into a position approximately 150 meters to the south of the stack to view the south face, YES the groove system was there and it looked a very real proposition. Primal fear had now been replaced with endorphins of the highest quality as I landed on the stack and hauled the boat and gear onto a most excellent non-tidal stance.

The best way forwards from here was to simple freesolo the ground above until it became necessary to employ the inverted gri-gri climbing partner. The climbing was easy but very loose and just (and I do mean just) the right side of terrifying. I just continued climbing up through a huge hanging slab and bypassing monster roofs to my right, I found myself on the huge summit ridge. A quick glance at my feet and there was plenty of rock to create abseil anchors, the sense of relief was overwhelming. It was now a scramble to the stacks highest point and I now knew I could safely get off the summit, it was a bit like finding a hundred sets of lost car keys at once! :-)



Standing on Bothanvarra Summit

A swift scramble along the summit ridge on to the small very exposed summit. The summit ridge of Bothanvarra is an excellent 50 meter ridge scramble along a true knife edge with an ever growing sense of exposure as the death drop either side of you increases to a 70 meter crescendo at the pin point summit. As with all mountaineering objectives the summit usually only marks the halfway point, but in the case of the unknown this summit marked the end of the uncertainty.

With hindsight the uncertainty on the outward journey was the most intense I have ever experienced. Will I make the long unescapable sea passage? Will I be able to climb the stack? Can I then get back down off the stack's summit? These were three reference points of top end mental anguish which faded upon reaching this summit.

This stack is the second last of the unclimbed monster stacks in Donegal, with only one left and summer fading fast, looks like next year for a return match with the fear.

[Iain Miller](#) is a guidebook author, rock climber and hillwalker living working and playing on the sea cliffs, sea stacks, mountain ranges and uninhabited islands of County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland.

https://uniqueascent.ie/dunaff_head for more information regarding climbing Bothanvarra Sea Stack

https://www.uniqueascent.ie/inishowen_guide for more details of the extensive rock climbing available on the Inishowen Peninsula

https://uniqueascent.ie/undiscovered_donegal for the climbing available in Donegal