

Tips for avoiding the cold when climbing and walking in the mountains of the UK.

If your office or playground is the hills and cliffs of this fair country then the challenge of maintaining a comfortable temperature is an unavoidable byline. Getting cold when climbing or walking whilst miserable at best can result in fumbled gear, dropped tools, dulled senses and impaired judgement making- none of which are conducive to safe and rewarding adventures. As a result of the wet and windy conditions that prevail in the UK hypothermia is arguably more of a risk in this country than say the alps with its 'dry' cold.

The following bunch of tips and tales are not meant to be definitive by any means but are here to share knowledge and experience which might mean you can stay functional for longer allowing you to place that crucial pro, finish the pitch, concentrate on that tricky nav section or allow you to keep enjoying the hills in less than ideal conditions.

Clothing

Keep wrists and ankles warm.

Blood gets very close to the surface at these points with very little fat to provide insulation and can contribute to cold extremities.

By adding layers to your wrists and ankles you can improve the warmth in your hands and feet without getting too sweaty around your core. For wrists you can get wrist overs in a variety of materials at a range of costs. I also love a thumb loop as preventing a sleeve from riding up can preserve heat but they're easily slipped off when it comes time to vent.

Personally I prefer using Buffs or similar material tubes as they work great at keeping wrists and hands warm but have additional uses that dedicated wrist overs don't.

Aaaah the wonderous Buff! Hat, neck gaiter, wrist over, balaclava.... Light, wind resistant and soft on snotty noses. The colder it gets the more I take. For activities where light weight, low bulk and multi functionality are key factors any kit that ticks all these boxes are must haves. I'll often pick up some of the cheaper versions for use as spares or wrist overs/snot wipes and if I'm wiping my nose on it I don't care how gawdy its' design.

I recently used a Buff around each ankle/lower leg whilst multi pitching high in the Mountains of the Costa Blanca. Despite the chilly conditions necessitating the need to climb in an insulated jacket my feet and legs were fine even without wearing socks in my rock boots.



Leg warmers.

A great tip given to me by a fellow MIA was the use of woollen leg warmers when rock climbing in the cold. At wrists and ankles the blood gets very close to the surface. Leg warmers are very effective at keeping as much warmth in the blood going to and coming from feet. Pulling them up or down allows you to vary the temp of your lower legs, they can be pulled over your feet at belays to keep your rock boots/feet warm or removed and worn over the fore arms. Don't write it off till you try it... Also means that when you top out on that on-sight you can dance around ala 'Flashdance' to celebrate! (if your under 30 then ask your mum/nan....).

Keep base layer dry- be bold start cold.

A common mistake is to get out of the car, put on all the layers you own and then set off up the hill. Within ten mins you've built up a sweat and all your base layers are now wet and as a result less effective at keeping you warm. Whist some materials will help keep you warm when wet all materials keep you warmer when dry. If you've got a short walk in to a climbing venue then keeping and generating as much warmth as possible in that short time will be beneficial. If you're out on a mountain day or have a long walk into the crag then the old adage 'be bold, start cold' is good to remember. Unless is actually raining don't wear your shell as it will be the least breathable piece of clothing you own- regardless of what the manufacturer says! Often a thin long sleeved base layer (with a neck zip) and wind proof top offer the perfect combo, allowing you to vent on the go and keep off the warmth sapping wind. Keep your shell or insulated jacket in the top of your sack so that when you stop for any extended period of time it's readily available to throw on whilst your stationary- stow it when you set off again. The idea is to keep all your insulation layers as dry as possible and staying cool/not overly sweating is the key. There's a more in depth look at this on Andy Kirkpatrick's site. <http://www.andy-kirkpatrick.com/>

Vents- avoid jackets that have pockets as vents as you then have to choose between staying cool or keeping your stuff . So you take your hat off to cool down and then want to put it into your pocket, reasonable to want to do, thus blocking the vent that you opened in order to cool down as well- daft!

When trying jackets on in a shop put gloves and a rucksack on and see how much of a faff it is to get to your vents. Remember - 'if it's a cock in the shop it'll be hell on the hill' (same applies to any piece of kit as well as walking and climbing partners..)

Powder your feet!

The military are very good at personal foot admin as they understand that if your feet are trashed you're not going to be able to operate effectively. It's the same for us on the hill. Powdering your feet well will keep your feet drier for longer and not only will you have warmer feet but dry skin is stronger than wet so your chances of blisters will also be reduced. Boots the chemist do a good value for money foot powder or you can go for an anti bacterial powder for a little more money.



Gloves.

Accept that no matter how much you paid your gloves will get wet as they have whopping great holes that you put your hands in and the very thing you're putting in them leaks water in the form of sweat. So the answer is to have lots of pairs:

- A walk in pair (thin polypropylene ones are good as you'll be getting warm and if you wear your main glove it'll get wet through sweat-or a thin wind proof glove
- Climbing glove- the harder the climb/the more stuff you've got to use, the more dexterous your gloves will need to be whilst still offering a reasonable level of insulation. If winter walking you should be able to have a thicker glove/mitt. The key things are that it allows you to use the axe easily with no fumbling and doesn't get your hands too sweaty.
- Belay gloves- over sized to go over climbing glove but not to be used as the in the poo glove as they will be getting wet.

Pair of in the poo gloves or mitts- massive super warm mitts that will also go over your feet. Go for a synthetic fill or a fibre pile lining as they retain heat when damp or wet.

When trying gloves on in a shop remember the 'cock in the shop- hell on the hill rule'. Also remember that cold wet hands are really hard and sometimes painful to get into tight gloves. Personally I go for one size larger for general mountaineering (1axe) and hill walking. They're less dexterous but are easier to get on and keep my hands warmer which means I have more dexterity anyway. Under these gloves I've used thin polypropylene gloves (lots of pairs taken in a dry bag) so when i whip off the thick glove to do something that requires more dexterity I still have a little protection from the elements.

When using 2 axes I'll have lots of thin insulated wind or water proof gloves and I'll keep changing them out ideally *before* my hands get cold. I'll keep a thicker pair of over sized belay gloves or mitts inside my jacket which I'll put on whenever I'm stopped.

Thin polypropylene gloves are cheap, light, low bulk and offer reasonable insulation. Take lots of pairs and keep changing them out. You can get long cuff liner gloves here:

<http://www.usсен.co.uk/shop/accessories/flight-glove/>

" The single biggest challenge I faced when I was in Patagonia was staying warm, not because the temperatures were so low, but because it was impossible to stay dry. Being wet for most of your day is something you just have to accept (a little like Scotland!). As I was spending most nights sleeping in snow caves and doing storm watch at 3am in the morning, being able to dry out my gloves was essential. Polypropylene liner gloves are amazing, and in my opinion a better option than wool or silk, as they tend to last a little longer (the wool liner gloves I took were full of holes within a week). When they are wet all you need to do is wring them out and place them next to your skin on top of your shoulders and they will be dry within an hour or so. Even if the rest of you is still wet and cold, having dry hands not only prevents infected scratches and cuts, it makes a massive difference to your state of mind." Alex Palmer, Cold Mountain Kit.

When changing wet gloves for dry ones I try to do it with my hands inside my rucksack to keep them out of the wind. I'll have one dry bag for the wet gloves and in the dry bag with my fresh dry gloves I'll put (when i remember) a small micro fleece travel towel (facecloth/flannel size) so that I can dry my hands as much as possible before putting them in the dry gloves. The little towel isn't going to be effective all day but if it gives me warmer hands for an extra hour then I'm happy with that.

The belay jacket

Not just for belaying (lunch jacket, sat around cooking jacket and general super toasty jacket).

I could go on for an age about the importance of a good 'belay jacket' but instead I'll stick to the essentials. What we're looking at here is a jacket that can go over everything, waterproofs and all, when we're stopped and need to keep as much heat as possible. Whether we're gearing up before a rock climb, on belay duty on a winter route or enjoying a leisurely lunch on a blustery fell top this jacket will be as welcome as a warm towel after you've left it too long to get out of the bath..

Forget down and go for synthetic with Primaloft being the insulation used by most of the main players and what you're looking for is as much of it as possible. This isn't a jacket to be active in- more like half a sleeping bag with arms.. Here's a list of some of the best available and the amount of insulation they have;

Mountain Equipment Citadel: Primaloft® One insulation (200g body and 170g arms/hood)

Rab Photon X: 200g Primaloft on the front, 100g on the back and 60g on the arms.

Montane Ice Guide: Primaloft® Eco 210g on the front, 133g in the arms and 170g elsewhere.

Montane Spitfire One: Primaloft Gold 200g front and back and 170g in the sleeves and underarm.

When you try them on make sure they'll go over everything easily.

If you're looking to be active in your insulation then one of these provides a good balance between weight, bulk and warmth;

Montane flux: Primaloft® Eco 100g / 60g

Montane Prism: Primaloft® Eco 40g

Mountain Equipment Fitzroy: Primaloft® One insulation (100g body and 60g arms/hood)

Mountain Equipment Compressor hooded jacket: Primaloft® One insulation [60g with 40g arms and side panels]

Rab Xenon X Hoodie: Primaloft Gold 60g

For those wanting to increase warmth but really want to save weight and bulk then consider an insulated gilet/vest;

Montane Prism vest: Primaloft® Eco 40g

Rab Xenon X Vest: Primaloft Gold 60g

With many of these things what you choose will depend a lot on you- are you generally a warm or cold person? Do you sweat a lot if you get warm? Do your hands go blue when you get the milk out of the fridge? You know what you're like so do what suits you and the kind of adventures and conditions you'll encounter.

If you're taking groups out keep an eye out in the sales and clearance sections for xl or xxl synthetic insulated jackets. These are perfect to take as a client spare as it'll fit almost everyone and their size will cover hands and upper thighs as if put on a child is as good as a sleeping bag. Due to their unpopular size you can often pick them up at bargain prices.

Food and Drink

Pack some fats and proteins- they break down slower and fuel your body for longer - instead of going on about it here have a look at Andy Kirkpatrick's site and read the relevant page of Will Gadds excellent ice and mixed climbing book, in fact read the whole thing as it's a damn good book.

Pre heat the flask.

If you're taking a flask then remember to pre heat it 1st other wise you'll loose some of the liquid temp as soon as you put it in meaning it won't last as long when you're out. I half fill mine with boiling water and leave it with the lid on for 5mins. Instead of wasting the water from the flask I'll use it to make a hot drink before I go out. I'll re boil the kettle before filling as I want it as hot as possible. I'd go for hot squash over tea or coffee as its far nicer to drink when cold. If white tea or coffee then warm the milk before putting it in the flask so it doesn't cool the contents (not an issue with hot squash). For the more weight conscious hot squash in a Nalgene wrapped in a section of old sleeping mat will stay warm for a couple of hours.

Don't put flask on the outside of your sack or if you have to, wrap it in an off cut of sleeping mat....

“When I haven't been out on the hill for a while the scale of the adventure required to satisfy my cravings usually escalates. On one such occasion my itchy feet tempted me to repeat a walk I did years ago, the length of Dartmoor North to South in one long 50km day (obviously not South-North as it would be all uphill..). However since I'd done it already it didn't seem hard enough so I decided to do it at night - that should be sufficiently arduous and unpleasant enough! I recruited a mate (fool) and we were off! It was April and there was a bitterly cold easterly wind blowing all night which, despite my hat, balaclava and buff, still chilled my left eye to the point of my vision being blurred for two days after. I had put goggles in my bag as I knew it was going to be windy put thought I'd be soft if I wore them...twat! Top tip- Be Bothered!! If you've got the kit to make your life easier or safer then use it!

That wasn't the only mistake I made as I put my freshly made flask of coffee (with pre warmed milk) down the side of my rucksack without wrapping it in anything and after only 1.5hrs of walking in the wind it was stone cold. Drinking it over the next 9 hrs doesn't exactly make my top ten of pleasurable life experiences...”

JP Edgington The Outer Edge.



Sleeping

Sleeping bag- if it's not going to get wet then get it out of its compression/dry sac well before you need it and shake it about to plump the loft back up. This will help it trap more air and keep more heat.

Flasks, fleeces, duvets, sleeping bags are all insulators- put cold stuff in and they'll keep it cold for longer- put warm stuff in and they'll keep it warm for longer so:

- Use Nalgene bottle to pre heat sleeping bag- use hot but not boiling water and let the steam escape a little to avoid a build up of pressure.
- Go for a wee before you go to sleep so that you're not using energy and body warmth to keep a litre of waste product warm.
- Have a small hot Ribena, (other black current drinks are available but not nearly as nice), or hot choc (hot water will do the job if you've nothing else) before you turn in to 'stoke the fires' to warm you up before you get into your bag. Avoid a large drink as it'll only make you wanna pee in the middle of the night!
- Practice peeing into a bottle- in a tent to start and then if you're a real pro then laid in your sleeping bag- the best I've managed is knelt up in my sleeping bag. Use a wide mouthed bottle like Nalgenes cheap bottles or the best are Nalgenes canteens as they take up little space when empty, have a wide mouth and are easy to differentiate from your water bottle! Once finished- stick at the bottom of your bag to keep your feet warm- make sure the lids on well...
- Before turning in run around, jog on the spot, punch the air or if stuck in a tent or small space then lay on your back and punch the air and bicycle your feet. What ever you can do do raise your temp before you get into bed- no need to get a sweat in as you don't want to make your base layers any wetter than necessary.
- Have a set of base layers that you only use at night (long sleeve top and legs)- these stay in a dry bag and are only worn when sleeping. In the morning air them if poss and put your sweaty wet clothes back on as you'll be moving and generating heat and will quickly get over how uncomfortable it is.

Eat something with a high fat content like cheese or dried meat as this will break down slower over night and provide calories for keeping you warm for longer.

Too many layers stop heat from your body warming the outer layers...

“Whilst on a mountain bivi I wore too many layers in my bag and massively reduced the effectiveness of the sleeping bag insulation as very little of my body heat was getting to it- what resulted was a miserable night compounded by the fact that I couldn't be bothered to fire up the Jetboil and re heat the water in my Nalgene that was by my feet. Lessons learned- don't wear too many layers and Be Bothered!”

JP Edgington The Outer Edge

Some of the suggestions listed here will work for some people and conditions and not others. Ultimately you need to find a system or systems that work for you, your activity, and preferences. My wife, when winter walking/mountaineering, has a pair of thickish nylon base layer leggings over which she wears a pair of paclite Goretex trousers regardless of precipitation. On top she wears a mid weight long sleeved zipped merino wool base layer and will wear a wind proof on the walk in if it's not raining or a shell if it is. Once the pace slows as the walk steepens or the climbing begins she'll pop a synthetic insulated top on. Her leg combo, for her, means that the wind is kept off and any dampness of the base layer is quickly dried or reduced due to their close fitting. Whilst her top combo allows her to dump or keep heat as required in order to keep her self as dry as poss.

Random Tips

Wear your watch on the outside of your jacket or on your rucksacks shoulder strap.

Fleecy onesies as favoured by kayakers would eliminate the annoying gaps at the waist- just get changed before going to the pub or being rescued by the local MRT.

One thing I've fancied trying is using a kayak touring cag when climbing in the pouring rain (which I did a lot in preparation for my MIA). Super waterproof and reasonably breathable but with good seals at the wrist and some have fleecy hoods and hand warmer pockets! They also have good arm articulation, are close fitting and resistant to riding up- anybody tried?

Prevent!Prevent!Prevent!

It's a lot easier to stay warm then it is to get warm once cold but it does take effort and good personal admin so ' Be Bothered'

Be more efficient- time stood still at belays faffing is time that you're getting cold so see my efficient multi-pitching article on for tips on reducing faff and clusters.

