
SCOTLAND

SPRING + SUMMER

TERMS + GRADES



Where to Start?

If you are a beginner in the world of mountains, it can be confusing and often intimidating when trying to understand the terminology and grading systems used. We hope that these explanations help you to choose the right level for your goals and feel a little more confident. It all sounds far more technical than it is in practice and we hope to help guide you through it at your own pace.

Scrambling:

In trekking and hill-walking the terrain allows progress solely on the feet. When the ground is so rough or steep that hands are also required for balance and assistance we use the term 'scrambling' to describe the means of progress.

There are three grades of Scrambling used in the UK.

Grade 1: Simple scrambles which can be tackled by most able-bodied walkers with a good head for heights and do not usually require protection of a rope.

Grade 2: Sustained scrambles, often with considerable exposure, requiring precise placement of feet and hands, on which inexperienced climbers will often require a rope for security.

Grade 3: Hard scrambles (equivalent to easy rock climbs) on which exposure is continuous, some moves may require strength in arms, and the use of rope, protection and belays is normal for most parties. The hardest summits on mainland UK require Grade 1 scrambling while on Skye some tops require grade 2 scrambles and the Inaccessible Pinnacle is a grade 3 by its easiest route.

Rock Climbing:

There are three styles of rock climbing, Traditional, Sport and Indoor.

Climbs may be single-pitch or multi-pitch. Pitches are the distinct sections of a route linking ledges and stances where good anchors can be placed by the leader for belaying the rest of the party.

Traditional:

Trad climbing is solely outdoor, uses natural rock features for progress and protection and developed on the UK mountains in the late 19th century. All protection is placed by the lead climber. There is little or no gear in place on a climb. Ethically and aesthetically this is the purest form of rock climbing. Risk is inherent in the appeal of Trad climbing.

The traditional grading system expanded over the decades as climbers tackled harder routes and uses adjectives to describe the difficulty:

Easy: equivalent to a grade 1 or 2 scramble

Moderate: equivalent to a grade 3 scramble – the East Ridge of the Inaccessible Pinnacle is the most famous Mod climb.

Difficult: includes the hardest grade 3 scrambles; and nowadays denotes a beginner's level of rock climbing with generous holds and good resting places.

Very Difficult: VDiff's may feature smaller holds, awkward cracks and chimneys or may have long run-outs on slabby terrain without good protection. Good technique and ability to work out sequences of moves are required.

Severe: Severes are often more abrupt requiring a definite strength quotient in the climber or may be more sustained slabby climbs with use of smears and small edges to make progress. Route at the top end of this grade are denoted as Hard Severe.

Very Severe: Prior to 1970 the VS was a yardstick of solid climbing ability. Even today it takes most regular climbers a year or two of experience to lead VS climbs. Techniques required at VS grade include laybacking, sustained hand jamming or smearing on smooth slabs.

Hard Very Severe: HVS is a distinct step up from VS and may involve fingery climbing, finger-jamming or strenuous crack climbing where physical training and good technique are combined.

Extremely Severe: originally denoted as XS the Extreme grade is now subdivided into E-grades according to difficulty and seriousness, from E1 to E10 and beyond... The Extreme grade was recognised after advances in performance in the 1950's. The first E5's were created in the mid-1970's. The full range of modern protection and training techniques coupled with mental strength is required to perform confidently at Extreme grade.

A big part of a Trad grade refers to the length and seriousness of the climb for the leader; in particular, the difficulty of finding and placing secure protection points with wired nuts, slings and camming devices.

Since the 1960's a numerical system has evolved alongside the overall grade to denote pure technical difficulty of the hardest moves on a climb (known as the crux). Routes from Severe upwards are given a technical grade in the guidebooks

The UK technical grades run 4a, 4b, 4c, 5a, 5b, 5c, 6a, 6b, 6c, 7a, 7b. Confusingly, these are not the same as Sport and Indoor wall grades (see below). They are generally stiffer. A Severe climb is usually 4a or 4b in difficulty, a Very Severe might be 4b, 4c or 5a and so on... A route given VS 4b might be sustained and not well protected but relatively easy technically, whereas a VS 5a will typically have a short, hard but well-protected crux section. An E1 5a might have long run-outs or be loose.

Nowadays, beginners on a top-rope will typically try VDiff or Severe routes on their first day of outdoor trad climbing, but it is a very different matter to lead such routes.

Sport and Indoor Climbing:

Sport Climbing describes rock climbing where all protection is provided by in situ equipment, most usually stainless-steel expansion or chemical bolts drilled into the rock. The climber progresses by free movement but has the assurance of a protection bolt every few metres. On single-pitch sport climbs the leader normally lowers off from the top bolt anchors and belaying is done from the bottom. Since 1980 sport climbing has led to a rapid increase in gymnastic standards of performance and an explosion in popularity of the sport. Sport climbing is designed to be safe and accessible without the mental engagement and long progression required in Trad. Indoor walls essentially offer the same experience as outdoor sport climbing, with fixed protection and lower-offs. A majority of modern climbers progress from indoor walls to outdoor sport climbing, often to an exceptionally high standard, without ever trying Trad climbing.

In Europe nearly all indoor and sport climbers follow the French grading system which is numerical: 4a, 4b, 4c, 5a, 5b, 5c, 5c+, 6a, 6a+, 6b, 6b+, 6c, 6c+, 7a, 7a+..... right up to the current limit of 9b. Beginners generally start at the grade 4's and easier 5's. Once into the 6's strength and agility as well as good technique is required. A favourable power-weight ratio and explosive strength are essential to operate in the 7's.

For comparison with Trad grades: a Severe 4b would be 5a in sport climbing, HVS 5a would be 5c or 5c+, an E1 5b would be 6a or 6a+ and an E3 5c would be 6b+ in Sport.

Sport climbing grades make no distinction between the continuity of difficulty and the absolute difficulty of the hardest move.

If you have any questions, get in touch: info@moran-mountain.co.uk.

We look forward to seeing you in Scotland!