

Putting the Free into Freedom' by Phoebe Smith

Walking is free, yet the rewards are rich. Trail asked 14 outdoor professionals what it is about the outdoors that draws them to it and the one piece of kit they couldn't live without

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Marion Shoard, environmental activist

I am constantly dazzled by the shapes and colours of the world outside. The variety, unpredictability and sheer beauty of anything from the banding of rocks to the faces of fish are things that never cease to amaze and intrigue me. I find virtually nothing in the outdoors ugly or repellent, and particularly like slugs and spiders.

I go walking in the outdoors because I couldn't survive if I didn't. Whether it's the fresh air or the views or the sounds or the smells I don't know – what I do know is I go stir crazy if I don't get outside often.

Exploring a stand of foxgloves in an out-of-the-way corner might prompt amazement at some aspect of the physiology of plants and awe at the mysteries of their world. Coming across beautiful places from which the public are barred makes me feel sorry for those forbidden to share their delights. Ruins on Highland pastures remind me of the banishment of ordinary people from the land through the Clearances. Peaty pools on northern moors inspire in me feelings of mystery and other-worldliness.

I often start a walk to resolve a problem from my everyday life, only to forget this intention and find myself trying to understand the outdoors instead. Often the problem I started out with seems to resolve itself in the process.

The one piece of kit I couldn't live without is my jeweller's magnifying glass. Binoculars are great, but they simply magnify. Lie on your stomach and peer through an eyeglass at, say, a mat of moss or lichen or tiny creatures scabbling between grains of quartz on a dusty track and you are drawn into a completely different universe.